Altered States: Travel, Transcendence and Technology in Contemporary Vodou

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February 2007

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy

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Le vaudou, tradition religieuse d'Haïti, fait l'objet de jugements désapprobateurs depuis longtemps. Cependant, un intérêt grandissant pour les religions afro caribéennes offre de nouvelles possibilités d'accès à cette religion gardée autrefois secrète. *Altered States: Travel, Transcendence and Technology in Contemporary Vodou* est une étude ethnographique du vaudou en Amérique du Nord qui trace le glissement des limites démarquant une religion et ses représentations au fur et à mesure que sa popularité prend de l'ampleur dans l'esprit contemporain. Les communautés vaudoues contemporaines comptent de nombreux pratiquants ayant consciemment recherché de nouvelles expériences et de nouveaux échanges religieux. *Altered States: Travel, Transcendence and Technology in Contemporary Vodou* étudie le parcours suivi par les pratiquants du Vaudou qui traversent les différentes représentations populaires et la mercantilisation de la religion; le processus d'assimilation des nouvelles pratiques technologiques et médiatiques par la cosmologie de la religion; et le changement que subissent la constitution et les constituants du vaudou sous l'effet des pratiques et des représentations médiatiques. Ce travail contribue à créer une meilleure compréhension des déplacements qui se produisent dans l'identification et dans la signification, eux-mêmes engendrés par l'entrecroisement de la religion, des technologies de la communication, de la représentation médiatique et de la mercantilisation de la culture.

Vodou, the religious tradition of Haiti, has been maligned throughout history. However, a growing interest in Afro-Caribbean religions is carving out new avenues of access to this formerly secret and subjugated religion. *Altered States: Travel, Transcendence and Technology in Contemporary Vodou* is an ethnographic study of Vodou in North America that documents the shifting boundaries between a religion and its representations as it gains contemporary popularity. Contemporary Vodou communities are filled with practitioners who have consciously sought out new religious experiences and allegiances. This text charts their journey to and from Vodou. *Altered States* examines how Vodou practitioners navigate popular representations and commodification of the religion; how the cosmology of the religion absorbs and incorporates new technology and media practices; and how media practices and representations alters the constitution and constituents of the Vodou religion. The work contributes to an understanding of the shifts in identification and signification engendered by the intersection of religion, communication technologies, media representation and cultural commodification.

Acknowledgments

Clearly, it takes a village to raise a thesis. I owe much to numerous people whose thoughts and ideas were instrumental in shaping this text. That said, the responsibility for the words within these pages is all mine and all named here should feel duly absolved. I thank first all those who lent me their stories and experiences so that I could write this manuscript. Your generosity and insights made this possible. Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark from the Resource Centre for Religion, Media and Culture at the University of Colorado at Boulder invited me in to a world of exciting and emerging scholarship. I am very grateful for the opportunities they have afforded me and their on-going support and generosity. Special thanks goes to Jenny Burman and Darin Barney for offering their ideas and (much needed) criticisms at critical points in the development of this text. Thanks also go to Sally Cole, Sheryl Hamilton, Norma Joseph, Christine Jourdan, Marie-Nathalie Leblanc, Carrie Rentschler, and Angela Zito for support past and ongoing. Will Straw has been a mentor as well as an advisor. He has shown me time and time again that truly critical thought spans disciplinary boundaries. His insights into my work as well as his extraordinary support for me as a scholar over the past few years has been both invaluable and inspiring and I am unspeakably grateful for it. Kaarla Sundström has helped to shape this text long before the first droppings of words on a page all the way through to the final euphoric phases of editing and has been present for all the moments of panic and triumph between. She has blessed the whole with her talents as a writer and an editor and me with her insights, humour and patience.

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Introduction

Vodou has been maligned and persecuted throughout its history. The numerous indictments that have been levied at this the dominant religion of Haiti have come from many sources and belie multiple agendas. In the colony of St. Domingue (Haiti's colonial name before its independence), French slave masters, with the backing of the Catholic Church, forbade the religious practices of their slaves under the rubric of a "civilizing mission" and punished suspected transgressions. Even after the slave owners were ousted from the land, the Catholic Church continued to hold sway in Haiti and maintained its persecution of Vodou. The church launched multiple anti-superstition campaigns (the last as recently as 1941), destroying and burning temples and imprisoning the ritual specialist of Vodou—in an attempt to force Haitians to reject Vodou. Vodou has been called primitive, backward, and barbaric and such labels have been used to justify political, economic, and military interference with the sovereign state of Haiti. Despite suggestions that Vodou would not survive these successive waves of persecution, the religion and its practitioners adapted to and negotiated the changing hostile conditions in which they found themselves. In part, Vodou thrived during times of persecution by functioning as an underground society. Rituals were held at night and codes were developed for communication among practitioners. For a long time Vodou was a secret, almost invisible, religious practice. Now, a growing North American interest in Afro-Caribbean belief systems is carving out new avenues of access to this formerly secret and subjugated religion. Like many other "unofficial"[1] religions, Vodou is growing in North America (Barnes 1989, Consentino 1993, Glazier 1998). This growth is, in part, attributable to an influx of new practitioners who come to identify with and practice Haitian Vodou even though they have no genealogical or geographic

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[1] "Unofficial" is often used as a designation for religions which are not among the five world religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Hinduism) and which do not have "official" institutional status in more than one country.

connection to Haiti. *Altered States: Travel, Transcendence and Technology in Contemporary Vodou* is a study of Vodou in North America that documents the shifting boundaries between a religion and its representations as it gains contemporary popularity. Scholars of globalization (Appadurai 1996, Clifford 1997) have demonstrated that even as mass mediated commodity culture seems to insist on globalized, commercial sameness, local groups imbue generic cultural forms with specificity. Vodouists are adept at hijacking such forms, reconfiguring them to serve religious purpose. Yet Vodou does not simply circulate through social space via re-appropriated commodities or representations. Instead, it is itself a mobile religious world. Vodou was constituted in motion during the dislocating transit of the Middle Passage (as slave ships brought practitioners of multiple African religions to Haiti). This uneasy history of travel, intrinsic to the cosmology of Vodou, is also grafted onto the lived experiences of practitioners constantly in motion, both via the actual routes of pilgrimage, tourism, and immigration and the less tangible—but no less trafficked—thoroughfares of cyberspace. The ethos of travel intrinsic to Vodou is mapped onto vectors of mobility generated by mass media, cultural commodification and communication technologies in ways that, although innovative, resonate with the cultural specificity of Haitian Vodou. Contemporary Vodou communities are filled with practitioners who have consciously sought out new religious experiences and allegiances. This text charts their journeys to Vodou and explores how religious or spiritual mobility alters the constitution and the constituents of the Vodou religion.

Do You Vodou?

When I tell people that I am researching Haitian Vodou I am frequently asked, "Does it work?" More often than not, before I have a chance to respond, people answer their own question: "I guess it works if you believe it does." This response to Vodou is intriguing. Seldom would one think to ask if Catholicism or Orthodox Judaism "works". The question reveals an awareness that Vodou is not

like many institutional religions. Vodou *is* a working religion in that it is particularly focused on ritual rather than on questions of belief, and while notions of the ubiquitous voodoo doll and pin may well be underlying this query, the question shows a certain awareness of the emphasis on praxis that can be found in Vodou. The question also belies a curiosity about Vodou, even as it is preemptively held in check by the self-given answer. The answer itself has always struck me as rather superstitious. Perhaps people feel that by not believing, they can ward off the "effects" of religion. In the case of Vodou, these "effects" are often seen as dark and dangerous, filled with stereotypical images of sorcery and sacrifice and the desire to harm others from afar. Interestingly enough, belief, although undoubtedly important to practitioners, is not considered a vital ingredient for the efficacy of Vodou. According to practitioners, you don't have to believe in Vodou for it to work. In *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, Raquel Romberg, who studies the witchcraft and healing traditions of burjería, overhears someone saying, "I don't believe in brujería, but it works" (3). In every Vodou community there exist people who would say much the same thing of Vodou. When people say Vodou "works" they usually mean that it is efficacious, that the interventions that Vodouists make on the ritual and spiritual plane have an impact on the everyday experience of practitioners. Vodou involves multiple forms of ritualizing, from large-scale ceremonies (or *seremoni*) that involve what Karen McCarthy Brown (2001) has called possession-performance—the arrival of the gods and goddesses of Vodou in the bodies of their practitioners—to smaller, interpersonal rituals that occur between ritual specialists and individual practitioners, or "clients". The term clients, used by many to describe those who go to the priests and priestesses of Vodou for help with specific and personal problems, should signal something about the spiritual economy of Vodou. Clients pay Vodou priests and priestesses (*houngans* and *mambos*) to help them gain employment, find success in love, mend a family rift, heal a persistent illness, and solve or resolve a host of other personal problems. These clients give money to a *mambo* or *houngan* and leave with herbal concoctions, talismans and, more often than not, instructions for ritual

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acts meant to be performed by the client him or herself. Given that there is monetary exchange involved, Vodou *has* to work. How else would these clients get their money's worth? Indeed, many *houngans* and *mambos* guarantee their services.

Vodou's clients are an ambiguous group. Many are clearly Vodou practitioners who have gravitated to a particular *mambo* or *houngan*, who attend the large scale ceremonies that are a defining characteristic of the religion, and who consider themselves to be "serving the spirits" (the phrase Vodouists use to define themselves as practitioners of the religion). However, there are also clients who do not participate in the large-scale rituals of Vodou. Instead, they come only for the spiritual transaction that occurs between themselves and the ritual specialists of the religion. These clients may or may not disavow their connection to Vodou. In Haiti, where Vodou has been persecuted for much of its history, it is still common for people not to admit association with the religion. While most feel comfortable practicing Vodou in communal settings, some never make their connection to Vodou public. Many *mambos* and *houngans* speak of having "private" clients. Some even speak of local Catholic priests and Evangelical ministers (known in Haiti for proselytizing against Vodou) who come and see them "on the side". In Haiti some of those belonging to the elite class, which has for a long time seen itself as too educated for the vernacular practices of Vodou, will disavow any connection to the religion even while seeing a *houngan* or a *mambo* in secret. Others freely admit that they seek the services of Vodou priests and priestesses but will maintain that they don't "believe" in the religion. The clients of Vodou priests and priestesses call into question how religious identity is constituted. Who are these people, these clients, in relation to the Vodou religion? Are they insiders, or outsiders (or neither, or both)? Why do they seek out Vodou as a solution to their personal problems? Why do they embrace the religion only provisionally, occasionally? Clearly, they are engaging in a form of religious and ritual practice, but are they *Vodouists*? Often being a client of a particular *mambo* or *houngan* is a first step in becoming more completely involved in the large-scale

(and thus, more public) ritual practices of Vodou. This movement from periphery to center, and what it signifies, lies at the heart of my interest in Vodou. The growth and spread of Vodou in recent years has been fed by an influx of new practitioners, many of whom have no genealogical or geographic connections to Haitian Vodou (although as will be seen, some are Haitians "returning" to Vodou), but who nonetheless seek out the religion. What instigates and guides their journey to Vodou is a primary concern of this analysis.

The client-specialist relationship that is an intrinsic part of Vodou is part and parcel of the economic well being of priests and priestesses who have long advertised their services by word of mouth. As Vodou becomes integrated into what some call the spiritual marketplace (Roof 1999, Hanegraaff 2001, Carrette and King 2005), the reach of this advertising has increased. Although still often practiced in private, consumerism and media have been transfigured to serve a religious (and sometimes missionizing) purpose in Vodou, drawing more practitioners to the religion. At the same time, the public visibility of Vodou has increased. While Vodou is even now a religion constituted by secrecy and invisibility, things are changing. In April of 2003 Vodou was, by presidential decree, finally recognized as an official religion in Haiti. Although it has always been enmeshed in Haitian politics, this official recognition of Vodou means that Vodouists will for the first time be officially protected from persecution under the laws of the nation. Though this decree, situating Vodou as part of the public sphere of the state, impacts practitioners in Haiti, practitioners in the diaspora are also increasing the visibility of Vodou in part by working against intolerance and trying to change its public image. The increased visibility of Vodou has made the religion more accessible. Newcomers seeking new religious affiliation have greater access to information about Vodou as well as greater access to ritual specialists and other practitioners. This analysis plots a host of access points into Vodou—from local festivals and community events (in "Vodou Located"), to popular music (in "Vodou Groove"), ephemera (in "Visible Vodou"), film and even scholarship on the religion (in "Mediated Vodou"). Because multiple forms

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of media and media representations act as portals to Vodou for newcomers, this analysis, in part, explores Vodou as a mediated and technologized religion. Karen Richman's work in *Vodou and Migration* (2005) illustrates how Haitian migrants, geographically separated from their kin in Haiti, reconfigure a host a technologies to not only communicate with relatives at home but to maintain a type of doubled existence, "living" simultaneously in Haiti and the US. Haitian migrants use multiple technologies to participate virtually in Vodou rituals from which they are physically removed. This use of technology, instigated by the conditions of transnationalism, has resulted in a "reconfiguration of the boundaries of the ritual performance space" (25) in the Vodou religion. In North America, practitioners similarly use a matrix of technologies to engage in a form of long-distance Vodou. Although new technology is transfigured for religious purpose, allowing practitioners to negotiate the conditions of transnationalism and transmigration, the use of technology does not inevitably compromise the efficacy or authenticity of the religion. Instead, the transfiguring of technology and media within Vodou is explored here as continuous with epistemological and cosmological discourses that have allowed Vodou to retain cultural specificity and connection to place despite the dislocation of travel and migration, a diversity of new practitioners, and a history of persecution.

This connection to place and history is something newcomers to Vodou must negotiate for many reasons and in multiple ways: initiation rituals and pilgrimage take newcomers to Haiti; the religious practice demands some familiarity with Haitian Kreyole; and the cosmology of Vodou is rife with the narratives of Haitian history. It is tempting, perhaps, to assume that the growth of Vodou among non-Haitians will lead to a loosening of the ties that bind Vodou to Haiti, rendering the religion more universal, the gods of Haiti less tied to the historical narratives of the land, and the need for visits to Haiti obsolete. Interestingly, however, new practitioners seem particularly drawn to both Haiti itself and the historical narratives of the country embedded in the cosmology of Vodou. This concurrent interest in Haiti and Haitian Vodou is undoubtedly

influenced by the rhetoric of black nationalism, which understands religions such as Vodou to be a way to "recover" an African heritage lost under the conditions of slavery, colonialism and racism. Some new practitioners to Vodou define themselves as black nationals and they often authorize their connection to Vodou through their racial heritage. These individuals see Vodou as a subversive religion that historically undermined colonial powers and that still has the ability to undermine dominant systems of inequity (including racism and capitalism). For them, the story of the Haitian Revolution and the overthrow of French colonial powers, revisited in the ritual practices of Vodou, is a potent emblem of black power. As will be discussed in "Virtual Vodou Part I: Mediated Vodou", these discourses and practices of black nationalism intersect in interesting ways with emerging discourses of Haitian nationalism, forming grassroots political movements that span national borders but that are still concerned with notions of place and nationhood.

Not all newcomers come to Vodou via the discourses of black nationalism. Many eschew the legacy of separatism that black nationalism once represented. And still other newcomers are drawn to Vodou without being able to claim the racial lineage to the religion that black nationals assert. Like many religious communities, Vodou communities in North America are constituted by ethnically diverse people. My initial field research took place in Montréal, a diversely populated cosmopolitan city located in Québec, Canada's French province. Perhaps not surprisingly given the linguistic makeup, the city is home to a large Haitian Vodou population. Attending Vodou ceremonies in Montréal, I noticed that these large-scale ritual events played host to many non-Haitians. Residents of Montréal (both francophone and anglophone) as well as immigrants from many other nations regularly joined Haitians to celebrate the birthdays and feast days of the *lwa*, the gods and goddesses of Vodou. Indeed, those with whom I have worked for this project have included immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, Latin American and Europe, and first, second, third and fourth generation Americans and Canadians of European, Caribbean and South Asian descent. This

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is not a quantitative analysis of the demographic of new practitioners in Vodou, but the diversity of these practitioners is an important caveat to those who may assume that new practitioners are predominantly white and middle class. While some new practitioners could be categorized in this way, they are not in the majority. In addition to coming from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds, the practitioners with whom I have spoken for this research are men and women, straight and queer, and most range in age from their early twenties to their mid sixties. In general, they live in or near cosmopolitan centers, they are mostly (but not universally) anglophone or francophone, they are literate, and they are mobile, although the shape of their mobility takes varying forms. There are certainly Vodouists who fall outside these parameters. In part, my interest in the journey of newcomers to the Vodou religion has pushed me toward those who are literal, virtual and spiritual travelers. Such travelers have access to particular social institutions, practices, and technologies. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that the Vodou practitioners with whom I have spoken come from a unified economic class. While some fall within what may generally be termed the North American middle class, some represent the lower working classes. All have varying access to the technologies used in and mobilities demanded by long-distance Vodou. As such, they use and relate to these technologies and the expectations of travel demanded by Vodou in varying ways. The purpose of this analysis is not to describe the varying levels of access to technology and mobility among Vodouists (although issues of access surface throughout this text); it is interested instead in how a diversity of Vodouists living in many different places negotiate the rigors of a religious practice closely linked to a place from which they are removed.

Although not bound to a single, fixed location, this is an examination of Vodou as it is practiced in North America. My research follows mobile Vodou practitioners from multiple Vodou communities, as they build connections that are defined by their own mobility and transnationalism. In this way, my research field has been constituted by the often geographically dispersed social relationships of

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those who shared their narratives with me. My research has spider-webbed out from Montréal, following the shifting borders of a group of practitioners not located in any one place. The condition of diaspora perhaps necessitates a kind of virtual reality, in which participation in the politics, economics, religious and cultural sphere of "home" are undertaken from afar. I argue that this kind of long-distance relationship to place is a component of Vodou for diasporic Haitian practitioners and newcomers alike, although concepts such as home come to signify differently for different Vodouists. A significant portion of my research involves speaking with geographically dispersed practitioners who use communication technology and specifically the internet as a means of maintaining religious community or engaging in religious practice. Although Haiti is occasionally a virtual site of this analysis, as North American practitioners travel back and forth, the focus of this study is on Vodou as it is practiced in the diaspora. While there is a growing body of work that looks at Vodou in Haiti, the growth of Vodou in the diaspora remains a still largely unexplored area of scholarship. My work draws on the lineage of scholars, such as Karen McCarthy Brown (2001) and Karen Richman (2005), both of whom have studied diasporic Haitian Vodou. Their explorations illustrate how such studies cannot truly account for the diaspora by viewing it as a bounded and circumscribed terrain, but by looking into how notions of diaspora interact with notions of home. How different places—from specific points in the diaspora, to Haiti, to the cosmographic spaces occupied by the gods of Vodou—come to signify in the ethos of long-distance Vodou is central to this analysis

My research on Vodou, with a focus on newcomers, technology and mobility, may strike some as straying too far from "authentic" Vodou. Throughout this text I argue that both mobility and technology use, while taking on new forms in contemporary times, are continuous with the cosmology and history of Vodou. How Vodou practitioners preserve continuity and tradition while negotiating change and innovation is a central concern of my analysis. Certainly, this text does not conjure up images of dusty back roads leading to

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isolated places in which a "traditional" form of Vodou is practiced. Instead, this text traces the thoroughly modern journeys (of both Vodou practitioners and the signifiers of Vodou) that occur, at least some of the time, on the glittering information highway. While it is true that many practitioners of Vodou, both in Haiti and in the diaspora, do not have easy access to technologies, the effects of such technologies reach well beyond the end user. Embedded in concerns of those who wonder how my research can be representative of "authentic" Vodou is a still pervasive secularization theory that pits the religious against the modern. Vodou, an Afro-Caribbean religion already steeped in problematic notions of "primitivism", has suffered from this assumption. There is risk in the dusty back road journey to Vodou, a risk of romanticizing an "authentic" picture of the religion that is infused with an insistence on its marginalization, its folkloric qualities, its smallness. There is a risk that such an image situates Vodou firmly on the wrong side of the digital divide, rendering that divide a self-fulfilling prophecy. And there is a risk that such assumptions render invisible not only the growth of Vodou among non-Haitian practitioners, but also the publicly changing image of the religion in Haiti and the diaspora and the far-reaching implications these changes may have.

Much of the work for this project is situated at the intersection of communication, religious, and cultural studies, redressing a reluctance to examine religion as a constitutive aspect of a sociocultural climate in which relationships (institutional and social) are increasingly mediated via mass media, commodity culture and communication technology. The introduction of new communication technologies into the social sphere is often thought to have a profound effect on the transmission and dissemination of religious knowledge (Spender 1995). Such a framework for analysis, however, exposes an assumption that religion and media are fundamentally separate. While mass media and new communication technologies tend to be understood simply as vehicles for cultural and religious meaning and messages, emergent scholarship in the communication subfield of religion and media seeks to develop an understanding of "mediated religion" in

which religion is "shaped by the mediation itself" (Lundby and Hoover 298). By looking at both religion and media as practices that shape the everyday experiences of individuals, scholars posit a framework in which religion and media are interdependent. Recent scholarship has begun to explore religion as inseparable from forces of globalization, new media, economics, and politics (Kintz 1997, Sands 2000, De Vries and Webber 2001). However, the focus of this scholarship has been on the highly visible influence of institutional religions on public life. "Unofficial" religions play an equally crucial role in the constitution of nation states as well as the everyday spheres of transnational populations. In many ways, an analysis of contemporary Vodou provides a case study example of an "unofficial" religion acquiring an increasing global reach. While studies into contemporary Vodou practices are growing in number (Desmangles 1992, Dayan 1995, Richman 2005)—moving the study of Haitian Vodou forward from the flurry of early anthropological work on the religion (Price-Mars 1928, Herskovitz 1937, Hurston 1938, Courlander 1939)—less attention has been paid to how Vodou manifests in urban North America (Brown 1991, Richman 2005) and virtually no attention has been given to the growth of newcomers to Vodou.

It can be difficult to account for these individuals and their relationship to Vodou. For many (scholars and practitioners alike) the attachment of newcomers to the Vodou religion is suspect, the result of an intersection between the popularization and commodification of the religion and a North American emphasis on private and individual religiosity that has led many to seek out new religious affiliations. Wade Clark Roof's seminal work (1993, 1999) on the religiosity of the influential baby boom generation illustrates how a socio-cultural emphasis on individualism and an anti-institutional approach to religion has engendered among many a spiritual or religious quest. Indeed, many of the newcomers to Vodou with whom I have spoken for this project share characteristics with Roof's baby boomers. These individuals are often introduced to Vodou as an "alternative" religion through the mechanisms of travel and tourism as well as through the workings of mass media and technology. Many

also conceptualize their movement toward identification with Vodou as part of a spiritual journey that takes them through multiple religious affiliations and attachments. It is easy to assume that such practitioners are not quite "real" or full Vodouists. Vodou is, after all, an intensely communal religion where family lineage and responsibility carries weight beyond the lived experience of practitioners and where communal embodied practices and rituals form central aspects of the religion.

On the surface of things, the individualism of many contemporary spiritual seekers seems to clash with the communal and hereditary practices of Haitian Vodou. However, charges that dispute the authenticity of new Vodouists show a deeper concern about issues of cultural appropriation and cultural dissolution. In part, such concerns stem from the categorization of Vodou as a minority, alternative, or unofficial religious culture. Such classification necessarily positions Vodou as a weaker and more vulnerable player on the global stage. Charges of inauthenticity and cultural appropriation aimed at newcomers to Vodou tend to assume that these individuals represent dominant forces of globalization and cultural commodification. As Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, the editors of *Minor Transnationalism,* explain, the dominant/subdominant binary renders the dominant "a powerful and universalizing force that either erases or eventually absorbs cultural particularities" (2) Yet, as I argue here and as my research shows, it would be incorrect to assume that the arrival of newcomers to Vodou inevitably destabilizes or dilutes the religious tradition of Haiti. Vodou is changing. However, these changes are not necessarily instigated by newcomers to the religion. Vodou, what many have called a living religion, has always changed and adapted to varying political, economic, social and cultural conditions. It should be no surprise that as Vodou changes and adapts to the informational, commodified, globalized and technological world in which its practitioners find themselves, it is also able to absorb practitioners who "find" Vodou through the very systems and institutions to which Vodou is adapting. Newcomers beat a path to the door of Vodou through a heady mix of quasi-

religious commodities, popular and mass mediated representations, and the technologized practices of digital media.

Religion and Media, Situated

An exploration of the journeys newcomers take to Vodou is situated within the growing subfields of religion and media (Buddenbaum and Stout 1996, Hoover and Lundby 1997, De Vries and Weber 2001, Hoover and Clark 2002, Hoover 2006, Meyer and Moors 2006) and media anthropology (Askew and Wilk 2002, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002). The developments in the emergent field of religion and media have, in recent years, been marked by the publication of anthologies that have emerged out of conferences on the theme of religion and media. A conference in Uppsala (1993) led to *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (Hoover and Lundby, 1997), a conference at Boulder, Colorado (1996) led to *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media* (Hoover and Clark 2002) and a conference on Media, Religion and Culture, hosted by the Media and Theology Project of the University of Edinburgh (in 1999) led to *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture* (Mitchell and Marriage, 2003). These three anthologies not only represent recent scholarship in religion and media, but also illuminate some of the tensions in the field.

Perhaps most visible is the debate between those who focus on (and embrace) new communication technologies and those who focus on (and embrace) traditional modes of communication (Mitchell and Marriage 3) in religious communities. This debate has much to do with underlying assumptions about the definition of religion and religious practice, forcing questions about what gets to count as religious communication and how new technologies, in general, fit into varied understandings of continuity, tradition and religious community. In part, this debate is fueled by the fact that not only scholars and academics are wrestling with questions concerning the intersection of religion, new media and communication technologies, but that religious groups are also

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taking on these issues and addressing them through their own religious and cosmological discourses. Certainly, the role of communication technology in religious practice is of concern to the subjects whose experience forms the foundation of my inquiry into Vodou. Mindful of these concerns, I develop a framework of analysis that explores media and technology not as opposed to religious tradition and continuity, but as concurrent and symbiotic entities. In this text I explore how religion, media and technology can be understood as synchronic, as part of a praxis in which media and technology use are absorbed into religious cosmology in such a way that it becomes impossible to separate the use of technology from religious practice. Stewart Hoover has suggested that "audience practices of reception are subverting the bright line that we once thought existed between 'religion' and 'the media'" (2003:10). Contemporary practices and discourses of Vodou blur not only the line between religion and media, but also the one between reception and production. Religious practitioners are increasingly producers of religious media and commercial ephemera even as they are consumers of those same commodities and media.

This argument situates my work at the crossroads of another central debate in contemporary scholarship in religion and media between those who focus on an investigation of audience reception to religious media and those who analyze the content of media texts (Mitchell and Marriage 3). Media anthropologists have explored how everyday media practices have socio-cultural implications for the production and consumption of media that occurs in unexpected ways and unexpected places.[2] Increasingly, however, division between producers and consumers is muddied. New technologies are developed and marketed to the "home" consumer, often making the production of media part of the cycles of consumption. In addition, as the editors of *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* explain, both producers and consumers are "imbricated in discursive universes, political situations, economic circumstances, national settings,

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[2] See, for example, the introduction to *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, eds. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, Brian Larkin [Berkeley; University of Calif. Press, 2002]. 1-36

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historical moments, and transnational flows" (2). In the "discursive universes" of North American religiosity, often shaped by media and the circulation of commodities, the distinction between producer and consumer can be difficult to make—consumers transform themselves into producers and producers become clearly signified audiences. My analysis is thus neither a study of production practices nor reception, but focuses on the spaces in-between, where media and cultural objects circulate through multiple social worlds. Religious practitioners themselves imbue both the production of artifacts and media, as well as the objects, with multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings.

Identifying Identities: Theories of the Modern Religious

Although this analysis positions itself in the space between many of the emergent debates in religion and media scholarship, it shares a primary concern of the field with religious identity and is genealogically related to multiple empirical investigations into how religious identity is constituted by contemporary conditions, including the growth of media and new technology, globalization and consumer culture. Scholars of religion and media often look to Anthony Giddens' work in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991) in order to understand how media and religion interact in the constitution of identity in contemporary culture. Giddens' contemporary analysis of the reflective-self, drawn in part from his exploration of the prevalence of a "self-help" culture in contemporary society, certainly does appear to resonate with the conditions of contemporary religiosity where individuals increasingly move between religious traditions. Giddens' work is important in that it situates the process of identity formation as a vector of influence in the larger structures of globalization, the politics of the nation-state and, implicitly, religion. He also explores "mediated experience" as having a central role in the shaping of identity, suggesting that the development of mass media has profoundly altered perceptions of the world. Giddens argues that with the advent of mass media, individuals now experience a "single world, a unitary framework of experience

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[...] yet at the same time one which creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal" (5). From these fragments, individuals are able to fashion composite identities, making choices about what "lifestyles" they will adopt in ways that are, for Giddens, unprecedented. Giddens also acknowledges that such choices are limited by what he calls "standardizing influences", such as consumer culture and commodification. However, central to Giddens' analysis of the reflexive self is the way in which identity is conditioned by risk or the stress of change. For Giddens, modernity is characterized as a "risk culture" in which risk is a primary organizing factor in social development as the fears of mass warfare and ecological or economic collapse shape global movements, the nation-state, and the individual self. While Giddens' analysis of modernity is salient, often his work is used to neatly explain contemporary religiosity as a reaction to societal changes, risk, or a cultural climate of fear. In particular, he sees the apparent rise of fundamental religion as a response to social change as individuals "seek refuge in pre-established beliefs and in familiar modes of activity" (142). This is an over-simplified explanation for the conditions of contemporary religiosity that obscures the actual workings of religion in contemporary society.

In part, this simplified understanding comes from a pervasive conceptualization of modernity that links it to secularism. In her work on the religious right, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America* (1997), Linda Kintz suggests that a failure to confront the complexity of religion in the modern social context has much to do with a discomfort in acknowledging how belief in general is part of modern existence. For Kintz, the modern nation-state, with its emphasis on politics and the public realm, is scaffolding upon which multiple belief systems (economic, national, and political, as well as religious) intersect to form a socio-cultural entity in which religion is inseparable from other aspects of culture and society. Kintz suggests that the religious conservatives in the US have been far quicker than their critics to acknowledge this deep level of interconnection of belief and politics. By examining the affective quality of belief, Kintz powerfully illustrates how even

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so-called fundamental religious practice is less of a simple "return" to religious traditionalism, or even a refuge for those seeking a pre-established belief system. Instead, for Kintz, religion is a component of a symbiotic system that intertwines religious belief with all aspects of the modern nation-state. From Kintz's analysis, the reflexive project of self-identity is circumscribed by factors left submerged in Giddens' work. These factors both open up possibility for (and curtail the limits of) the self. *Altered States* is particularly concerned with how religious identification can be understood as an agentic and often strategic process. Understanding religious identity as strategic does not disavow the "authenticity" of such identification, but rather acknowledges the fluidity inherent to the contemporary self-reflexive project.

In *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico* (2003), Raquel Romberg suggests that concepts of modernity closely linked with a belief that modernity brings secularization have permeated not only colloquial discourse, but also academic frameworks of analysis. Romberg argues that the history of Enlightenment has generated an "imagined modern world opposed to an equally imagined traditional world" (1). However, this imagined modern, secular society has not followed its predicted linear trajectory, as "there has been an increasing emergence of charismatic movements, spiritual healing, and transcendental practices in highly industrialized and technological environments" (2). The pervasive myth of secular modernity can generate a sense of marginalization for religious individuals who identify with faith-based belief systems over (or in addition to) technoscientific or political ones. However, this seeming marginalization or derision of religiosity does not negate the empowerment that religious identity can offer individuals or groups. In *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (1997), Michael Herzfeld puts forward a notion of "cultural intimacy" that acknowledges the contradictions that characterize negotiation of the multiple factors that condition the possibilities of identification. Herzfeld's understanding of identity necessitates an agentic reading of culture in which individuals come to recognize and evaluate aspects of

culture (social forms, identity categories, etc.) which may have multiple and conflicting meanings. Thus individuals can find empowerment even while adopting an identity that may seem disenfranchised or marginalized. As Herzfeld explains, cultural intimacy involves "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the basis of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation" (3). This definition of cultural intimacy is particularly useful for a study of religions such as Vodou, which clearly represents an "external" position of disenfranchisement and yet which, for an increasing number of newcomers to the religion, provides the "common sociality" of which Herzfeld speaks. As Herzfeld points out, even though this identity position is limited by social conditions and institutions of power, it generates a familiarity with those limits. Practitioners of Vodou consistently express a well-worn familiarity with the vectors of power that both circumscribe and disseminate their religion. Debates over the authenticity and veracity of Vodou practice and its practitioners play out within a self-conscious awareness of the dynamics that exist between the negative public image of Vodou and the increasing popularity of the religion. Practitioners encode, decode and transfigure a host of cultural signifiers and media representations that varyingly transmit Vodou both covertly (visible only to those "in the know") and overtly as the religion gains acceptance. This circulation of a seemingly marginalized and disenfranchised religion forms a generative matrix that produces social forms and global influences in the very space between "creative irreverence" and "intimidation". However, identification with religion in contemporary North America is seldom a unitary experience. Recent scholarship (Roof 1993, 1999; Fuller 2001) has shown that individuals increasingly adopt multiple religions over a single lifetime. Often, these multiple religious identities, although sometimes conflicting, are held simultaneously. Accounting for this simultaneity requires the re-visioning of a unitary (and global) modernity.

In *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (1993), Jean and John Comaroff suggest the need for an understanding of "multiple modernities", rather than understanding modernity as homogenizing or globalizing. As a concept which often frames discussion of identity, Comaroff and Comaroff argue that modernity, with its implications of change and transformation, is particularly problematic when it is set up in comparison to notions of tradition. This pervasive binary of modernity and tradition has implications for the study of religion and media. Analytic frameworks that assume this type of opposition tend to line religion up with tradition, setting it up as antithetical to concepts of modernity, change and transformation. As the authors explain, "[s]uch binary contrasts [...] reduce complex continuities and contradictions to the aesthetics of nice oppositions" (xii). Contemporary religious identity is constituted, in no small part, by mediating tensions between religious and secular claims to moral and political authority, to social institutions and social practices (including attempts to define normative use of new media and communication technologies). But what cannot be accounted for with these analytic frameworks that assume an opposition between religion and those social practices associated with modernity (including globalization, commodification and new technology) are the ways in which the negotiation of this tension between religion and secularization is an intrinsic aspect of modern religiosity in the West.

Scholars such as Bruno Latour have suggested that Western notions of modernity are rather misguided. His premise, in works such as *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Pandora's Hope*, that the binary oppositions that so characterize modernity—nature and culture, subject and object, science and society, and implicitly the sacred and the secular—are nothing more than myth, has been well taken. But what sometimes lies unarticulated in Latour's work, as in the work of others, is that the myth of modernity, myth though it may be, constitutes a real and tangible presence in the lives of modern people. While theoretical work that seeks to make visible the fallacy of binary oppositions is of

vital importance, it is equally important to understand that individuals can and do embrace these categories of radical distinction and separation even as they also simultaneously embrace fluidity and interconnectivity. Individuals make strategic stands from the myth of modernity while understanding the inherent contradictions (including the weaknesses and flaws) of this overarching system of belief. When, for example, Creationism transfigures itself into the scientific discourse of Intelligent Design, it becomes apparent that practices of religious dissemination no longer hold sacrosanct the much-lauded boundaries between religion and secular modernity, science and faith. This, and other instances of the infiltration of supposedly secular realms of scientific and technological development, marks a change in the visibility of religious influence in the public sphere rather than a change in techno-scientific discourse itself, which despite protests of objectivity and empiricism has long been shaped and influenced by religious precepts (Noble 1997). It should be remembered that, for all else that they do, contemporary religions provide epistemological and ontological ways of thinking through the multiple other belief systems in which individuals live their lives. The complex cosmological structures of religions such as Vodou allow individuals to understand that belief in scientific and technological progress, rationality, empiricism, political ideas, or modernity is just that—belief. And as such, multiple beliefs can and do concur. It is the concurrence of conflicting belief systems that is such a forceful characteristic of contemporary Vodou. This concurrence of seeming opposition and the strategic negotiation of conflicting systems of belief can be difficult for scholars to appreciate in the context of analytical frameworks which assume that the influence of globalization and commodification are having a negative effect on religions such as Vodou.

The notion that social movements, including religious movements, are constrained by social and institutional conditions that delimit the possibilities of choices that can be made in a given time and space, certainly borrows from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "practice" (in *The Logic of Practice*, 1980). My understanding of how individuals come to identify with a religious group,

ideology, discourse, or practice is concerned not only with the constraints social and institutional conditions have on the constitution of identity, but also the ways in which such institutions allow new possibilities for religious identification. In *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere*, Jean-Loup Amselle attempts to conceptualize identity in terms of what he calls an "originary syncretism" or hybridity. Questioning Ricoeur's insistence that "selfhood" is constructed in "a permanent relation with alterity" (x), Amselle seeks ground between the two poles of the universalist-relativist debate. His understanding of identity foregrounds the ways in which individual and collective identities function as historical and fictitious narratives. For Amselle, this narrativity coalesces into a single identity, which comprises "elements of all descendent cultures" (xi). He argues that "these elements should not be conceptualized in terms of opposition but oscillation (or shrinkage and dilation) and multi-belongingness" (xi). Thus, Amselle seeks to find a framework for analysis of identity that accounts not only for the fluidity of social life, but for the ways in which social actors belong to multiple and sometimes seemingly conflicted identities. Amselle argues for a "mestizo logics" which circumvents the categorization or opposition of conflicted identities by embracing the concurrence of multiple identities. In so doing, Amselle envisions culture as a "reservoir, a collection of practices internal/external to a given social arena that actors mobilize as a function of one or another political conjuncture (4)". In my work on contemporary Vodou, I explore how newcomers to that religion draw on a complex cultural "reservoir" which includes multiple and often conflicted understandings of Vodou. Such individuals draw not only on what some would call "authentic" Haitian Vodou, but also on popular images and conceptualizations of "Voodoo". In addition, newcomers to the Vodou religion also draw on multifarious concepts of religion, often embracing multiple belief systems concurrently. And inevitably, new Vodouists interact with the complex history of Haiti and Haitian-American political and military history. The "multi-belongingness" that renders non-Haitian Vodouists "friends of Haiti"—a label that is applied to non-Haitians who are active in Haiti or the Haitian diaspora—

also reshapes, or transforms these individuals' interaction with (and understanding of) their own nation-state.

Indeed, the history of Haitian-American relations—punctuated by American military and economic interventions in Haiti, successive waves of Haitian immigration to North America, and the stereotyping of Haitian-Americans within Canada and the US (the most obvious example of which is, perhaps, the association made between Haitian immigrants and the North American spread of AIDS)—underpins any examination of contemporary Vodou practice in North America. For newcomers and Haitian Vodouists alike, an explicit discussion of the history of Haitian-American relations is only sometimes part of their interaction within Vodou communities. Nonetheless, the historicity of Haitian-American contact is embedded in the signifiers of Vodou, both those coming directly from the religion and those that have been manufactured outside the religious sphere. Complex concepts become distilled into single signifiers (such as the word "Voodoo"), which must be decoded by newcomers who are negotiating the "multi-belongingness" their affiliation with Vodou necessarily engenders. Multiple and conflicting conceptualizations of identity become embedded into signifiers and symbols that then transmit multiple and conflicting meaning across time and space. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative,* Judith Butler defines the historicity of language as encompassing a past and a future that exist outside the lived experience of an individual (28). Language or more specifically names can accrue a thick layer of meaning as they circulate through multiple spheres of usage: "the name has, thus, a historicity, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name, has come to constitute the contemporary meaning of a name; the sediment of its usages as they have become part of the very name, a sedimentation, a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force" (36). Part of this project is to trace and unpack the sedimentation of usages embedded in the names "Voodoo" and Vodou, as well as in other signifiers of the religion.

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The complex historicity embedded in the names "Voodoo" and Vodou is also embedded in the multiple objects and commodities which in some way carry or signify that same name. Portions of this analysis are devoted to examining artifacts, popular representations, and cultural commodities that come into contact with, disseminate and delimit the Vodou religion. Interwoven with the narratives and experiences of Vodou practitioners is an ethnography of social forms. In "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition" Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli suggest that an ethnography of social forms requires an attentiveness to "the edges of forms as they circulate so that we can see what is motivating their movement across global social space" (392). My analysis does not plot the autonomy of individual representations of Vodou so much as it charts the movement of social forms in and out of multiple social spheres, exploring what motivates this movement as well as what shifts in meaning occur as differing signification is attached to circulating social forms. Thus, this analysis is both about becoming a Vodouist and about what Vodou is becoming, the processes of which are formed by a material culture of circulation that generates certain possibilities and limits for becoming when social worlds and people interact, intersect, and occasionally collide. By tracing the movement of cultural commodities—such as popular music commodities, media representations (television and film), ephemera such as comic books, "Voodoo" doll kits, and other smaller items of kitsch (such as action figures, playing cards, soap, clothing and jewelry) which signify Vodou in some way—this analysis not only unpacks the histories embedded in artifacts, but also understands cultural commodities and artifacts as mobile vectors in generating social and religious imaginaries.

As this analysis traces the vectors of mobility, travel, and dissemination of objects that are, in some way, related to Vodou, it examines the materialities—the tangible conditions—that allow for the movement of social forms in and out of multiple social spheres, generating commodities, artifacts and objects that are at

once disconnected from certain local specificities and reconnected to other specific places. For example, the examination of Vodou in popular music in this analysis traces the movement of Vodou from folkloric to popular music, the conditions imposed on that movement by the structures of World Beat music production and the ways in which Vodou escaped those structures to circulate in musical forms and commodities which, in cannibalizing other musical structures, come to imbue Vodou with new symbolism and meanings. Similarly, the ways in which Vodou surfaces in ephemera, such as the Brother Voodoo comic series released in the 1970s, is understood in this analysis as being delimited by a particular set of historical, social and cultural conditions. As ephemera circulates, terms such as "Voodoo" are both disseminated and (re)defined.

There still exists, in much scholarship on contemporary religion, an implicit assumption that religion and commodification, like religion and modernity, are opposing elements of individual experience. In *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (1994)—a cultural history of consumerism and American religiosity—R. Laurence Moore notes that religions, in general, have never been particularly antithetical toward (or even fallen outside) dominant economic systems. Nonetheless, scholarship that explores commercial forms of religion tends to assume that commercialization inevitably dilutes "authentic" religions. For instance, the work of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*—which explores how religion is absorbed into and repackaged as part of commercial "brands"—argue that religion is being taken over by commercial enterprise. Similarly, Michael Tausig's work on commodity fetishism, an important source for some who theorize the commercialization of religion, assumes a fundamental split between capitalist and "pre-capitalist" cultures. Thus, cultural commodities and the economic systems associated with them are seen as intrinsically foreign to religion in Taussig's understanding of the spread of capitalism. While the histories of colonialism and imperialism are central to an understanding of Haitian Vodou, both past and present, these New World histories do not reveal a clear

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moment of division between capitalism and precapitalism. Instead, the circulation of commodities and the ethos of commodification seem to create elisions over the fissures of disconnection caused by colonialism, slavery and the contemporary legacies of both.

The assumption that commercialization dilutes or disassembles religion renders invisible the way Vodouists reclaim, transfigure, and even produce commercialized forms of Vodou. Popular or vernacular religions can and do operate both inside and outside economic systems, taking advantage of new economies and redefining the meaning of material success in religious terms. The spiritualization of commercial enterprise, intersecting with a global marketplace, maps popular religion onto increasingly public terrain. How Vodou negotiates the increased public visibility spawned by the commercialization of Vodou and how commercial enterprises are absorbed into the religious tradition is central to this analysis. Commodity culture, I argue, does not lead inevitably to a sense of alienation, but becomes encompassed within a religious world view which imbues the commodity with sometimes unexpected meanings and the production and dissemination of commodified religion with missionistic purpose. An understanding of a commodified identity relates back to the work of Anthony Giddens who argues that through consumerism, society conditions a set of practices or lifestyles that an individual must adopt, not necessarily for practical or necessary reasons, but because "they give form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (81). For Giddens and other critics of commodity culture, the commodified identity inevitably results in alienation, or what Giddens calls the "disembedding" of the self from social relationships and responsibilities. However, scholars of vernacular religions have observed that while processes of commodification can structure social relations, they do not necessarily usurp them (Romberg 13). Certainly, Vodou can be reached through cultural commodities and a process of commodified identification. However, I would argue that rather than generating alienation, this process of "finding" Vodou becomes embedded in a complex set of social relations, not simply by instilling consumerism itself with

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meaning, but also by using the very structures of consumer capitalism to resist cultural dispersal and dissolution.

In part, what critics of commodity culture target as alienating, is the scope of post industrialized production. Mass production, like mass media, is charged with separating individuals from not only products, but also social consequences. Famously, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin illustrates how mass production alters the proximity of the copy (the mass produced object) to its original. For Benjamin, this separation of copy and original dissolves the "aura" of the original, its particular history or location in a specific time and place. The unmooring of an object from its cultural specificity and its ties to place is undoubtedly one consequence of mass production. However, the repetitious characteristic of mass production can be transfigured and reinterpreted. In Haiti, mass produced chromolithographs of Catholic saints have been co-opted as an important part of religious practice, each Catholic saint representing a particular god or goddess of Vodou. For practitioners of predominantly oral religions, repetition carries a certain social force that gets transmuted to the repetition inherent to the production of cultural commodities. Theorists of black cultural production have spoken extensively about the role of repetition in black vernacular culture (Braithwaite 1984, Cooper 1993, Glissant 1989). In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Henry Louis Gates Jr. relates repetition to the structures of jazz music and particularly the play of improvisation where the same signifier (or sound) accrues new meaning as it is repeated in differing contexts (64). This is what Gates sometimes calls doublespeak, which assumes—contrary to the Habermasian ideal of consent—that the same utterances can carry sometimes radically differing meanings.[3] If this notion of repetition is mapped onto the repetitious production of the cultural commodity, it is possible to understand how this unmooring of the copy (or the repetition) from its original allows it to accrue a doubled (or

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[3] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987. 199

multiple) meaning shaped by the multiple contexts or social spheres into which that repetition or copy falls. In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler suggests that it is through repetition that signifiers used to subjugate individuals and groups can acquire new layers of meaning or can even be reclaimed. The reclamation inherent to the repetitious nature of doublespeak occurs when slurs are repeated and recouped by those who are habitually subjugated by them. Similarly, stereotypes embedded not only in language, but also in cultural commodities and mass media, get recouped, repeated and reused by contemporary Vodouists. Understanding repetition as a facet not only of orality but of commodity culture itself, allows for an exploration of how commodities not only accumulate multiple and complex meanings as they circulate through multiple social spheres, but also how they can function to constitute social relatedness (rather that social disembedding) for individuals. Tracing the circulation of Vodou can provide both a model for how to understand the continual movement-in-tandem of human and machine, object and subject, not as rigidly defined dichotomies but as continually "unpacked" (or sometimes packaged up) categories that shape the conditions which make possible identification with contemporary religions.

Minor Mobilities

Mobility, the movement of subjects and subjectivity, objects and ideas, is central to understanding a contemporary religion, such as Vodou, that is at once characteristically local and intrinsically global. Undoubtedly, shifts in contemporary Vodou practice are partially a result of both mobility and the tracking of such mobility by the ever-watchful lens of media. New media technology enhances what some see as a global restlessness, allowing for so-called virtual mobility even when the body is confined by economic and political conditions. Mobility, virtual and physical, is not unfettered, but is always constrained by modes of transportation and border patrols. In *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Zygmut Bauman argues that the world's mobile populous can be divided largely into two groups: tourists and vagabonds (77). Bauman's

categorization plays up a perspective of the growing global divide between the on-the-move elites and those who are confined to local geographies (or, conversely, moved to places against their will). His analysis also points to the realization that the rapidly growing commerce of tourism is not simply an industry, but an intrinsic aspect of a global (capitalist) culture. Bauman argues that tourism fits into an emergent pattern of consumption characterizing contemporary globalization. He attributes this practice of rapid consumption to a global consumer industry—of which tourism is a significant part—which is increasingly concerned with the selling of "attractions and temptations" (78). According to Bauman it is the ethos of travel or mobility, far more than the movement of objects, that is the new mode of circulation governing social and cultural relationships.

Certainly, contemporary Vodou communities and practices are marked by a complex mobility of which tourism is a part. While tourist practices in Haiti seem to render Vodou part of Bauman's "attractions and temptations", Vodou is itself a mobile religious world accustomed to constituting itself on new and unfamiliar terrain. Part of the project of this analysis is to tease apart how Haitian Vodou can remain specifically Haitian even when removed from Haiti. Such an analysis must necessarily eschew notions of culture as bound to place. Not only does Haitian Vodou itself travel as practitioners constitute new sites of Vodou practice in the diaspora, but it also becomes a site for the circulation of seemingly foreign signifiers and practices. In his introduction to *Transnational Connection: Culture, People, Places*, Ulf Hannerz, speaking about his anthropological work in contemporary Nigeria, could be speaking about Vodou when he wonders; "How do you understand and portray, a culture shaped by an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and the imported?" (Hannerz, 1996:5). While contemporary Vodou is filled with signifiers, discourses, and even practices that seem to originate elsewhere, the aggregating (or what some would call syncretic) quality of Vodou is part of its history and its historicity. Vodou is a site through which a host of signifiers circulate; but these signifiers do not

circulate through Vodou unchanged. Instead, Vodou transfigures that with which it comes in contact with to serve religious purpose. In this way, Vodou functions as a site of mobility as much as it is itself a mobile religious world.

All this mobility would seem to imply a subjectivity that is dislocated from place. Certainly, it is tempting to see Haitian Vodouists outside of Haiti as non-local selves or nomadic subjects. Theorists of transnationalism and globalization have discussed the ways in which subjectivity is rendered fluid under contemporary conditions of mobility. Scholars such as Aihwa Ong (1999) and Arjun Appadurai (1996) have explored how the mechanics of transnationalism "transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities" and in doing so loosen "the bonds between people, wealth, and territories" (Appadurai 1991:192). Although as the editors of *Minor Transnationalism* point out, such "[f]lexible or nomadic subjects function as if they are free-floating signifiers without psychic and material investment in one or more given geopolitical spaces" (8). Contemporary Vodouists, however, express connection to multiple places. Clearly, Haitian Vodouists in the diaspora continue to have affective and tangible investments "back home" in Haiti even as they are implicated in the conditions of their diasporic home. Newcomers to Vodou also forge connections to multiple places (including Haiti) as a result of their affiliation with Vodou. As I argue throughout this text, Vodou provides practitioners with a complex cosmological and epistemological system that allows them to understand Vodou as at once bound to and unbound from a cosmographic homeland. While Haiti is an important site for Vodou practitioners—one to which they must return to for initiations even if that particular journey of return takes them to Haiti for the first time—Haiti is always only a secondary site of origin for Haitian Vodou. Embedded within the discourses of Vodou is a complex notion of Africa, or *Ginen*, as home to the gods and goddesses of Vodou. As I discuss more extensively in "Virtual Vodou Part II: Techno Vodou", *Ginen* represents a spiritualized concept of Africa that can be accessed through the soil of Haiti onto which practitioners pour libations for Vodou deities. But the mythological

Africa/*Ginen* that is a part of Vodou cosmology is not wholly disconnected from the "real" or actual Africa that is the originating point of the Middle Passage that brought the slaves and their gods to Haiti. Embedded in Vodou is an understanding of attachment to multiple places and of the connections that exist between the national and the transnational. Vodou, in this analysis, is not a reified or static culture at risk of being assimilated into the global. Instead, Vodou is itself intrinsically transnational.

Understanding Vodou as mobile and transnational means exploring how the mobility and circulation that can be mapped in relation to contemporary Vodou constitutes what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call "transversal movements of culture", or "minor transnationalism". For Lionnet and Shih this cultural transversalism "includes minor cultural articulations in productive relationship with the major (in all its possible shapes, forms, and kinds), as well as minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether" (8). Vodou is adept at both mediating productive relationships within dominant (economic, political and social) structures as well as subverting those same structures, forging connections to other "minor" religions and social movements. In part, understanding Vodou as a mobile religiosity requires an awareness of how Vodou moves *with* seemingly dominant structures, institutions and systems of mobility. Throughout this text I argue that rather than being subsumed by the global flows of goods and people, Vodou rides these flows, extending its global reach. The vibrant tourist trade in Vodou initiations and ceremonies that takes place in Haiti may seem like an obvious example of global mobility subsuming local distinction, rendering it palatable, the religious tradition of a local culture no more than touristic diversion. Yet religious tourism (which I discuss extensively in "Vodou Located: Navigating Deterritorialized Spaces") becomes enmeshed in local economies often providing much needed capital for local people. In the exchange between religious tourist and the savvy local who plays to touristic interests and desires, it is not always clear who is taking advantage of whom. Similarly, when Vodouists revision pop culture representations and commodities or transfigure

technologies to serve religious purpose they are using already existing structures of circulation and mobility often in ways other than they are intended. Newcomers to Vodou—who access the religion through a decoding of popular images of Vodou/Voodoo or search for religious information on the internet—move against the seemingly one way flow of globalization, making the "minor" marginalized religion of Vodou (or even the nation of Haiti) their destination point.

What emerges from the theoretical framework of minor transnationalism is an understanding of how the circulation of Vodou impacts on the processes of identification with the religion. Identification with Vodou engenders negotiation of "national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries" that subvert the rigid dichotomy of the local and the global, the dominant and the subdominant. As Lionnet and Shih explain; "New requirements of ethics become urgent, and expressions of allegiances are found in unexpected and sometimes surprising places; new literacies are created in nonstandard languages, tonalities, and rhythms; and the copresence of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial spaces fundamentally blurs the temporal sequence of these moments" (8). The growth of Vodou involves the movement of Vodou across global space and the movement of newcomers to the religion, both of which can be seen as examples of minor transnationalism. And both forms of movement create the allegiances and literacies of which Lionnet and Shih speak even while negotiating colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial conditions. Globalization and transnationalism may condition the possibilities for identification with Vodou in contemporary North America, but that identification is always undertaken someplace. Identification with Vodou may require negotiating tensions between the national and transnational, but it does not necessarily produced non-local subjects. The individuals in this text encounter Vodou from specific and situated places. Mobility, in this analysis explores the political, social and religious discourses and intersubjective relationships that are generated in the movement between places.

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Some of the vehicles of mobility explored in this analysis are the vectors of movement through what some call cyberspace. There is growing inquiry into how the internet impacts religious experience, identity and organization (Brasher 2001, Campbell 2005, Højsgaard and Warburg 2005, Stahl 1997, Taylor 1999, Zaleski 1997). Although religion has suffused the realms of cyberspace—both in the rhetoric surrounding the introduction of new computer technology, linking technological change to discourses of transcendence, spirituality and mysticism (Stahl 79), and also in the way in which religious practitioners are fast becoming the most prolific users of the internet[4]—there remains a conceptual distance between the realms of religion and cyberspace. In part, this conceptual distance exists because internet and computer mediated communication practices are often conceptualized as inherently "disembedding" (to use Anthony Giddens' term), lifting individuals out of social relationships and removing them from social consequences. My work on Vodou and cyberspace examines internet use and computer mediated communication as socially situated practices, embedded in religious communities and social relationships that exist "offline". Following the research of ethnographers of the internet such as Daniel Miller and Don Slater who, in *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, examine internet use in a Trinidadian context, my work explores how the internet, like other forms of mass media and commodity culture, has an impact on the Vodou religion that extends beyond the immediacy of computer mediated communication and internet use. The growing tourist trade in Vodou initiations in Haiti, for example, fed in part by internet advertising, has an impact on the lives of practitioners who have limited access to the internet.

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[4] Statistics suggest that more people use the Internet for religious or spiritual purpose than for online banking or online dating. For more information, see PEW Internet and American Life Project (2000). *Wired Churches, Wired Temples: Taking Congregations and Missions into Cyberspace,* available online at: www.pewinternet.org and PEW Internet and American Life Project (2001). *Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online.* Available online at: www.pewinternet.org

An understanding of the interconnection between "online" and "offline" practices and experiences requires a particular conceptualization of cyberspace itself. Early discussions of the emergent technologies of the internet and the web have produced lyrical, varied and often utopic definitions of "cyberspace" that are still in circulation. Cyberspace is often conceptualized as a world apart from reality, and the beings born within it are understood as epitomizing a postmodern concept of identity as fluid and fragmented. Donna Haraway has defined cyberspace as the "spatio-temporal symbol of postmodernity and its regimes of flexible accumulation" (1997:238). For Michael Benedikt, cyberspace is (among other things) "a new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines. A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sight, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic light" (1). And in "Old Rituals for New Space: Rites de Passage and William Gibson's Cultural Model of Cyberspace", David Tomas, recalling the science fiction writer who coined the word in 1984, suggests that cyberspace "is neither a 'pop' phenomenon nor a simple technological artefact, but rather a powerful, collective, mnemonic technology that promises to have an important, if not revolutionary, impact on the future compositions of human identities and cultures" (32). Although it has come to signify a model of space—a virtual geography, or a parallel universe—Haraway argues that cyberspace cannot be simply defined as location, but must also be understood as location in time. That time, as Tomas points out, is not confined to the present. Instead, cyberspace functions both as a collective mnemonic device (as, for instance, the collective recall of a vast compendium of knowledge that exists somewhere between the fingertips and the search engines, rendering actual memory, perhaps, redundant) and as a tentative foreshadow of the future. It is between this future tense and memory—its contrapuntal shadow—that philosophers of the virtual locate much of their discussion. The virtual exists between the past, which is always virtual in that, like a memory or a dream, it is not actual, and a possible future that does not yet exist. The virtual may be

augmented by technologies like the internet, but it does not exist because of them. In fact, the internet—often conceived of as the "location" of a "virtual reality"— can facilitate the transition from virtual to actual when, for instance, e-commerce turns virtual transactions into actual products that arrive at actual destinations.

Transitions between the virtual and the actual have always existed. As Rob Shields points out in *The Virtual*, "Virtual elements are embedded in everyday activities and the language we use. Ritual, miracles, understandings of risk and fate all involve slippage between the categories as the virtual is actualized, the probable takes place" (43). It is here that theories of the virtual,[5] which collide powerfully with commonsense notions of "virtual space", explore the vast possibilities of becoming that cyberspace and virtual reality seem to foreground. Existence is closely tied to our understanding of the virtual, and more specifically, how existence (or identity) becomes actualized through the virtual (31). Erik Davis in "Synthetic Mediations: Cogito in the Matrix" suggests that "cyberspace externalizes us, translating the contents of subjectivity into an objective space of technical operations. So...we have the endless play of virtual identity, in which we lend 'reality' to stray fragments of the psyche by externalizing them into a field of technologically sustained symbolic intersubjectivity" (25). For some, the "endless play of virtual identity" offers up utopic possibilities for undoing the essentialist categories of identity (such as race and gender), which so often lead to the subjugation of some. For others virtual identity risks obscuring the "real" intersubjective relations that structure everyday life for many. These ontological preoccupations, circulating in discourses of cyberspace and the virtual, inevitably intersect with the ontological processes of religious seekers and practitioners, who find themselves in various states of becoming (religious, Vodouists, or initiated, for example) While the potential for movement toward becoming a "new" subject

[5] See, for example, Giles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* [NY: Columbia University Press, 1981], J. Baudrillard's *The Precession of Similacra* [NY: Zone Books, 1990], and Pierre Levy's *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* [NY: Plenum press, 1998]. See also, Katherine N. Hayles's *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* [University of Chicago Press, 1999] and Mike Crang's et al, (eds) *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space, and Relations* [NY: Routledge, 1999].

is one aspect of cyberspace, it is not the only form of movement embedded within understandings of the term. As Benedikt points out, cyberspace is made up of a hectic traffic in information and symbols that has a counterpart in facilitating the movement of material objects and people.

Perhaps because the circulation of material objects is so evidently augmented by digital technologies (perhaps most obviously within the domain of e-commerce), the assumed disembodied and disembedded characteristics ascribed to cyberspace have been challenged by more recent scholarship. Many scholars have come to abandon the term cyberspace, suggesting that it has become overused to such an extent that it no longer functions as a useful signifier. However, recently, scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles (2002) have re-defined the term, suggesting that it is a useful descriptor for the "mixed reality" many now live, where multiple technologies contribute to the "seamless mixing of virtual and real spaces." My own work makes use of the term cyberspace largely because it is a term that practitioners use and are familiar with. In addition, I explore (in "Virtual Vodou Part II: Techno Vodou") the ways in which Vodou has become intertwined with definitions and understandings of cyberspace itself, in part through cyberpunk author William Gibson's influential Neuromancer Trilogy (*Neuromancer* 1984, *Count Zero* 1986, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* 1988). Gibson, often credited with defining the term cyberspace, made Vodou an influential religious element in his fictional hacker underworld and depicted the gods and goddesses of Vodou as inhabiting a cybernetic matrix. Gibson's representation of Vodou-in-cyberspace is negotiated by Vodou practitioners as they come in contact with Vodou's growing online presence. While the technologies that contribute to "mixed reality" are multiple and not limited to the digitalized realm of the internet, the internet is nonetheless an important component of contemporary Vodou and the burgeoning growth of the religion. Understanding how practitioners use the internet, and what they do online, is central to an understanding of contemporary Vodou practices both on and offline.

Some scholars make a distinction between forms of cyber-religion. In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises,* Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan define "religion on-line" as providing "the interested web traveler with information about religion: doctrine, polity, organization, and belief; service and opportunities for service; religious books and articles; as well as other paraphernalia related to one's religious tradition or quest" (9). "Online religion", on the other hand, "invites the visitor to participate in the religious dimension of life via the Web; liturgy, prayer, ritual, meditation, and homiletics come together and function with the e-space itself acting as church, temple, synagogue, mosque and grove" (9). In "Online-Religion/ Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas", Chris Helland elaborates on this distinction, arguing that the conditions of modernity have spawned a distinctive and characteristic split between public and private religion; "In our contemporary religious culture it appears as if there are two manifestations of religious systems. One is structured and appears in the public sphere based upon traditional forms of highly bureaucratic and institutionalized beliefs, controlled by the elite of the organization. The other has its locus within the individual, fluctuating and altering as the beliefs change with the individual's perception and interpretation of what it means to be religious or spiritual in the modern world" (211). For Helland, institutional beliefs correspond to religion on-line as religious institutions reproduce their hierarchical structures on the internet, broadcasting, as it were, their religious messages to a mass audience. On-line religion, on the other hand, is an interactive practice where the private beliefs of individuals are given a public forum without the constraints of institutional structures; "Individuals are interacting with the religious beliefs systems presented on the Internet; they are contributing personal beliefs and receiving personal feedback. It is a dialectic process; the beliefs are developing and altering, adapting and fluctuating in the direction the participants wish to take them" (214). Practically speaking and from the perspective of the webcrawler, the movement from religion on-line to on-line religion can be difficult to detect and hard to clearly define. Individuals who surf the web for information about religion may find themselves in virtual spaces of worship, they may encounter and interact

with meditation software or prayer machines, they may stumble upon an online ritual, or an invitation to an offline one. In addition, the proliferation of chat groups and listservs devoted to a particular religion or an aspect of a particular religion are difficult to categorize. Such groups are informative, but they are also sometimes missionistic and rituals may be embedded in these online forums,[6] blurring the distinction between on-line religion and religion on-line. In addition, the internet has an influence that extends beyond online practices.

Emergent studies on how computer-mediated communication practices are reshaping religious experience and identification have yet to focus on how Afro-Caribbean religions interact with computer-mediated communication in unique ways. In part, this stems from an assumption that religions such as Vodou (and Vodouists themselves) are bound by economic conditions that make new media technologies inaccessible. This notion of a digital divide is challenged by the ways in which practitioners use and transfigure the internet into a communicative environment that suits their needs. Sometimes this challenge is literal, as practitioners seek to make the internet accessible to those with limited access, other times it involves a revisioning of Vodou's place in cultural and technological production. In both cases, these challenges point out that issues of access exceed the end user of technologies. Technologies such as the internet generate vectors of influence that extend beyond simple representations of or practices involving Vodou in cyberspace. In this way the seemingly globalizing forces of an increasing technological ubiquity and promise of technological promise is reconfigured in culturally and religiously specific ways. The growth of Vodou in cyberspace provides an analysis of how technologies and characteristics of an "information society" are incorporated into a belief system.

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[6] Examples of rituals embedded in listservs include members calling for prayers for an ill list member or organizing virtual rituals that take place at a designated time. Such virtual rituals are organized over the internet, in chat rooms or online forums, but they may well take place away from the technology itself. Individual practitioners are separated by distance (although united in time), and they may perform such rituals away from the computer, in separate areas of their homes or even in outdoor spaces at the designated time.

Elucidating the intersection of mediated, technologized, and commodified religiosity with the rituals, practices and epistemology of Vodou requires an understanding of the lived experience of Vodou practitioners. This text explores how cultural commodities, media and communication technology create religious networks and fidelity despite separation of time and space, generating a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the lived experience of a diverse group. Vodou practitioners develop strategies of identification that are contingent on the multiple places and multiple affiliations they negotiate everyday. These strategies are not merely individual but are dependent on how the institutions, economics, politics and other realities conscribe and liberate agency or the possibilities of identification. Contemporary sites of religious practice, whether geographic or virtual, may look increasingly like the crossroads of a global spiritual marketplace where religion and spirituality is commodified and marketed. However, the choices (or selections) made possible within this marketplace are determined by conditions that are both locally specific and globally significant. The way in which this analysis teases apart this interdependence in an attempt to demystifying the growth of Vodou in North America has implications for understanding what some see as the resurgence of religion in a supposedly secular age.

Methods of Methodology

As this analysis traces the vectors of mobility, travel, and dissemination of objects that are, in some way, related to Vodou, it examines the materialities—the tangible conditions—that allow for the movement of social forms in and out of multiple social spheres, generating commodities, artifacts and objects that are often unmoored from local specificity altogether. For example, the examination of Vodou in popular music in this dissertation traces the movement of Vodou from folkloric to popular music, the conditions imposed on that movement by the structures of World Beat music production, and the ways in which Vodou escaped those structures to circulate in musical forms and commodities which, in cannibalizing other musical structures, come to imbue Vodou with new

symbolism and meanings. Similarly, the ways in which Vodou surfaces in ephemera, such as the Brother Voodoo comic series released in the 1970s, is understood in this analysis as being delimited by a particular set of historical, social and cultural conditions. As ephemera circulate, the historicity of terms such as "Voodoo" are both disseminated and defined. The theoretical frameworks of globalization, mobility and identity, as well as theories of cultural commodification and new media are used to explore the ways in which social forms are continually transfigured, depending on the social spheres with which they come into contact.

Although a material cultural analysis, my work is also concerned with how social forms accrue meaning through their circulation through complex social networks. Elucidating the intersection of mediated and commodified religiosity with the rituals, practices and epistemology of Vodou requires an understanding of the lived experience of Vodou practitioners. The primary method of research for this analysis is ethnographic, based on interactive long interviews, interview-interaction, and participant observation. Such research produces qualitative data that can illuminate the processes of religious re-signification and identification that occurs in contemporary Vodou. This approach allows for an understanding of how cultural commodities, media and communication technology create religious networks and fidelity despite separation of time and space and it generates a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the lived experience of a diverse group.[7] My approach to fieldwork was not born out of a desire to control the conditions of my research. I did not seek out a representative (or idealized) sample of practitioners who would then elucidate what Vodou "means". Instead, I sought to observe the conditions I found and I understood what practitioners shared with me as performative statements (as, indeed, my own statements were similarly performative) circumscribed by a host of discursive conditions. I borrow my

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[7] My ethnographic work complies fully with the national (Canadian) Tri-council policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans as well as the research ethics policy of McGill University. I have received Research Ethic approval (REB I) for this research from McGill University.

approach to both fieldwork and ethnographic writing from the toolbox provided by reflexive ethnography which seeks to acknowledge that the dividing line between researcher and researched is arbitrary, even while the researcher must take accountability for the implications of her research on the researched.

Theorists of reflexivity (Clifford 1986, Kondo 1990, Wolf 1992, Behar 1996, Okely 1996) have explored the importance of examining the intersection between the experience of fieldwork and the written text produced by the fieldworker. While this dissertation is not autoethnographic, it makes use of the methodological and theoretical strategies offered by scholars of this approach to fieldwork. In *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*, Dorinne Kondo explains how experience, transcribed textually, highlights not so much the "reality" of that experience, but the specificity and fluidity of experiential discourse. For Kondo, the narration of personal experience is a strategic method that allows a theoretical framework to emerge. It is a strategy that expands notions of what can count as theory, "where experience and evocation can become theory, where the binary between "empirical" and "theoretical" is displaced and loses force" (1990:8). Like Kondo, I blur the boundary between empirical data and theoretical discussion in this analysis of Vodou. In part this blurring emerges from the subject of study itself. Vodou, like many Afro-Caribbean and African traditions is highly self-analytical. In the introduction to *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeutics of Power in Yoruba Society*, Andrew Apter explains how Yoruba scholars have developed such a monumental tradition of self analytical work, much of which has entered the mainstream of academic discourse, so that "for many decades it has not been possible or conscionable for non-Yoruba scholars to write 'about' or 'for' the Yoruba, but rather *with* the Yoruba, within a complex discursive field" (3). Part of the endeavour of this project is not to become wholly submerged within the "complex discursive field" of Vodou, but to mediate between intercultural and interdisciplinary discursive fields in an attempt not only to know Vodou, but also to understand how it is known. This involves acknowledging the ways in which

all discourses about Vodou (including, inevitably, this text itself) circulate in such a way as to condition the possibility of identifying with (or even identifying) the Vodou religion.

I open with a discussion of both the local specificity of my multiple fieldsites and an understanding of the movement between these places. "Vodou Located" (chapter one) examines how the praxis of Vodou insists on forms of mobility, how mobility signifies differently for Haitian and non-Haitian Vodouists, and how it is experienced differently for Vodouists who occupy different social positions (such as class and race). In addition, this chapter explores how the vectors of mobility demanded by religions such as Vodou constitute a particular understanding of place as unbounded, not limited to any particular locale. Tourism and pilgrimage are understood as sometimes overlapping aspects of a mobility constituting a particular religious identity. Chapter two, "Vodou Groove", traces Vodou-in-music as a circulating social form and cultural commodity, from Haiti across North America. As popular music groups and movements—utilizing the musical tropes and genres of Haitian Vodou—have developed in Haiti, music saturated with signifiers of Vodou has been disseminated to a mass audience. This has led to the appropriation of the genres, rhythms, melodies and signifiers of a "Vodou groove" by musicians and producers not genealogically or geographically connected to Haitian Vodou. In this chapter, I argue that no matter how far flung this dissemination, the encoded signifiers of Vodou are transmitted via popular music. The literal and virtual movement of the Vodou religion in North America is accompanied by a sometimes uneasy traffic in "Voodoo". Bound up with the troubled history of Haitian-American relations, "Voodoo" condenses a host of assumptions into a single social form or cultural commodity. These popular representations cannot simply be dismissed as misconceptions, misinterpretations or stereotypes of Vodou. Instead, I contend that popular forms of "Voodoo", no matter how seemingly removed from the religion, always carry something of the ethos of

Haitian Vodou embedded in their form. Chapter three, "Visible Vodou", excavates popular social forms, looking at what can be described as Vodou ephemera, including comic books, spell kits, Voodoo dolls, and other Vodou "kitsch". I argue that these artefacts and representations become part of a process of religious identification contingent on how practitioners recognize, evaluate or transfigure commercial objects to serve religious purpose. Vodou in contemporary North America is definitively marked by the collision between circulating popular forms of "Voodoo" and a network of practitioners actively engaged in processes of evaluation. The last two chapters of the text, "Virtual Vodou Part I: Mediated Vodou" and "Virtual Vodou Part II: Techno Vodou" explore the impact of media representations and new media technologies on the growth of Vodou in North America. "Mediated Vodou" examines the impact of representations and media events—such as Karen McCarthy Brown's ethnography *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* and the screening in North America of the documentary on Vodou in Haiti, *Des Dieux et Des Hommes*—on the public visibility of Vodou. The influx of newcomers to the religion is, in part, instigated by such public moments of visibility. New practitioners find themselves in the process of "becoming Vodouists". This ontological process intersects with the ontological praxis of Vodou embedded in the history and narratives of the religion. I argue that the mediation of Vodou and its increased public visibility does not dilute or diminished the cultural specificity or efficacy of the religion, but does reshape the intersubjective relationships that constitute a given religious world. In "Techno Vodou" I explore how practitioners use a matrix of media to conduct a form of long distance Vodou. I argue that this long-distance Vodou is commensurate with the cosmology of Vodou. The cosmological construct of *Ginen* in Vodou represents a type of virtual Africa, one from which Vodouists were dislocated during the Middle Passage. When contemporary Vodouists practice a type of long-distance Vodou, I suggest that they preserve cultural continuity through a unique understanding of virtuality.

The shifting ontological positioning of contemporary Vodouists illuminates a praxis of strategic identification that self-consciously understands identity as contingent and fluid. The fluid understanding of identity, embedded in and transmitted through the narratives and rituals of Vodou, impacts on how newcomers to the religion are able to (re)situate themselves as belonging to Vodou. The boundaries of Vodou are constantly redrawn. Who and what belongs to Vodou is constantly changing. Vodouists negotiate this change in part by: policing and challenging the borders of the tradition; transfiguring cultural commodities, representations and communication technology to serve a religious and sometimes missionizing purpose; and producing their own commodities and media to further the reach of their religion. Thus Vodou flows through new media technologies in ways that are both innovative and also continuous with the religious tradition. In addition, the reclamation of popular forms allows Vodou to "hide" in plain sight—as it poses as pop culture kitsch, or entertainment—and yet still carry the signifiers, history and specificity of that complex religion. In this play between recognition and misrecognition, innovation and continuity, I show that despite its maligned and subjugated status, Vodou is a socially powerful force. Vodou is dynamic, mobile and in its own way globalizing. Using the ethos of mobility inherent to Vodou cosmology as a framework, Vodouists colonize the flow of global capital, media images and cultural commodities in ways that profoundly affect multiple social spheres. Tracking these vectors of influence allows for an understanding of how religion, commodity culture and media are interconnected experientially, spiritually and socially.

Vodou Located: Navigating Deterritorialized Spaces

Since embarking on this study of Haitian Vodou in North America, Haiti has seen another political coup, another uprising, and another "intervention" of foreign military powers. Former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, educated in part in Montréal at a university not too far from where I write this, was ousted from his presidency in 2004. This marks his second period of exile from Haiti.[8] Aristide's politics and rhetoric have reached beyond the borders of Haiti, affecting the lives of those living in the diaspora. Maybe because he had spent so much time abroad, Aristide was one of the first political leaders to speak directly to transmigrants and diasporic citizens, acknowledging their experiences at least partially in an effort to corral their power and influence in Haiti. By creating the Ministry of Haitians Living Abroad in the first term of his presidency, Aristide acknowledged the interconnections between Haitians in Haiti and those living in the diaspora. In their exploration of "long distance nationalism", Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron note that by "maintaining this ministry, the Haitian government is declaring that Haitian emigrants, whatever their legal citizenships, remain Haitian" (12). Aristide named the diaspora the *Dizyem Departman-an*, or tenth department (Haiti being divided geographically into 9 departments, or provinces), thus baptizing, as it were, the vast realm of diasporic space. As the authors of *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation States* observe, by giving a name to the amorphous diaspora:

> Aristide and many persons in his government who had lived abroad
> for many years and maintained transnational networks were
> rupturing the territorial definition of the state and creating a
> deterritorialized nation-state. Their construction of the identity of
> Haitian immigrants reflected the emergence of Haitian

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[8] The first occurred during Aristide's first term and lasted from September 1991 to October 1994.

transnationalism. At the same time these leaders were shaping the manner in which Haitians are coming to understand their migration. (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994:147)

Aristide's successor Rene Preval who was elected in February of 2006 is no stranger to the dispersed nature of Haitian political allegiances.[9] Like Aristide, who spent numerous years abroad (including time spent at the Université de Montréal in Canada) Preval spent some years working in Brooklyn. Despite the large numbers of Haitians living in Canadian urban centers such as Montréal and Toronto, New York, or *Nouyok* in Haitian Creole, is often conceived of as the Northern border of the Haitian diaspora. It is a place that has taken on importance for both those living in the diaspora and those living in Haiti. The work of Haitian popular musicians working in North America, such as Wyclef Jean (best known, perhaps, for his work with *The Fugees*), has given voice not only to the conditions of the diaspora, but to the meaning of place within that diaspora and more particularly the maintenance of social class stratification among Haitians living abroad. As Karen Richards explains, the track from Jean's 1997 album *Carnival*, "Jaspora" (Diaspora), "lampoons the social exclusion of Haitian migrants but satirizes even more the migration of class prejudice from Haiti to Haitian settlements in New York, where neighborhoods and boroughs signify Haitian transnational status, Brooklyn being the lowest" (28). Preval's often-noted connection to Brooklyn reinforces his populist image and in turn bolsters his connections to the poor or lower class voting electorate in Haiti. Through complex diasporic discourse such as this—disseminated in no small part via transmitters such as popular music—places like Brooklyn that are geographically removed from Haiti have become signifiers encoded with layers of meaning within Haitian political discourse.

Rene Preval's challenge immediately following the 2006 election is, in no small part, to move Haiti out of the state into which it fell after Aristide's departure. Haiti is still infused with the presence of foreign military and

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[9] Preval was formerly president of Haiti from 1996-2001; He left his presidency after his term expired. He was succeeded by Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

government personnel, still waiting for an international community to decide when Haitians will be ready to (fully) make their own decisions about governance, leadership and sovereignty. Concern over foreign intervention in Haitian affairs is the focus of left-wing organizations such as the Canada-Haiti Action Network[10] who, after Aristide's departure in 2004, organized a project named Canada-Out-of-Haiti to raise awareness about the role of foreign governments in Haiti.[11] While the Canada-Haiti Action Network is comprised of many diasporic Haitians concerned about their homeland, it is also made up of non-Haitians who come to express their own concerns with the ways in which globalization is played out along the vectors of political and economic power. This is not an analysis of Haitian politics (although the interconnections between Vodou and the political and economic conditions of Haiti and Haitian people must always be taken into account). However, what becomes visibile in the realm of politics are the ways in which Haiti and its diaspora forge links and relationships with others. Non-Haitian activists in the Canada-Haiti network are sometimes termed "friends of Haiti". Friends of Haiti is a phrase that has come into currency in recent years in order to signify the host of non-Haitians who have forged connections to Haiti, encompassing anyone from political activists to Christian missionaries (Catholic and Protestant) who work to improve the economic or social conditions of Haitians (in the diaspora or at home). Similarly, the label is applied to academics who have taken an active interest in Haitian politics and culture and it is used to categorize non-Haitian Vodouists, many of whom perform outreach work in Haiti. I have heard the term used disparagingly on occasion, with frustration at the interference of foreigners in Haitian affairs. But as the number of "friends of Haiti" continues to grow, the phrase is often used fairly uncritically as a useful handle with which to define the multitude of non-Haitians who work and live in Haiti on a regular basis. This influx of non-Haitians into Haiti is emblematic of an aspect of transnationalism that is seldom discussed. While theorists of transnationalism and diaspora have become adept at accounting

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[10] See http://www.canadahaitiaction.ca/index.php for more information (last accessed on June 9, 2006).

[11] A parallel movement can be found in the United States.

for the journeys away from homelands, they are less able to contend with journeys of return and moments of arrival.

When Haitians bring Vodou to North America, Haitian Vodou assumes the status of a diasporic religious tradition, a categorization that involves particular conceptualizations of place (as home or abroad, for example). When Vodou brings non-Haitians to Haiti—either literally through the structures of pilgrimage and initiation or more figuratively through a cosmology that insists on the historical and cultural specificity of Haiti—place becomes less easy to categorize. In part, this analysis of newcomers to the Vodou tradition charts journeys toward places that cannot be clearly defined as either home or away. Although on the surface this analysis seems to be situated in the non-places of tourist and transnational mobilities, in cyberspace, and within the fluid movements of cultural objects, geographic locales bear significance as the vectors through which such movement occurs. While not limited to any one particular place, places—specifically urban centers as sites of a particularly urban form of Vodou—are central to this analysis. Cities are characters in the narratives of Vodouists in this text and, as has been discussed above, urban places (such as Brooklyn) signify beyond their geographic boundaries. I limit the scope of this study not by clearly circumscribing the geographic boundaries of the Vodou religion (although I aim to both respect and acknowledge the boundaries drawn by practitioners themselves) but by tracing the shape of Vodou in particular times and places. Locales such as Montréal, New York, and places in Haiti function as end points and beginning points of literal, spiritual and metaphoric journeys to and from the Vodou religion. These points delineate a particular trajectory of objects and people associated with Vodou. Other points, such as New Orleans, Miami and even Cuba, which make only cameo appearances in this text, could have been more definitely included and surely would have shown different journeys giving rise to different narratives. But Montréal, New York and Haiti are distinct nodes on a particular vector of travel and circulation for those concerned with Vodou.

Pilgrimages to sacred spaces or sites are constitutive elements of many religious cosmologies. For example, Mecca[12] in Saudi Arabia, which is the focus of annual pilgrimages, is a place of sacred power and "bliss" and marks the first place created on Earth according to Islamic tradition. Similarly, the Church of the Nativity in Jerusalem marks the birthplace of Christ for Christians. These sacred places are destination points for religious practitioners and the focus of religious rituals. Yet despite this focus on particular locales, religion is seldom bound to place. The rigors of missionism have meant that religious organizations and institutions have actively (and sometimes forcibly) sought out new converts far from the sacred sites that often demarcate the originary narratives of religious traditions. Although there is a tendency to think of globalization as an aspect of modernity, religion has been a significant factor in earlier epochs of globalization. Scholars such as Anthony Giddens have argued that a central feature of globalized modern society is the interplay of space and time (augmented by the instantaneity of new media and communication technology); "the concept of globalization is best understood as expressing fundamental aspects of time-space distantiation. Globalization concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations 'at distance' with local contextualities" (21). Religious epistemologies, or ways of knowing, often have built-in means of dealing with the "intersection of presence and absence" characteristic of globalization as practitioners of global religious movements inevitably negotiate tensions between the local and the extra local (or the global). Pilgrimage and ritual are two specifically religious ways of dealing with events that occur "at a distance" from practitioners. Pilgrimage allows and even encourages practitioners to literally bridge the distances that separate them from sacred sites, often by providing means of transit for those whose mobility is generally limited, while

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[12] "Mecca" is an English translation of the Arabic name for the city. Some English speaking Muslims prefer to use the translation "Makkah" as being closer to the original Arabic.

ritual can collapse the linear rigors of time, making the past accessible in the present. The technologies of ritual and the transit of pilgrimage have allowed religions to negotiated time-space distantiation long before the advent of new media that bridges distance and duration. Through pilgrimage (as well as missionism), religions can operate as highly mobile cultural systems and as such they have epistemological and ontological ways of understanding mobility.

It is not surprising that mobility is demanded by a religion constituted at least in part during the dislocating journey of the Middle Passage that brought African slaves to Haiti. Rites of pilgrimage to sacred sites, such as Saut D'Eau[13] (a waterfall in Haiti where the Virgin Mary was believed to have been seen and which is a sacred site for the *lwa* Erzulie) or Plaine-du-Nord (site of the first slave uprising of the 1971-1804 Haitian Revolution and sacred to the *lwa* Ogoun) are an important part of Vodou practice in Haiti. Forms of pilgrimage also occur as an aspect of initiation rituals, particularly for those who must travel from the diaspora to Haiti, the traditional site for initiation rites. Similar journeys are made by diasporic Haitian Vodouists to their ancestral land for ritual purposes. Shorter, but no less significant pilgrimages are made within cities in the diaspora as Vodouists travel to Catholic Churches in order to celebrate the feast days of particular "saints" (or *lwa*). Although these journeys are not always easy, sometimes entailing both a physical and financial cost for practitioners, they are undertaken even by the very poor and the very ill. Vodouists, like many other religious practitioners, are *expected* to be mobile. In the face of factors that restrict mobility (including poverty and illness), Vodouists find strategic ways around such obstacles. The demands of pilgrimage become part of the practices of newcomers to Vodou although these journeys arguably signify differently than the journeys of many Haitian practitioners.

In *Migration and Vodou*, Karen Richman documents the conditions of migrant Haitian farm workers in the Southern US and in particular Southern

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[13] Also known in Creole as *Sodo*.

Florida. Her ethnographic analysis charts both the economic hardships facing Haitian migrants who travel to the US and the enduring social ties that engender a stream of "remittances" of money and gifts sent from the US back to Haiti. Richman, who worked as a legal advocate for migrant workers, vividly illustrates the harsh reality of migrant life for many Haitian practitioners of Vodou whose often quasi-legal status and continued poverty makes return trips to Haiti difficult and infrequent, if not impossible. Yet despite separation in both distance and duration Haitian migrant workers and their relatives "back home" ensure that the social relationships that are integral to Haitian culture survive such dislocations in time and space. Richman's work focuses on the small town Ti Rivyè, which she describes as the "geographical and moral anchor of a mobile community" (65). While migration has been an inevitability for virtually every able-bodied adult in this place, Richman explains that long-distance social relationships as well as cultural, religious and economic ties have meant that migrants transplanted to the US "were simultaneously 'living' in Ti Rivyè. At the same time, kin (including ancestors and spirits) located at home regularly inhabited the migrants' new world" (64). Richman describes a virtual existence in which transnational migrants "over there"[14] (in the US, Canada and elsewhere) maintain relationships, economic and political interests, and even religious practices "back home" in Haiti. Because of the continued relationship between transnational migrants and Haitians at home, some Haitian towns are more connected—by a circuit of people, money and commodities—to places in the diaspora than to big city centers in Haiti, such as Port-au-Prince. In *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home,* Nina Schiller and Georges Fouron explain how such connections to "home" have an economic impact on places in Haiti:

> Towns and hamlets throughout Haiti, although almost unreachable by road, have become linked to the United States by the steady stream of money and gifts from people who have settled abroad. Most of these gifts originate in family networks, but many small towns and hamlets also receive support from their residents who have settled abroad and

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[14] The Haitians with which Richman works use the Creole term *deyo* (literally translated as "outside") to describe the location of transmigrants.

then band together to form "regional associations" that sponsor small development projects to benefit their hometowns. (51)

Diasporic ties to home, for all the cultural and social effects they may have, also make a visible impact on the Haitian landscape. Migrant workers direct from afar the building of new homes for their families (and in anticipation of their own return to Haiti) that perhaps unsurprisingly take the physical form of the houses with which they are familiar in the diaspora. Speaking of the emergent architecture in Aux Cayes, Schiller and Fouron point out how transnational connections mark the Haitian city; "The newer remittance houses announce the owner's wealth and ties to the diaspora through an architecture that is more reflective of suburban Florida than Haiti" (52). Despite the difficulties of making return trips home, migrant workers and diasporic citizens tangibly affect and alter the conditions and lives of people "back home" through the maintenance of social ties across transnational spaces.

This maintenance of social ties, a central part of Haitian culture, is perhaps augmented by the precepts of Vodou in which social obligations, characterized through the prevalent use of the metaphor of "feeding", extend past the realm of community and kin into the cosmographic spaces occupied by the *lwa* of Vodou. Unlike money, which represents the worlds of business and commerce, food represents the domain of kinship. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains, "Within the family food and its metaphorical extension into all that feeds and nurtures is the means of exchange" (2001: 68). The fact that Vodouists frequently refer to "feeding" the *lwa* and often prepare elaborate feasts for them illustrates how closely linked the gods and goddesses of Vodou are to the intimate lives of their practitioners. Richman explains:

> [Vodouists] symbolically construct and construe the social production process as feeding. Personal relations and social rank are subtly articulated through exchanging food. Adults are expected to compensate those who "fed" them when they were children. Obligations to the dead are explicitly construed as feeding debts, as are responsibilities to the *lwa*, spiritual counterparts of human members of the descent group (41).

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By sending gifts, money and sometimes even food itself, transnationals are "feeding" familial and religious relationships both of which, for Haitian Vodouists, are closely tied to place. "Back home", already important because of family left behind, takes on religious importance as rituals designed to "feed" family spirits must be performed on family land. This land takes on symbolic import, representing "a sacred, inalienable feeding site anchoring members seeking livelihoods in distant lands" (41). Migrants who cannot return to Haiti to perform these rituals "commission" them from the diaspora, ensuring an ongoing relationship despite the separation of distance.

For some transnational Haitian Vodouists, such as the migrant workers with whom Richman worked, the literal mobility needed to make return trips to Haiti in order to perform rituals is often limited. However, these individuals conduct truly transnational lives, negotiating the realities of more than one nation. As such, they live a type of doubled existence, living one life in the diaspora while maintaining another virtual life back home in Haiti. Communication technology is used or adapted to allow such individuals to actively participate in lives from which they are literally removed. Richman explains how a sub-industry around telecommunications has sprung up in places like Florida and Miami. Haitian entrepreneurs in the US create small centers to negotiate the difficulties of Haiti's often-unreliable national phone service. At these centers, migrants and other transnationals can go to make phone calls for which they pay by the minute, thus bypassing the need for a personal phone or even a permanent address and allowing them to maintain social ties in their host communities. Similarly, migrants "bypass the limitations of their (structured) underdevelopment, exploiting both the latest in communications and computerized banking technology and the most antiquated means of conveyance (mopeds, bicycles, burros, and feet)" (77) in order to send money and other remittances back home. But while poor and lower class Haitian citizens have become adept at working

around the restrictions of distance and duration[15] in order to maintain social ties at home, the dispersal of Haitian transnationals and the splitting of families is not limited to the poor of Haiti. Middle class Haitian Vodouists that I know in Montréal belong to families where even the immediate members live in Florida, Miami, Haiti and New York, as well as Montréal. Children are often sent at a young age to Canada or the US—where they may live in the care of family friends and distant relatives—in order to attend school. Husbands and wives live in separate countries in order to care for older relatives who either cannot or do not wish to move from their place of residence. Although in constant communication by phone or email, these dispersed family members may see each other only once a year or less, although momentous events such as the birth of a child or the death of a relative become occasions for reunions. While Haiti always remains a central destination point for these transnationals, mobility, or more specifically a lack of mobility caused by pregnancy, illness or infirmity, are the primary reasons that other sites such as Montréal, Miami or New York are reconfigured into meeting places, crossroads for individuals coming together to celebrate, mourn and always exchange gifts. In *Migration and Vodou*, the Haitians with whom Richman worked used the Creole term *deyo*, meaning literally "outside" (as opposed to inside, or "home"), to describe where Haitian migrants are. Interestingly, this term describes the location of transnationals, whereas the term more commonly used by the Haitian Vodouists with whom I work, *jaspora* (diaspora) tends to be used to describe identity rather than location. Practitioners will speak of those living outside of Haiti as *jasporas* transforming the *where* of the diaspora into an ontological marker. For Haitian transnationals who often have more permanent social ties to their host country (including, for example, legal status as Canadian or American citizens) mobility assumes an ontological tenor that differs from the practices of migrant workers. In both cases the vectors of mobility are constituted by both social and religious networks and relationships.

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[15] In an analysis of transnationalism it is important to note (as Karen Richman does) that diasporic individuals are not only separated from their homeland by space but also by the time, or duration, they spend away from that homeland.

For many Vodouists Haiti is not always the only destination point for pilgrimages. In the introduction to the new edition of his seminal work on Italian vernacular religiosity in East Harlem, Robert Orsi[16] observes how, since his ethnography was first published, the once waning religious festivals of East Harlem have been interpolated and revitalised by an influx of Haitians and Puerto Ricans who layer their own meaning and cosmologies onto the religious rhythms of what once was Italian Harlem. As Orsi explains, Haitian immigrants were drawn to a Harlem church dedicated to the Madonna of Mount Carmel "perhaps because she most closely resembles the figure of the Virgin who is said to have appeared over a palm tree on the island as she is depicted in Haitian Catholic iconography" (xxxi). Layering memories of Haiti onto the spaces of East Harlem, Haitian immigrants find new avenues of religious mobility, journeying "to the festa in long pilgrimages from Brooklyn by car, chartered bus, and subway" (xxxi). Such annual festivals pattern both the time and space of the city. Contemporary cities generate durable routes not only between diasporic communities and their homelands, but also between a host of religious practitioners and geographies that quickly become new religious destinations. Haitians, for instance, carve out new routes of pilgrimage, journeying from Brooklyn to East Harlem in massive numbers to join the Italian festivals for the Madonna, in lieu of making more expensive pilgrimages back to Haiti.

In part, these local pilgrimages are efficacious because of the connections urban religions regularly make with transnational sites and events. In her exploration of Vodou in New York City, Karen McCarthy Brown suggests that it is connection to Haiti that makes the rituals and practices of Haitian Vodou in New York viable:

> It is often possible to go back to Haiti for important Vodou ceremonies, but in more routine ways, the spirits can be well served in New York City partly because there is such frequent contact between the diaspora community and Haiti itself. The stream of arrivals from Haiti enriches the community's memory of songs,

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[16] Robert A. Orsi. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, Second Ed., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002.

> dances, and rituals. New arrivals and frequent travelers carry herbs
> from Haiti to be used in treatments in New York. They bring beads,
> icons, and ritual implements. They even carry the soil of Haiti. (80)

This travel brings the local specificity of Haiti to the urban centers in which both Haitian and non-Haitian Vodouists practice the rituals of the religion. What results is a type of doubling of place, a transposition of the sacred places and events of Haiti onto the spaces and events of urban centers such as New York or Montréal. Robert Orsi's explanation of the layering of Italian Catholicism, Puerto Rican Santeria, and Haitian Vodou in an East Harlem church illustrates the multiple vectors of mobility that generate a place layered with signification. The frequent movement back and forth between Haiti and central places in the diaspora does more than simply facilitate the religious practice of Vodouists in the diaspora; it also links multiple places both in a literal trajectory of travel and as part of a larger conceptual space.

For Vodouists, as well as many transnationals, place is never conceptualized as bounded to a single locale, but is forced to take on a transnational signification that stretches it beyond the boundaries of a city, or even a nation. Arguably, what emerges from transnational and diasporic practices is an image of place that is stretched over time and space, measured in distance and duration, and rendered heterogeneous, signifying differently in different contexts. The doubled existence demanded both by the practices of Vodou and the conditions of transnationalism allows for a concurrence of seemingly conflicting identities, and even beliefs. Many individuals now "live" multiple lives, in more than one place. Such individuals take on and negotiate multiple identities and tensions can arise when individuals find themselves having to pick and chose which identities to foreground. A friend bristled when, speaking with a bank teller in Montréal, she was asked where she was from. "Here" she said shortly, ending the conversation before it had really started. "I hate that," I said sympathetically as we walked out of the bank. As a first generation Canadian I too often get asked where I am from, a question I never really know how to answer. In the Canadian context it is a highly laden question—instigated by anything from an accent to the

spelling of a last name—that has to do with complex notions of plurality and Canadian-ness. In Montréal the question is further overlaid with what it means to be a Quebecer or a Québécois, a Montrealer or a Montréalaise. "It's so passé," my friend said suddenly. "What?" I asked, loosing the thread of the conversation for a moment. "To ask someone where they are from," my friend explained. "It's so...oh, I don't know," she said, exasperated. In *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search For Home*, Pico Iyer agrees that the question "where do you come from?" is an "antiquated" inquiry in a world that is increasingly "coming to resemble a diaspora" (10). For my friend, a Haitian immigrant to Canada, such questions are frustrating in that they force her to choose, to hierarchize identities that she sees as commensurate, or at least co-existing. Undoubtedly, she sees herself as both Haitian and Canadian (rather than a Haitian-Canadian), a resident of both Montréal and Port-au-Prince (as well as a couple of other cities and countries in between). Some would suggest that hers is a quintessentially post-modern condition.

In "Cultures of Circulation and the Urban Imaginary: Miami as Example and Exemplar", Edward LiPuma and Thomas Koelble suggest that "world" cities, which are nodes on an extended circulatory system of goods, money and people, are similarly post-modern in their plurality and heterogeneity. Speaking specifically about Miami, LiPuma and Koelble explain how despite their physical location, urban centers are experienced as unbounded spaces:

> While Miami is enclosed within the space of a national state, those who move within this cityscape frequently act and imagine themselves as located in an interstitial space beyond the territoriality of any nation. Framed in regard to the state, cities such as this stand at the center of the active dissembling or denationalization of the autocentric national economy and jurisdiction that has been the touchstone of the capitalist nation-state. (165)

Although individuals such as my friend are clearly located in the here and now of a particular place, they inhabit other places simultaneously through a matrix of media and technology, through the circulation of money and commodities, by vectors of travel and transmission (via everything from personal narrative to

popular culture), and through signifiers and stories from "elsewhere". In this condition of multi-belonging-ness, it is no wonder that identifying with a particular locale can be difficult. As LiPuma and Koelble explain, although urban residents may make "imagistic use of hereness and the spaces of "their" present, there is every reason to think that the singular city, or cityness, is neither the referential nor socio-interpersonal center of their discourse" (164). Transmigrant workers and transnationals of varying classes and backgrounds often locate themselves in multiple places, identifying varyingly with multiple locales. Through shared cultural and religious narratives, as well as kinship ties, such individuals constitute ontologies or ways of being in the city that are strongly connected to other places and ontologies around the globe. Certainly, this is the case for Haitian Vodouists who, through cultural as well as religious ties to Haiti, layer the signifiers of Haitian Vodou onto the spaces of urban centers such as Montréal and New York. Arguably, the arrival of newcomers to Vodou who are not genealogically or geographically related to the religion, is a significant albeit under-recognized force contributing to the "dissembling" of the nation-state. These individuals forge social ties that seem to counter the flow of people away from disenfranchised places such as Haiti. Although usually discounted as tourists (or cultural appropriators) they are active participants in the circulation of things, money, narratives and subjects that constitute the vast deterritorialized spaces of modernity. While transmigrant Haitians send "remittances" back to Haiti, non-Haitian Vodouists purchase religious supplies (or services) directly from Haiti (and Haitians); while Haitian transnationals return to Haiti to visit kin or conduct virtual relationships from afar, non-Haitian Vodouists travel to Haiti on religious pilgrimages or take up extended residence as "friends of Haiti"; and while Haitians maintain social relationships at a distance through travel and communication technology, non-Haitian Vodouists use the same methods to forge lasting social ties to their religious "families" in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora. These vectors of mobility traversed by Haitian and non-Haitian Vodouists constitute a vast deterritorialized space. Accounting for the experience of individuals who inhabit such "interstitial spaces" requires an approach "that in no

way presupposes the confluence—and certainly not the conflation—of physical, social, and subjective spaces" (164).

'Off the Beaten Track': Transfiguring Tourism

For Haitian Vodouists travel is almost always related to the social networks of family. The importance of family in both the culture of Haiti and the Vodou religion dictates the practices of transnationals and their relationships to place. Pilgrimages back to Haiti (or to other sites in lieu of Haiti) are as much about affirming social relationships as about conducting site-specific ritual practices (such as "feeding" family spirits, initiation or internal pilgrimages to sacred sites in Haiti). For newcomers to Vodou, who have no genealogical or geographic connection to Haiti, transnational travel, which takes them from places like Canada and the US to Haiti often for the first time, inevitably signifies differently than it does for Haitian Vodouists. Unlike Haitian transnationals who are often traveling home, newcomers to Vodou must negotiate travel to places that are for them, as one practitioner put it, "off the beaten track." Usually notable as non-Haitians, or *blans*,[17] newcomers on pilgrimage or religious business in Haiti occupy an ambiguous space between tourist and Haitian Vodouist, belonging fully to neither. Clearly unable to assume the identity of Haitian Vodouists, new practitioners are usually anxious to avoid the stigma of tourist, seeing themselves as more knowledgeable about Haiti and specifically Vodou than the "average" tourist. Indeed, these new practitioners often travel (for religious reasons) to places outside the usual routes of Haitian tourism and usually travel in the company of local citizens. The new practitioners with whom I have spoken generally accept the ambiguity of their position while in Haiti, understanding that Vodou demands sometimes a literal connection to the soil of that nation. As

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[17] *Blans,* which can be literally translated to mean white, signifies outsider or non-Haitian in the context of Haitian Creole. A non-Haitian black would be considered a *blan* in this context.

Jacthine, a newly initiated practitioner explained; "I am not Haitian, but I am a Vodouisant, so I have to come to Haiti. I don't stay in the fancy hotels when I come, I speak a bit of Creole and usually travel with my "mother",[18] so I really don't *look* like a tourist. But sometimes people think I am." I asked her if she explained to these people the reasons why she was in Haiti. "Sometimes," she said. "Usually I don't. I just smile and say I am visiting friends." After only two visits to Haiti, Jacthine had learned that it isn't always advantageous to advertise one's connection to Vodou in Haiti, not simply because of the potential stigma still attached to the religion, but because to do so marks one as culturally "other" in this land. Jacthine observed that Haitian Vodouists seldom proclaim their religious "business" to anyone except those immediately connected to it, privacy and secrecy being an intrinsic part of the religion. Instead, when in Haiti, Jacthine positions herself as a visitor rather than either a tourist or a religious pilgrim. As a visitor she can claim some familiarity with the land, culture and people of Haiti and thus discourage the press of enterprising individuals eager to show tourists around. Such intermediary positions allow new practitioners to negotiate travel to and pilgrimage within Haiti.

The ease with which newcomers seem to adopt the precepts of Vodou may be due in part to the extension of the praxis of mobility so central to Haitian Vodou—beyond the literal movement of religious practitioners. While theoretical frameworks still struggle between the two poles of universalism and relativism around identities such as race and gender, religions have always had a built in system with which to deal with shifts in identity. Conversion is a particularly religious way of accounting for the movement from one (religious) identity to another. Within Vodou there is no clearly defined mechanism for conversion. While one can be initiated into Vodou it is not necessary to be initiated in order to practice the religion. Many who attend Vodou services and celebrations are non-

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[18] Sometimes initiates refer to the priest or priestess that initiates them as their father or mother. Practitioners are initiated into the "house" of a specific mambo or houngan (priestess or priest) and all the members of this "house" are understood to form a type of extended family. In Haiti, this "house" is usually focused around a specific temple. In this case Jacthine is explaining that she travels with a native Haitian.

initiates, or *bosal*. In part, the lack of conversion practices in Vodou may be explained by the fact that Vodou is construed as less of an identity than a practice. Haitian Vodouists, in particular, do not always define themselves *as* Vodouists, but rather as individuals who "serve the spirits". Speaking about Mama Lola, Karen McCarthy Brown explains that the Vodou priestess "never talks about 'worshiping' the spirits; rarely does she speak of 'believing' in them. Existence and essence are the theological preoccupations of Great Atlantic culture. Alourdes speaks about the spirits in the way common to Haitian people; 'I serve the spirit', she says" (2001: 49). For those who practice Vodou, religious identity is not necessarily a static birthright but something that must be actively renewed through spiritual work. Vodou is less an identity for its practitioners than a practice (and a process) of identification. This praxis of identification aligns well with the interests of legions of non-Haitians in the Vodou religion. Like Haitian Vodouists, who acknowledge that identification with Vodou is an active religious process, these newcomers are actively shaping their religious identities, choosing Vodou from among a host of other religious and spiritual choices and options.

In urban centers like Montréal, non-Haitian practitioners come to Vodou in a variety of ways: some actively seek Vodou communities, searching for them through contacts made with store owners in Montréal's North end; others are brought by friends already involved with the community; *mambo* or *houngan* (priestesses and priests) may bring in new "clients" who have sought out spiritual services advertised in local newspapers and newsletters; and still others may find community contacts on the internet (through listservs, for example). Newcomers also arrive at the religion via "cultural events". Marginalized and secretive religions such as Vodou may become not only more visible but also more accessible through the institutional structures of the city, particularly those organized around the commerce of cultural tourism. In cities such as Montréal, Vodou may be (sometimes inadvertently) "marketed" as part of cultural festivals and events. Some summers ago,[19] I watched as *Boukman Eksperyans*—a band

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[19] Boukman Eksperyans played at the Nuits D'Afrique Festival in Montréal July 25th, 1999.

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known internationally for its strong political and *racine* Vodou music aesthetics—was the second last band playing in a large outdoor concert closing the annual Nuit D'Afrique festival at Place Émilie-Gamelin in Montréal. The popular band interacted with the crowd, calling out *Ayibobo,*[20] a complex Haitian Creole word with clear religious connotations, to which Haitians, Vodouists and others in-the-know responded, shouting *Ayibobo* back. At the end of the half hour set the band left the stage to make way for a reggae group that was to close the show. The fans of *Boukman* were not happy. They cheered in hopes the band would return. Someone started to blow into a large corrugated piece of ductwork creating a deep reverberating sound, others began to drum on metal waste bins, still others began to beat their water bottles and chant. Creole words poured out over the open air too fast for me to catch, but I did catch the names of some *lwa,* the gods that populate the polytheistic pantheon of Vodou. *Boukman Eksperyans* never returned and the singing, chanting crowd eventually gave up as a reggae group took the stage. "Jah bless," shouted the leader as the first piece started. And the seasoned crowd responded, "Jah bless."

Perhaps not everyone in the crown at the Nuit D'Afrique festival was aware of the spiritual significance of the words *Ayibobo* and *Jah bless*; maybe some of them simply got caught up in the call and response of the concert. But some certainly appreciated the cultural and religious meanings of these terms and the religiosity their recitation evoked. The narratives and musical structures of gospel and other roots music can operate as ritualized reminder of past experiences, collective struggle, common roots, and a shared sense of ethnic identity. In "Shouting the Church", Ray Allen uses Victor Turner's idea of *communitas* to analyze the link between ritual experience and musical performances. Allen suggests that religious music such as gospel or in this case Haitian or Jamaican roots music creates moments of ritualized social interrelatedness; "ritualized performances are meant to create an intimate spiritual

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[20] *Ayibobo* is not easily translated but may be taken to mean "amen", "halleluiah", or "bless you". During ritual it is often part of the call-response of the oral "liturgy" of Vodou.

atmosphere" (313) by downplaying "hierarchy and artist-audience distinctions in favor of social equality and spiritual unity" (314). While the call and response performances of the Nuits D'Afrique festival were certainly meant to generate "spiritual unity", the ritualized performances at this urban festival did not signify one unitary belief system but multiple and distinct religious traditions. Ritualization occurred not only during the performance of *Boukman Eksperyans* or the reggae group that followed, but also in between performances as the audience struck up their own rituals of improvisation. For "unofficial" religions in the city, sacred space is often found space, made sacred through ritual action. These sacred spaces are inevitably transient. Such moments of transition open up pathways between spiritualities where urban traffic insists upon a shift in signification. In the time between the vocalization of the rhetoric of Haitian Vodou and the vocalization of Rastafarian I-ric festival goers found themselves negotiating a concurrence of religiosity that is structured, at least in part, by the city itself. In Montréal, a Nuit D'Afrique festival expects one to be able to leap between cultural and religious signifiers in the shared celebration of all that is "African". The consumption of culture, in this instance in the form of music, provides both a space and a time for sacredness carved out of the cultural commerce of the city. Unification under the rubric of race or ethnicity often means sharing religious and spiritual elements under a cultural umbrella.

While some cultural events like the Nuits D'Afrique festival are part of the cultural tourism of the city, others have closer links to the city's Haitian community. Such events are often filtered through the lens of local media. In October of 1999, members of Montréal's Haitian community hosted an open-invitation ceremony to celebrate the "Day of the Dead"[21] and the *fête* of the *lwa* Guedeh. This relatively well-publicized "cultural event" brought together local *houngans* and *mambos* (priests and priestesses), interested members of Montréal's Haitian community and many non-Haitians. In a newspaper article about Vodou

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[21] See Alison Macgregor "Folk religion thrives in Montréal." *The Gazette*, Montréal, Québec, 14 May 2000, A.1.

written in Montréal's main English language paper almost a year after the event, the public ceremony was seen to signal "a new openness" toward Vodou within the Haitian community. Interestingly, despite lauding the greater ease of accessibility to Vodou instigated by such events, the article goes on to suggest that Vodou is on the wane among the younger second-generation Haitians in Montréal. Despite public "cultural" events specifically designed to make Vodou accessible (or at least observable) to non-Haitians in Montréal, Vodou is still assumed to be a religion passed on through kinship lines. While other religions, such as Christianity or Islam are understood to transcend racial or ethnic boundaries, assumptions about Vodou circumscribe the religion, confining it discursively within the boundaries of the Haitian community. This renders the possibility of non-Haitian converts to Vodou unacknowledgable or invisible. While my own research shows a growing interest in Vodou among second-generation Haitians and (perhaps more interestingly) the children of the first wave of Haitian immigrants to Montréal, many of whom were self-defined atheists, events such as the 1999 Montréal *fête* act as windows of opportunity for non-Haitians seeking access to Vodou communities and ritual specialists. Given the growth of Vodou and other Afro-Caribbean religions in city centers such as Montréal, it is interesting that media reports of the religion insist on speaking of its decline.[22]

Despite being a growing demographic, these newcomers to Vodou are a notably understudied, under-recognized group of religious practitioners. There are undoubtedly a myriad of reasons for the invisibility of the growth of Vodou in the West, not the least of which is a continued focus on Islam as a threat to North American culture and society. While this focus may have intensified in recent

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[22] It should be noted that the article by Alison Macgregor "Folk religion thrives in Montréal." in *The Gazette*, [Montréal, Québec, 14 May 2000, A1] speaks specifically of a potential decline in Vodou practice
within the Haitian community. The possibility of newcomers to Vodou reversing this supposed trend is simply not addressed in the article.

years, a fear soaked image of Islam certainly predates recent events. Since Islam[23] became integrated within the discourses of Black Nationalism in the 1950s, a variety of media[24] and popular representations have depicted a threatening image of legions of black men converting to radical Islamic movements. However, the conversion of blacks to Islam has received a disproportionate amount of media attention, obscuring the growth of religions like Vodou, Santeria and Yoruba. While both Islam and Afro-Caribbean religions have been absorbed into the discourses of Black Nationalism, theorists such as Robert Elliot Fox have argued that Afro-Caribbean religions resonate more strongly with African-American culture:

> The rhetorical appeal of Louis Farrakhan or even the late Malcolm X notwithstanding, Islam never has had a widespread appeal among African-Americans, and its influence is marginal in comparison with the burgeoning presence of religions such as Voodoo and Santeria, a major factor in what one might call the re-Africanization of the United States via...transmitters like Haiti and Cuba. (1995:36)

Whatever the reason, there has been practically no attention paid to the "burgeoning presence" of Vodou in North America. Subsumed by a climate of fear and concern over the growing presence of Islam, the growth of the Vodou tradition is rendered virtually invisible. Stephen Glazier laments that:

> Amongst the most significant and understudied religious developments in the United States over the past twenty years has been the large-scale transfer of Haitian vodou and other African-derived religions to urban centres of New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and Toronto. It is estimated that there are currently more than 100,000 devotees in New York City alone. This would make variants of Afro-Caribbean religions the largest and fastest growing religious movement in that city. Similar assessments have been made for Miami and Toronto. (1998:110)

Arguably, the growth of Vodou, among not only blacks but also those who cannot even claim the genealogical lineage of racial heritage, is most notable in North

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[23] The Nation of Islam was founded within the American black community in the 1930s but gained prominence and visibility in the 1950s and early 1960s under the leadership and spokesmanship of Malcolm X. The Nation of Islam returned to notable prominence in the early 1980s under leader Louis Farrakhan.

[24] One of the often cited examples of media attention given black Islam is the 1959 documentary produced by CBS (with Mike Wallace as the presenter), *The Hate That Hate Produced.*

American urban centers. In many ways, cities are vessels for the effusive spillages of the spiritual marketplace where multiple spiritual and religious choices are available and accessible. Cities are places where admittance to seemingly secretive religious communities, such as those of Vodou, while never easy, is at least possible. The religious identity of newcomers to Vodou is constituted in part by those structures that generate routes between a multitude of religious and spiritual communities. Maintaining social interrelatedness, a primary concern of urban popular religions, is complicated not only by urban institutions that unite multiple religions under a single cultural umbrella, but also by the city's discursive relationship to the idea of "otherness". There is a long history of social anxiety about cities as containers for an imagined "otherness" that has largely been spawned by exaggerated representations or images of slums, inner cities, ethnic enclaves and ghettos. In *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, Robert Orsi explains how representations of the city—as a place of poverty, depravity, and otherness—have provided a foil to religious narratives of redemption, healing, and salvation (9). The North American city has been at least partially been constituted by these (predominantly Christian) religious narratives.[25]

Unlike dominant religions which leave a tangible architectural imprint on the city (via the institutional structures of mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples), urban diasporic and "unofficial" religions are often less visible. Practitioners of such religions must map religious narratives onto the (seemingly) secular spaces of the city. Such "[r]eligious cartographies disclose the coordinates of alternative worlds for practitioners, remaking the meanings of ordinary places and signaling the locations of extraordinary ones, establishing connections between the spaces of the city and other spaces" (54). It is such a "remaking" of place that occurred at the Nuits D'Afrique concert in Montréal, where musicians

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[25] For a discussion of the history of religion in the shaping of North American cities see Robert Orsi's "Introduction: Crossing the City Line" in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, Robert A. Orsi, ed., Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999. 1-78

and audience members alike transformed the ordinariness of a concrete park into sacred space. Practices of scavenging ritual space out of places designed for different purposes are not limited to the diaspora. Speaking of the pilgrimages to Plaine-du-Nord in Haiti, Donald Cosentino explains how Vodou practitioners locked out of a local Catholic Church still use the space to perform rituals; "An enormous crowd has gathered on the steps of the church. But they cannot enter. Iron gratings bar the doors and windows. So the pilgrims shout prayers and hurl objects: candles, pennies, cigars, rum bottles, through the gratings. They aim their missiles at an empty niche which used to contain an image of St. James" (1995: 245). These transient, makeshift sacred spaces evince a religiosity long accustom to the vectors of mobility. Mobile practitioners of mobile religions like Vodou regularly transfigure seemingly inhospitable, alienating and locally specific places into spaces with transnational connection, significance and meaning. In so doing they generate a particularly religious subtext for the reconfiguration of urban space and the practices that occur there, allowing practitioners to navigate the conditions which make "being religious" possible or problematic in the city.

Urban practitioners of many religions reconfigure local places into sacred spaces and pilgrimage sites, even as the structures of the city reconfigure the same places as tourist destinations, rendering the city part of a global traffic in religious meaning and signification. In *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Zygmunt Bauman suggests that the rapidly growing commerce of tourism is not simply a commercial industry, but a defining characteristic of global (capitalist) culture. Bauman suggests that tourism is emblematic of contemporary consumer culture, where the ethos of travel or mobility, rather than the mere movement of objects, is the new mode of circulation governing social and cultural relationships. For Bauman, "consumers are first and foremost gatherers of *sensations*; they are collectors of *things* only in a secondary and derivative sense" (83). This collecting of sensation seems to apply aptly to some descriptions of the spiritual

marketplace,[26] where consumers and practitioners can pick, choose and even pay for religious experience or membership. Indeed, some religious experiences overlap, quite tangibly, with tourist experiences. Religious sites, rituals and celebrations are often marketed to tourists as part of local urban culture. The touristic approach to religion seems to run the risk of homogenization, diluting the cultural specificity of religious traditions in order to make them more accessible and palatable to a tourist sensibility. And certainly, commercial tourism is very much about ease of accessibility and, to a large extent, about rendering the unfamiliar familiar.

In his introduction to *Virtual Globalization: Virtual Spaces/Tourist Spaces*, David Holmes argues that tourist spaces, increasingly marked not only by convenience but also by a sense of familiarity no matter their location, function much like virtual space—where time is not experienced as a constraint (5). "Their virtuality is less an outcome of what they *look like*, and more to do with the fact that they exist on a global place of interlocking space. They are spaces which *seemingly* allow anything-anywhere-anytime" (5). Tourist centers link multiple places across vast space by creating a sense of sameness and familiarity in each of them. For Holmes, this "standardization of experience," generated through the mixing of touristic and technological forms such as the internet, mobile telecommunications, the 24 hour cultures of airports, fast food restaurants, hotels and tourist enclaves, "can itself become a center of attachment—a kind of ontological security we find wherever we go" (5). If tourist experiences are, as Holmes argues, becoming increasingly standardized, then the efficacy of (upward) mobility must be calculated less in terms of what an individual chooses to do or have (less about where they chose to vacation, or what they choose to purchase while there), and more in terms of their *ability* to move toward a new standard of mobility (or the ability to visit multiple places, rather than any one particular place). This frenetic and continual movement toward a newness that is

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[26] See, for example, Wouter J. Hanegraaff's "Prospects for the Globalization of New Age: Spiritual Imperialism Versus Cultural Diversity", in *New Age Religion and Globalization* (Mikael Rothstein ed.), Aarhus University Press: Aarhus Denmark, 2001. 15-30

nonetheless somehow familiar emphasizes the temporary nature of touristic consumption. As Bauman explains, "ideally, nothing should be embraced by a consumer firmly [...]. It is but the volatility, the in-built temporality of all engagements that truly counts" (81). This movement toward the new is engendered by what Bauman sees as a necessary process of forgetting, born out of the transience of a consumer society (82). In order to be free to move toward new standards of consumption (and the new ways of being that such consumption supposedly generates), the individual must be able to forget those histories that tether him or her to both tradition and concrete locality.

The mechanics of such "forgetting" are undeniably part of the currency of spiritual and religious mobility. The spiritual marketplace encourages the loosening of the ties that have traditionally bound religion to a particular group. Increasingly, religion and spirituality are seen as a choice, or more specifically, a quest. In *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, Wade Clark Roof defines a "seeker religiosity" as typifying the baby boom generation in North America. For these "seekers", Roof suggests, the quest for a spiritual identity is as important as the goal. The movement that occurs as practitioners shift from one religious or spiritual identity to another mimics the gathering of sensation that Bauman attributes to the ontological category of the tourist. The spiritual marketplace is often derided, accused of diluting religious tradition, rendering it a mere commodity—the offering of transcendence for sale. However, the praxis of spiritual mobility constitutes a complex process of identification. The spiritual marketplace allows individuals to touch a generative matrix of cultural, spiritual and religious signifiers. Touching these religions, however briefly, does not leave the identity and the ideological matrix of these seekers unaffected. Like swallowing a magic potion, this practice of consumption leads to transformation or transfiguration. In addition, when tourists travel in search of spiritual or religious sensation they do so in ways that sometimes subvert the seemingly one way flow of travel and cultural appropriation implied by tourism.

Despite the social inequities of the global marketplace, commerce is never a one-way street, perhaps especially in the spiritual marketplace. Given the current and continued state of the Haitian economy, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is an emerging trade in Vodou initiations from the *hounsi kanzo* (or lowest level) all the way up to *asogwe* (initiation as a Vodou priest or priestess) specifically designed for tourists visiting Haiti. While most Vodouists with whom I speak (both Haitian and non-Haitian) decry this touristic practice, often criticizing the priests and priestesses who engage in such practices as either inauthentic (not "real" priests or priestesses) or unethical, these tourist-based initiations allow Haitians to garner substantial sums of money. These Haitians exploit not only the cultural workings of tourism, but also stereotypical images of Vodou. Those who have witnessed such "staged" ceremonies suggest that they play upon stereotypical imagery, using snakes, performing blood sacrifices, and representing possession as a frenzied state of being. While all of these may in some way be elements of Vodou, their combination in these events seems to improvise on and exaggerate elements of the religion in order to appeal to tourists who see Vodou as dark and exotic (and often powerful). While this emergent industry in Vodou initiation appears to be a relatively new phenomenon, it is not entirely unprecedented. Not only have Vodou rituals long been part of the Haitian tourist industry, these rituals have often been the starting point for academics and anthropologists interested in Vodou. The contacts and relationships that arise from such staged events can further shape Vodou practices. In *Vodou and Migration*, Richman speaks about one particular ritual specialist called Misdor who was active in the 1950s. Misdor was a charismatic leader whose Vodou practice garnered interest from both foreign academics and Haitian elites who have varyingly expressed interest in the "folklore" of the Haitian peasantry. Speaking about Misdor's ritual practices in Ti Rivyè, Richman explains that:

> [a] foreign, academic audience may have contributed to shaping the
> ritual traditions emerging from Misdor's "laboratory." The elite's
> appetite for ritual, or Misdor's perceptions of their expectations,
> reinforced the trends toward codification of elaborate ritual
> performance. Misdor encouraged his foreign visitors to participate in

the spectacle, even to the extent of "experiencing" trance. His
successors have perpetuated his style. (123)

Contemporary entrepreneurs who generate rituals and initiations specifically for
tourists are capitalizing upon a long history of foreign interest in Vodou. In the
same way that these staged rituals use elements of more traditional Vodou
practice, Vodou will inevitably reabsorb elements of these tourist practices. While
it is easy to suggest that such practices inevitably dilute and de-authorise
"authentic" Vodou, it should be remembered that Vodou is a highly adaptable
religious tradition. While Vodouists are undeniably concerned with issues of
authenticity when it comes to their own religious practice, most are not
particularly concerned about the tourist trade in Vodou initiations. For many,
these staged rituals are so obviously "fake" they do not merit outcry. It is also
difficult to criticise a poor local population for capitalizing on tourists who are, as
one practitioner put it, "impressed with a little eye rolling."[27] Tensions around
issues of authenticity are more evident within more established Vodou
communities, particularly those that regularly provide "services" to newcomers to
the religion. Interestingly, concern around authenticity does not seem to surface
around the introduction of new practitioners into established Vodou communities.
Instead, Vodouists express a fear that these newcomers will stumble upon
charlatans rather than "authentic" ritual specialists. This concern is augmented by
the financial exchange that is an intrinsic part of Vodou. Since it is customary to
pay for ritual services, including initiation, the fear expressed by many Vodouists
is that unscrupulous individuals will take the money of those newly interested in
Vodou without providing them with "authentic" rituals or services. The fear, then,
is around the preservation of the efficacy of Vodou, rather than the preservation of
a culturally homogenous Vodou community. While priests and priestesses seem
rarely to criticize each other directly, new practitioners with whom I spoke have
developed a type of shorthand with which to warn each other of the perils of
inauthentic Vodou. Terms such as "scambo" (as a play on scam artist and *mambo,*
or priestess) and "mckanzo" (playing, evidently, on "mcdonaldization" and *kanzo,*

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[27] "Eye rolling" refers to a stereotypical sign of possession.

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the first level of Vodou initiation) have been coined, encoding with a few syllables a complex discourse around the issues of religious tourism. Although clearly critical of transient tourist practices, newcomers may well find their way to more permanent practices and communities through staged events.[28]

While it is not always clear where the divide between the spiritual tourist and the spiritual authority falls, mobility in the form of both tourism and pilgrimage directs a growing traffic toward places like Haiti. Even without literal travel, Vodou always insists on an active engagement with Haiti. If new practitioners do not journey to Haiti for initiation purposes, they inevitably become aware of the specificity of Haitian history and culture through the cosmology and practice of Vodou. Through connections to Haitian Vodou communities both in the diaspora and in Haiti, newcomers forge connections to places from which they are genealogically and geographically removed, Globalization connects a place to co-ordinates outside of itself. Post-industrial cities are blurred entities that extend beyond the "city limits" Increasingly, cities such as Montréal, New York and Port-au-Prince function as nodes on a mass circulatory system, which carries not only people and objects, but also ideas and ontologies (Hannerz 1993: 68). In this context of continual circulation and movement, urban religiosity is, perhaps, best understood not only as a local expression of a particular religion, but as constitutive "practices of making connections, real and imaginary, within neighborhoods, across the city, and around the globe" (Orsi 52). These "practices of making connections" are not limited to transnational or immigrant religions in the city, although they are, perhaps, most acutely visible there where both local and global connections are often generated and maintained through religious practices and cosmologies. Such practices and cosmologies generate ways of being that allow practitioners to situate themselves (as, for example, religious) while also generating (sometimes idealized) continuity with social worlds far removed.

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[28] Further discussion of newcomers to Vodou who arrive at the religion via tourist events and practices occurs in later chapters of this text.

For immigrant Haitians living in North American city centers, the processes of deterritorialization and the constitution of a diasporic identity is determined, in no small part, by the condition of separation from their homeland. Perhaps more difficult to understand is the status of those people Vodou takes "back" (literally or virtually) to Haiti. The conditions of contemporary mobility import an ever shifting population of Vodou initiates and "friends of Haiti" who identify with that land in complex ways. Unlike the hegemonizing practices of global tourism described by Holmes and Bauman, the mobility of new practitioners can frustrate the seemingly one-way flow of globalization. For new practitioners of religions such as Vodou the praxis of mobility defined by notions of pilgrimage can take them outside of the homogenising spaces of tourism. As have been observed, Vodou initiation practices require that practitioners "return" (although for many new practitioners these "return" trips take them to Haiti for the first time) to the spiritual home of the gods and goddesses (the *lwa*) of the Vodou pantheon. In the Vodou tradition *mambos* and *houngans* are usually paid to conduct initiation ceremonies and in addition to this payment, initiates living away from Haiti are expected to pay the diasporic *mambo* or *houngan*'s airfare back "home". While it is vital to explore how cultural appropriation and global capitalism can rewrite local differences in ways which make them palatable for those whom Holmes terms the "tourist citizen", it is equally important to understand how, and when, these processes are subverted. When immigrant Haitian priestesses or priests from Montréal insist on paid airfare back to Port-au-Prince in Haiti—so as to conduct initiation rituals for non-Haitian practitioners— they are quite literally hijacking the global flow. Contemporary religiosities generate durable routes between diasporic communities and their homelands opening up possibilities for travel by transnationals and tourists alike. In a way, this is deterritorialization in reverse.

Tourism and pilgrimage intersect, bringing seekers of different things into close proximity. In the city, spirituality and religion are marketed to the tourist

who (perhaps unwittingly) samples it as part of the local culture, while at the same time the spiritually mobile transfigure ritual, pilgrimage (and even conversion) out of tourist events. Spirituality is often marketed as part of the local culture, or what Claude Jacobs calls "local color" in his analysis of New Orleans tourism.[29] However, the commodification of local culture that Jacobs decries in his analysis also provides opportunities for local residents to scavenge moments of religious transcendence out of commercial enterprises. Intersecting avenues of mobility are mediated through specific places, providing tangible links to a fluctuating global culture of transnational and pan-global religious movements. These links are not always forged out of the inevitability of cultural dilution and absorption. Pilgrimage blurs the elite signification of global mobility, ascribing new symbolism to old forms of human movement and redirecting groups of people to different spaces. While the transnational travel of Haitian and non-Haitian Vodouists, and the growing commercial trade in Vodou initiations in Haiti, can be understood as subverting the seemingly culturally dominant patterns of global tourism, they also blur the distinction between tourism and pilgrimage. For newcomers to Vodou, moments of tourism, such as a visit to Haiti, are reconfigured as pilgrimage. The city, in an age of globalization and information technology, opens up opportunity for a reversal of the presumed one-way flow of homogenization that seems to characterize contemporary modernity. The overlapping practices of tourism and pilgrimage explored here illuminate how the very dispersion and diffusion—so emblematic of the contemporary city— organizes meaning, not only around its geographic local, but also around a virtual double, the image of the city, which is projected along the routes of information and communication technology and broadcast via diverse forms of media. This movement creates a dynamic vitality, a mythic city generated by the circulation of people, things and ideas that coexist with the local but are intrinsically connected to the discourses of the global. While it is important to guard against an analysis that fails to account for systemic power and privilege differentials between

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[29] See Claude F Jacobs, "Folk for whom? Tourist guidebooks, local color, and the spiritual churches of New Orleans" [*Journal of American Folklore*, 114: 453, Summer 2001. 309-330].

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identity groups, the very notion of mobility seems to warn against the preservation of rigid dualities. There is undeniable movement and interdependence between those who have access to a touristic mobility and those who do not. While ignoring the implications of the widening gap between the rich and the poor is problematic, it is equally problematic to insist that those on the wrong side of the tracks as it were, have no avenues for action or agency. As Karen Richman discusses in her ethnography of migrant Haitians, even those forced into a form of mobility due to economic conditions adapt technologies and systems of transit in order to maintain social ties at a distance. Sometimes those categorized as marginalized or disenfranchised utilize the very system of mobility supposedly denied them to mobilize in ways that are anything but static and powerless.

Vodou Groove (or Transnational Tricks of Transmission): The Role of Popular Music in the Dissemination of Vodou Cosmology

The seemingly generative matrices of media, communication technologies and commodity culture dislocates religious traditions from linear histories and local specificity, allowing adherents to jump from signifier to signifier, narrative to narrative and religion to religion without the cohesion and structure enforced by more formal religious practices. This, in turn, unmoors religions, such as Vodou, from their cultural and religious specificity, constituting a string of circulating social forms that sometimes appear only tangentially related to the Vodou religion and yet still carry, transmit and transfigure the specificity of Haitian Vodou. Media practices and commodification create a space where the discourses of Vodou meet the discourses that talk about Vodou. In this space the signifiers and discourses of (and about) religion freely circulate. And it is in these intermediate and often periodic spaces that the production and consumption of the stuff of religions, such as Vodou, often occurs. At the intersection of contemporary religiosity and commodity culture, Vodou in popular music encodes multiple signifiers.

Commodities are one way of asserting and constituting identity in contemporary society. Transnationalism, and the theoretical frameworks that seek to understand it, calls into question issues of authority and authenticity as identities and communities are forged in places at a remove from the cultures that seemingly spawn them. Music, as a cultural commodity,[30] can both signify and be a signifier of this re-formation of identities, belonging to places and spaces that are geographically and culturally removed from those who are in the act of

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[30] For further discussion of music as a cultural commodity and its continued circulation as an artifact despite the digitalization of sound, see Will Straw's "Exhausted Commodities: The Material Culture of Music," [*Canadian Journal of Communication* (25:1, 2000)].

identifying. This chapter explores how the circulation of popular music works to transmit cultural specificity; what happens to cultural signifiers in that transmission; and ultimately, how the transmission of Vodou via popular music creates conditions for the possibility of identification with the Vodou religion.

Vodou surfaces in multiple forms and guises in the popular imagination of Western culture, sometimes overtly, other times masked beneath coded signifiers. In the realms of popular music production, where Vodou is often represented and disseminated, the religion is linked to discourses of race and nation in ways that can sometimes make the signifiers of Vodou seem almost incidental. This analysis looks at some nodes or points at which Vodou, via popular music, becomes visible in North America. These points vibrate along the threads of a complex network of transmission as Vodou is disseminated across vast geographic space. Within these expanding parameters, Vodou-in-music generates moments in which Vodou is decoded, unpacked from the cultural commodities of popular music and re-circulated in multiple discourses. As Vodou circulates throughout North America, popular music and the artifacts associated with it can become a resource for a process of religious identification dependent on intersections with popular culture.

The transmission of cultural specificity and signifiers does not simply follow the sometimes predetermined paths of commercial music production. There are instances when signifiers surface in unexpected places, when world markets collapse into street corner stalls, and street vendors hawk their wears in the halls of mega corporations. In a sense, the transmission of cultural signifiers through cultural commodities is a carnivalesque activity, an act that can both subvert and reify structures of power and domination, authority and authenticity. The music that is the focus of this analysis can be first heard in Haiti in 1990, a few weeks before the annual festival of *kanaval*, with the popular music of the Haitian *rara* band Boukman Eksperyans. Tracing the commercial success of Boukman Eksperyans in Haiti and the incorporation of the structures of Vodou

into popular music in that country provides a basis for an analysis of Vodou in music. Musicians, such as Lionel and Constant Bernard, join many immigrants who have caught the transnational flow from Haiti to New York. Their 1995 album *Vodou 155*, illustrates both continuities and discontinuities with the Vodou grooves of Haitian popular music. Another album simply entitled *Voodoo*, released in 2000 by rhythm and blues singer D'Angelo, illustrates the way in which Vodou groove reaches beyond the geographies of Haitian Vodou and its diaspora, before the analysis returns to the carnival with Wyclef Jean's 1997 release of his celebrated album, *Carnival*. These works intersect with one another, borrowing similar tropes, speaking to varying but not unrelated identity groups, and representing differing forms of Vodou. These albums communicate creating a discursive space in which Vodou is understood. By exploring this space the ways in which popular music works to transmit cultural specificity and knowledge become visible and the discourses that condition the possibilities of identification with Vodou are articulated.

Vodou Groovology: Improvisation and Community

Like most religions, music is of central importance to Vodou. Praisesongs are sung to the *lwa*—the gods of the Vodou pantheon—and various drum rhythms and corresponding dances are employed to *chofe,* or "heat up", ritual space in order to make it receptive to the energies of the *lwa*. Most Vodou ceremonies are oriented around possession, a central ritual component of the religion, in which practitioners "call" the *lwa* who arrive in the bodies of practitioners so that the lwa can communicate and interact with the congregation. Music is a structuring component of what Karen McCarthy Brown has called possession-performances. In *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Brown explains that "at all ceremonies, each spirit called must be offered three or seven songs, which must follow a definite order dictated by the type of drum rhythm that would ordinarily accompany them" (Brown 55). Music is part of a compendium of spiritual knowledge where melodies and rhythms carry specific meanings and are employed for specific purpose. Drumming and dancing play a vital role in Vodou

ceremonies and practitioners come to recognize the songs, drum rhythms and corresponding dances that structure the often all-night celebrations of the religion. Music and ritual are closely interrelated and musical instruments are imbued with ritual significance. The *ascon*, for example, is a gourd rattle that is granted to *houngan* and *mambo* (priests and priestesses) who have obtained the highest level of ritual initiation. Brown explains:

> In Haiti, where drums almost *always* accompany the ceremonies, the *langay* crescendo ending the litany of saints is the signal for drumming to begin. When the complex polyrhythms of the drums come rolling in over this rapid chanting the effect is stunning and paradoxical. The drumming raises the energy level dramatically and, at the same time, gives order to the frenzy of the *ascon*, handclapping, and *langay*, each of which had seemed about to dissolve into chaos. After the drums enter, the *ascon*, which is used to direct ritual action and never simply as a musical instrument, slows to a steady beat and then, after a time, is silent. The handclapping gradually finds its own rhythm to enter into conversation with the cross-rhythms of the drums, and the langay transmutes into the familiar Creole of the first of the Vodou songs. (280)

The relationship between music and ritual in Vodou is seamless, part of a long tradition of ritual drumming, singing and dancing. Although there exists a large repertoire of "traditional" Vodou songs, dances and rhythms, new musical elements are constantly introduced into the corpus of Vodou music. As will be explored later, some genres of Haitian popular music have derived a sense of authority and authenticity by having their songs played at Vodou ceremonies. In Haiti, popular music has developed alongside the music of Vodou, each incorporating the rhythms, songs, cosmology or politics of the other into a symbiotic musical discourse that I have labeled "Vodou groove".

Although it owes a significant debt to the national and religious discourses of Haiti, Vodou groove encompasses popular music generated outside of Haiti— sometimes by non-Haitians—which has embedded within it some recognizable form of Vodou. Arguably, popular music is a transmitter of the Vodou religion, a means by which the religions is gaining public and global visibility. When new

musical forms are taken into the practices of Vodou, music becomes part of an ongoing process of religious innovation or perhaps more specifically, improvisation. Black literary critics[31] have explored the complex connections between improvisation and the creation of a transnational African discourse in which the meaning of identity and community is constantly revised. Like musical improvisation, the revision of meaning, or "signifyin(g)",[32] comments on that which is being revised, always retaining some recognizable relationship to the original. In an improvisation, a tune or rhythm is repeated while the rest is embellished, extended or cross-referenced. This act of disturbing the original opens up the possibility for new interpretations and new meanings in an ever-expanding discursive matrix. Vodou groove is large-scale improvisation. It is a discourse that surfaces in the cultural products of popular music, through not only the actual sounds of music, but also through liner notes, inserts, images and printed lyrics. Through all these signifiers, Vodou groove creates a discourse about Vodou that not only transmits the religion across North America, but also improvises new interpretations of this religious tradition.

The continuities and transformations articulated by the improvisational tactics of Vodou groove have the capacity to create networks of identification. In part, Vodou groove creates such networks by addressing (and giving voice to) the very structures and discourses of oppression that have historically maligned the Vodou religion. In *Masters of the Drum: Black Lit/oratures Across the Continuum*, Robert Elliot Fox explores how music, intrinsically linked to the spiritual, subverts the erasure of black cultural production:

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[31] See, for example, Robert Elliot Fox's *Masters of the Drum: Black Lit/oratures Across the Continuum* [Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996], Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* [NY: Oxford University Press, 1988], Edouard Glissant's. "Cross-Cultural Poetics" and "An Exploded Discourse" in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* [trans. J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989] 97-157, 158-220 and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* [London, Nairobi, Portsmouth N.H.: James Currey; EAEP; Heinemann, 1986].

[32] From, Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* [NY: Oxford University Press, 1988].

Black art strives to speak both *to* and *from* the core of black experience and, at the same time, to elicit in its more distanced audience (inside and outside the culture) a shift of consciousness that will bring it closer to that black core. It is, in short, both expressive and transformative. Think of The Persuasions (an a capella group). Rhetoric persuades. To persuade = to sway = to rock = to roll. This sequence of synonyms (courtesy of my computer's thesaurus) brings together the secular and the sacred (rocking and rolling comes from the black church to begin with, referring to the sway of the spirit) in performance. The persuasive appeal of the black preacher/teacher, whether playing the Word or playing the saxophone, is an aspect of "the call". Anchoring it all are the *riddims* (rhythms + rid'ems): antidotes to oppression...Hence, rhythms establish continuities, links to the past and to the future. (8)

Functioning in ways akin to more mainstream African-American forms of popular music expression, Vodou groove conveys an epistemology that has the potential for subversion and in so doing creates identity networks united by a common sense of disenfranchisement. As Tricia Rose explains in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*:

Slave dances, blues lyrics, Mardi Gras parades, Jamaican patois, toasts, and signifying all carry the pleasure and ingenuity of disguised criticism of the powerful...These cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the "unofficial truths" are developed, refined and rehearsed. These cultural responses to oppression are not safety valves that protect and sustain the machines of oppression. Quite to the contrary, these dances, languages, and music produce communal bases of knowledge about social conditions, communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance. (100)

But in addition to creating communal resistance, popular culture and cultural commodities disseminate alternative information to places at a remove from the cultural specificity in which music is created.

Arjun Appadurai, in *Modernity at Large*, categorizes the production of "global cultural flows" which guide, among other things, the dissemination of cultural specificity (such as that of Vodou) through popular culture and media. For Appadurai, media and commodity are inseparable aspects of the creation of

transnational communities and discourses (35). He proposes "mediascape' as a template for understanding how media representations are inflected by the specific media which carries them, the genre which frames them, the audience which receives them and the interests of those who own or control them (35). Appadurai is primarily concerned with audience reception, or the impact of media on those who consume it. A mixing of a repertoire of images and narratives within media forms shapes, for Appadurai, how transnational audiences constitute the everyday imaginary. Although Appadurai notes that important forms of production can take place in this realm of the imaginary, his framework implicitly locates "real" (or material, or actual) production with a few "controlling interests", magnifying the schism between producers and consumers on a global scale. Appadurai argues that the consumer has been transformed into a sign by commodity flows. For him, rendering the consumer into sign is "a mask for the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the many forces that constitute production" (42). Production generates "images of agency" which seem to "dupe" the consumer into believing that "he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser" (42). However, this understanding of agency presumes that consumption and production are separable forces in the constitution of the agentic subject. Like consumption, global practices of production are absorbed into local economies and cultures and "repatriated" (42) into discourses which allow for heterogeneity and agency in the face of the seemingly homogenizing and disempowering forces of globalization. Vodou groove, the disparate strands of music that this analysis seeks to bring together, illustrates the complex forces at play in the multilayered practices that may constitute both the production and consumption of popular music. Vodou groove also illuminates how cultural production—through the symbols and signifiers of Vodou sedimented in the forms and artifacts of popular music—can disrupt the seemingly one-way movement of the "global flow". In this disruption acculturation moves both ways.

Boukman nan Kanaval (Boukman in Carnival): Vodou's Legacy in Haitian Popular Music

In *A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti*, Gage Averill traces the development of popular music in Haiti between 1915 and 1995. In this seminal text, Averill conducts a social history of music in Haiti within a critical exploration of the intersection of music and (often, political) power in Haitian history. Starting with the American Occupation of 1915 Averill points out how the power relations between Haitian and American identity that shaped political structures in Haiti at that time led to the adoption of American jazz and dance music, all to the seeming detriment of the indigenous music of Haiti (37). However, throughout the development and shifts in popular music, there exist moments of what Paul Gilroy has called "diasporic intimacy". Although the American Occupation challenged Haitian nationalism and destabilized race and class relations within the country, moments of "diasporic intimacy" forged musical connections *between* cultures as Haitian music created a discourse that reached through to, and made connection with, the African American roots of imported American music (39). As will be seen, it is these moments of connection between cultures, or what some may call minor transnationalism[33], that can is evident in instances Vodou in popular music. Since the American Occupation, Haitian popular music has articulated the tensions between imported or foreign music and the desire for an authentic or "roots" music that speaks to a national Haitian identity. Even in the early days of the Occupation, Haitian elites borrowed the (foreign) ideology of the Harlem Renaissance to insist on their own culture as a vehicle of connection to an African past. As Averill explains: "In Haiti, intellectuals saw in their own "primitives" (i.e., the peasants) an absence of the identity crisis that was so palpable for black intellectuals in the African diaspora. A return to their roots, for these members of the middle class, was a balm for the spiritual homelessness of the postcolonial

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[33] From the anthology, *Minor Transnationalism* [Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi (eds), Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005].

experience" (43). Vodou was (and still is) of central importance to this roots movement, representing a mystical connection to an African past. Like African-American identity, Haitian identity has been constituted, in part, through proximity to the authenticity, authority and subsequent power of a collective African history. Throughout this history of popular music in Haiti—from Vodou jazz, the adoption and transformation of *Yéyé* and the use of *merengue,* to the various surges of *kompa* music and the formalization of *mizik racine* (roots music)—the tensions around issues of authority and authenticity and the implications these tensions have held for the understanding and articulation of Haitian identity have remained. Vodou has been a central part of this discourse, notable for it's presence in Haitian popular music, conspicuous in its moments of absence. Averill suggests "when Haitians speak of the centrality of Vodou to the meaning of being Haitian, they see peasant culture as an extension of the African past into the present. The drum as its center (in the music of the Vodou cult) becomes a synecdoche for Africa and the call of African heritage" (45). While this is undoubtedly true (and truer in some historical moments than in others), Averill's analysis implies a dualism between Haitian and Vodou identities, creating a world where Vodou serves the purpose of authenticating Haitian identity. I do not wish to suggest that tensions between Haitian and Vodou identity do not exist. However, as this analysis will explore, the representation of Vodou in popular music authenticates Vodou identity that is connected to multiple ethnic, racial and other identities.

The music of Boukman Eksperyans illustrates the complexity of Vodou as it functions in Haitian popular music. The members of this Haitian band pioneered *mizik racine*, or roots music, a popular music movement in Haiti that started in the early 1980's. The movement (notable as early as 1977-1978) is characterized by the incorporation of elements of traditional musics and the signifiers and discourses of Haitian Vodou (135). This musical movement was motivated by a number of factors. Perhaps most significantly and as will be discussed later, it was a response to political oppression and the repressive regime of Duvalierism that

had permeated Haiti for so long. Despite the often subversive political nature of the music, early *mizik racine* bands such as Sanba-yo, Foula, and also Boukman Eksperyans, received little attention from either the media or the military. The reasons for this initial lack of response were multiple. In part, *mizik racine* did not seem to be a commercially viable music compared to the more popular fusion forms that had preceded it. However, the late 1970s and early 1980's saw a resurgence of black nationalism in the Americas and abroad. Black Nationalism is a generic term for a diversity of theories and ideologies that were formulated and articulated in North America during the 1960s. This movement corresponded with a sudden "granting" of independence to many previously colonized African nations. This spurred the widely publicized nationalism of the black cultural movement in America, which embraced and still espouses a number of ideas including the (literal) back to Africa movement and "Afrocentrism".[34] The rhetorics of black nationalism had a powerful influence on cultural production in the Caribbean since Afrocentric ideology conceptualized the cultures and spiritualities of the Caribbean as a link to an African past. *Mizik racine* was both a local and a global phenomenon, instigated by the political climate of Haiti and a larger transnational and diasporic discourse about African identity and black nationalism that saw diasporic African religions (such as Vodou) as a spiritual response to decades of black struggles that had transnational significance. The movement was gradually influenced by the ideological underpinnings of Jamaican reggae, specifically the synthesis of defiant politics and Rastafarianism (133). At the same time, the appetite for World Beat music had extended to a growing interest in Caribbean dance music. These "world" audiences had (and still have) their own expectations of authenticity, and the incorporation of Vodou in Haitian popular commercial music fit an external image of Haitian music even while the practice was gaining popularity within Haiti itself. As a result, by 1985 *mizik racine* was not only popular but a commercially viable enterprise.

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[34] See, for example, Molefi Kete Asante's *Afrocentricity* [Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1998] and *The Afrocentric Idea* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987].

Another instance of the multiple tensions between the discourses that constitute both Vodou and Haitian identity can be seen within the social classes at this time. The middle-class Haitian elite, who were generally both the producers and the prime consumers of Haitian popular music, had generally come to accept Vodou music as a cultural artifact, a folkloric trope that could distinguish their music from that of the rest of the Caribbean. Yet despite the fact that Vodou music had long been a component of Haitian popular music, the new ideological thrust of *mizik racine* awoke a great deal of anti-Vodou sentiment. For the most part, the elite had not seen the incorporation of Vodou musical structures as a literal incorporation of Vodou ideology or cosmology into the genres of popular music. Groups such as Boukman Eksperyans, however, did notably more than simply adopt the structures of Vodou music in their own musical practices. Instead, they developed a revisionist approach to the Vodou religion, seeing it as a potentially emancipatory spirituality which, incorporated into music, could prove libratory for Haitians and other black listeners alike. In this way, *mizik racine* bands subverted the social power structures that had long labeled Vodou as a primitive folk tradition while imbuing their own work with an authority derived from the discourses of Vodou itself. As Averill explains:

> The *mizik* racine bands didn't see their work as folklore or as something conceptually different from Vodou-as-religion, but as an extension of Vodou spirituality into other realms. Boukman Eksperyans labeled their music "Vodou *adjaye*", a term used for the dances at a *peristil* (temple) that follow ceremonies. Trance plays a critical role in authenticating roots music performances. Each of the *mizik racine* bands has accumulated anecdotes about audience members, whether *ounsi kanzo* (initiated practitioner) or not, falling into trance possession at concerts. Trance possession serves as a vote of approval by the *lwa*-s for the music. (140)

Mizik racine groups often perform at the end of Vodou ceremonies. At the beginning of the *mizik racine* movement it was "very much a point of pride that *ounsi* recognized the rhythms and performed the correct dances to each" (140). Clearly, there exists, within *mizik racine* in general and the corpus of Boukman Eksperyans in particular, a desire to create a sense of spiritual authority both by positioning roots music within the realm of the spiritual and by drawing the

spiritual into the realm of popular performance. This connection to authenticity and authority is transferred to the creation of the cultural commodity of the CD. The liner notes for Boukman's third CD *Libite (Pran Pou Pran'L!)/Freedom (Let's Take It!)* gives written explanations beside the English translations of the Haitian Kreyole lyrics. The explanation beside the song titled "Ganga" reads:

> Simbi Ganga is a spirit who belongs to the Kongo nation in Vodou, and who comes as a commander in chief. His name tells us a lot about history. Simbi is a word in the KiKongo language in Central Africa for a whole class of ancestor spirits whose personalities and symbols are consistent from Kongo to Haiti. The word Nganga means healer-priest in KiKongo. Many of the people who came to Haiti in slavery were from the Kongo, and their spirits still walk and talk with the Haitian people. When Simbi Ganga possesses people he talks in a loud funny way; he sort of yells and howls. Listen to the traditional prayer-song chorus in this song. The spoken voice you hear is the voice of a band member possessed by the spirit of Ganga. (1995)

This short passage is not present in the Kreyole portion of the liner notes. Not only does this passage assert the connection of Boukman Eksperyans to Vodou by invoking trance and possession as a validation of the spiritual power of their music, it also invokes the authority of an African past. In addition, such a description satisfies a World Beat audience intrigued by any representations of trance or possession. This short piece of text indicates a productive consciousness of both the strictures of World music production and the potentially subversive power of an Afrocentric discourse. It also provides an audience, particularly a non-Kreyole speaking audience, with a point of access to the cosmologies and ideologies of Vodou as they are "packaged" through the production of *mizik racine*. The instance of *mizik racine* musicians on a public connection to Vodou alienated many within the Haitian elite and in so doing, established *mizik racine* as a counter-cultural force, aimed at subverting institutional power.

By the mid 1980s, *mizik racine* had become closely linked with *dechokaj* (uprooting)—a collective excavation of all levels of Haitian culture and society from the oppressive power dynamics that had kept Duvalierism in place for so long. *Mizik racine* was, in part, a musical *dechokaj* of *kompa* (a dance music form

patterned on a style of merengue borrowed from the neighboring Dominican Republic), a musical structure that had been popular during the dictatorships and was a favorite of "Baby Doc" Duvalier. But *mizik racine*'s increasing popularity was not due only to local and internal political ideologies. As Averill explains, it was also positioned to capture attention abroad:

> Even though the movement was in its germinal stages in Haiti, foreign audiences were taking note of *mizik racine* in a way they never had for *konpa....Mizik racine*, apart from issues of quality and novelty, fulfilled foreign expectations for "authentic" Third World dance musics in ways that *konpa* hadn't. In the new aesthetics of "world beat", the more "African" the better. Americans, especially, wanted Vodou in their Haitian music. Over the next five years, the inordinate economic power and draw of foreign markets added to the local pressure to "go" roots. (180)

The pressure of global markets and the expectations of representations of Vodou that go along with this pressure shape the discourse of Vodou groove. They also create nodes or points of access to this formerly secret religion. Vodou groove is, in part, the dissemination not only of a particular manifestation of Vodou, but also of a complex local political and historical specificity. It reflects the local's connection to global discourses of subversion, change and profit while being equally immersed in a social backlash from those who have had something at stake in conceptualizing Vodou as a mark of cultural differentiation rather than part of the political empowerment of the (specifically Haitian) lower classes. In many ways, Boukman Eksperyans and the rise of *mizik racine* epitomizes these diverse layers of meaning.

Pointing the Way: Pwen and Decontextualized Discourses

After Baby Doc's exile in 1986, Boukman Eksperyans retained its popularity, in part, by continuing to critique Haiti's political processes. In 1990 one of their pieces created what Averill terms a musicopolitical controversy (180). Released during the instability of military rule in Haiti, "Ke'-M Pa Sote" (my heart doesn't leap/I am not afraid) incited all who heard it. Although it debuted at *Kanaval*, "Ke'-M Pa Sote" is a *rara* song, which is music designed for the period

immediately following *Kanaval*, a seasonal festival celebration related to Vodou belief that takes place during Lent and involves days of processions.[35] *Kanaval* of 1990 was to be only the second occasion of *Kanaval* since the end of the Duvalier dictatorship. Despite struggles toward political stability, many felt that a military dictatorship was again immanent in 1990. "Ke'-M Pa Sote" speaks to a frustration and dissatisfaction with Haitian politics, but these sentiments are couched in language that appears ambiguous. The song makes use of a number of techniques specific to *mizik racine*. The *pwen*, or point in *mizik racine* is a multi-valenced concept. Through song or oral speech one can *voye pwen*, or "send a point". The point or target, in this complex communication is often articulated through veiled lyrics or speech, a subversive method of critiquing political figures or groups in a corrupt and volatile climate. In this song Boukman refers to such ambiguous entities as "those guys", "assassins", "frauds", "idiots" and "paranoids". This ambiguity is characteristic of *pwen*, a complex play on language and meaning that forms coded communication. However, what now seems ambiguous, observed at a geographical and temporal remove from the original performances of this song, embodied a great deal of local specificity in 1990 when the song became an anthem of protest against the injustice of military rule. *Pwen* separates words from their conventional meanings, generating a fluid vocabulary that runs parallel to more conventional discourse. In this way, musical lyrics can become social resources for a communicative process which subverts an often oppressive socio-political climate.

The lyrics of "Ke'-M Pa Sote" can be divided into three sections, the first of which is based on the call and response of the *sanba*, traditional spiritual

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[35] Elizabeth McAlister in *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002] explains that "Rara is the yearly festival in Haiti that, even more than Carnival, belongs to the so-called peasant classes and urban poor. Beginning the moment Carnival ends, on the eve of Lent, and building for six weeks until Easter Week, Rara processions walk for miles through local territory...Bands stop traffic for hours to play music and perform rituals for Afro-Haitian deities at crossroads, bridges, cemeteries. They are conducting the spiritual work that becomes necessary when the angels and saints, along with Jesus, disappear into the underworld on Good Friday" (3).

singers; "Sanba, this hurts, oh/ Look what those guys do to me/ My blood is running, sanba/ They give me a burden to carry/ I am not going to carry it." This suggestive section is followed by a passage which describes the "guys" referred to in the first section; "What do you have there now?/ A band of idiots/ What do you have there now?/ A band of deceivers/ What do you have there now?/ A band of paranoids." A third incorporates a Vodou chant, based on traditional praise poetry, for the deity Ogun Balendjo, a warrior god; "poison can't harm those possessed by Ogun Balendjo." Local audiences understood these lyrics to be a harsh criticism directed at the government of Haiti (Averill 181). They also heard a call for resistance in the music of "Ke'-M Pa Sote". Given the incendiary nature of the piece, then President General Prospere Avril wanted to ban the song from *Kanaval*, but thought the political ramifications may have been too high (181). The structures of *Kanaval* allowed the song to be disseminated across the country as *rara* bands learned the piece and played it in numerous locales. A week later a young girl was shot by the military and "Ke'-M Pa Sote", which had become an anthem of courage in the face of governmental oppression, propelled a nation wide protest that led to Avril's resignation and the instigation of a temporary government. The power of music to incite political protest in Haiti is well documented in Gage Averill's text. However, the global significance of this powerful and subversive music, as it is disseminated to global audiences who may have little or no knowledge of the context into which songs such as "Ke'-M Pa Sote" are first sounded, remains to be understood.

The word *pwen* can also mean fist, a symbol which has long been a sign of (black) resistance. But in Haiti, this resistance often plays with acquiescence, marching along with conventions to generate a subversive realm of the implicit. As Elizabeth McAlister explains in her seminal text on Rara, "Some politicized *pwen*...go on to become political passwords within the hidden transcript of street interaction" (169). This form of Haitian vernacular engenders the employment of double speak, which has been essential for survival in Haiti's chaotic climate and has formed arenas of social discourse that evade control by repressive institutions.

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As McAlister explains, although the public performance of *pwen* is not an explicit or overt challenge to the forces of oppression and subjugation in Haiti,

> it does perform two kinds of cultural work for the dispossessed majority when it enables communication. For a population that lived in a daily condition of hunger under the U.S. embargo and who had lost young people to murder and exile, these small nods and smiles created through the practice of verbal signifying were both a profound source of encouragement and a way to effect popular organizing and networking. Thus, during the coup years, the Haitian people created areas of social discourse that eluded control by the military and created communication avenues in the public sphere through which to maneuver (170).

Throughout their long career, Boukman Eksperyans has been a vehicle for the mass dissemination of *pwen* that the Haitian people have been able to use to maneuver through an often unstable and insecure social sphere. But does this very specific local social discourse translate beyond the local? How do people of a geographical, cultural and temporal remove from the *Kanaval* of 1990, interact with the lyrics and sound of "Ke'-M Pa Sote" which was released on Boukman's *Vodou Adjae* album in 1991? The "areas of social discourse" created by the performance of *pwen* through popular music become globalized as *pwen* are translated into the varying contexts in which a Vodou groove is heard. Vodou generates its own conventions of double speak by positioning itself in varying relation to discourses of authority and authenticity, and in so doing spins the local contexts of Haitian Vodou, and flings the political, cultural and religious discourses of Haiti across North America.

But what are the effects of this dissemination? In *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place,* George Lipsitz suggests that bands such as Boukman find themselves in a "dangerous" and contradictory place as they become indebted to the very structures which keep them oppressed by way of their ethnic, national or religious identity:

> The musicians in Boukman Eksperyans face serious contradictions as they attempt to address the volatile political and social conditions in Haiti at the same time that they address consumers around the globe as prospective customers. The influence of South

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African mbaqua music on Boukman Eksperyans may testify to a
dialogue between liberation struggles on different continents, but
also reflects the ability of commercial culture to collapse
boundaries and render historically specific cultural expressions
little more than fashions to be appropriated far from their
conditions of creation. (11)

Certainly this is one risk inherent in the dissemination of Vodou and the cultural
specificity of Haiti embedded in that discourse. And many may fear that world
music fans may commodify the religion, turning it into "one more exotic
spectacle, one more novelty, one more diversion for jaded consumers living in
wealthy western countries" (11). This is a legitimate fear. And yet, implicit in this
anxiety is a perception of Vodou, and the matrix of cultural signifiers that is
Vodou groove, as an inherently powerless social force. The subjugation and
oppression of the Haitian people and of Vodou practitioners both historically and
in the present is undeniable. However, the cosmology of Vodou is infinitely
adaptable to the harshness of systemic oppression. And adaptability to such
systems engenders a cultural and religious ethos that sees the politics of cultural
commodity distribution as just one more venue that can be exploited. Vodou is a
missionistic tradition, concerned with the dissemination of its ideology on a large
scale. Vodou groove is part of this mission. For Vodouists there exists an
understanding that the cosmology and signifiers of Vodou carry meaning that is
inherent, meaning that is conveyed regardless of whether the recipients of these
signifiers understand them or not. This is not to imply that the potential
exotification of Vodou in popular music by world music audiences is of no
consequence, but it is to suggest that any analysis of representations of Vodou in
popular music should take account of the way in which the ethos of the tradition
allows Vodou to articulate itself through the systems of popular music production
and distribution. This analysis examines not simply how Vodou is commodified
through popular culture but how Vodou is insisted upon.

There and Back Again: Vodu 155, D'Angelo and Wyclef Jean

Following the Duvalier regime, the transnational flow away from Haiti

reversed as political refugees returned both as permanent residents and visitors (Basch 34). The early 1990s was an era of hope under the influence of new president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. For immigrant Haitians, the processes of deterritorialization, the method by which their diasporic identity is constituted (in no small part through their relationship to the "home country"), was highly influenced by the political discourse of Haiti. In *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation States*, the authors explore how the political discourse of Haitian presidents such as Jean-Bertrand Aristide has served to emphasize the boundlessness (versus the boundedness) of national identity; Aristide defined the space of the diaspora, giving it the name of the "10th Department" or *"Dizyem Departman-an* of a country that has 9 geographical divisions called *Departman"* (147). Aristide, and other politicians, redefined Haiti as a boundless and truly "deterritorialized nation-state" that encompassed those living in the diaspora. However, while Aristide may have been one of the first to articulate a political discourse that emphasizes the transnational element of Haitian identity, it was in the realm of popular music that those living in the diaspora found a real voice for their experiences. In the diaspora, Haitian popular music became a way of both expressing and negotiating the complexities of Haitian identity transposed onto a North American landscape of racism and ethnicism. In addition, music produced in the Haitian diaspora transmits the not always ideal experiences of the diaspora back to Haiti, generating transnational discussions about identity and nation. As will be discussed, popular musicians, such as Wyclef Jean, have recently had a profound influence on perceptions of Haitian identity in the diaspora. However, before Jean made his mark with The Fugees, Haitian singer Ti Manno spoke to the complexity of Haitian identity in his music. Arriving in the US in 1970, Ti Manno was influenced by the then emerging discourses of black nationalism as well as by the musical work of singers such as Bob Marley. As Nina Glick-Schiller and George Eugene Fouron explain in "'Everywhere We Go We Are in Danger': Ti Manno and the Emergence of a Haitian Transnational Identity", Ti Manno "found in Bob Marley a model of the contribution a singer could make to his nation and people"

(334). Through his music Ti Manno consciously called out for a unified Haitian identity, speaking out against the internal divisions that stratified Haitian communities both in Haiti and in the diaspora.

During Ti Manno's time lifetime, the class divisions that (still) stratify Haitian culture had profound consequences when they were translated onto the spaces of the diaspora. Under the dictatorship of the Duvaliers, particularly Jean-Claude Duvalier who inherited his presidency from his father in 1971, many Haitian's fled Haiti for the US, arriving in boats on the shores of Florida. The migration of Haitians by boat started in the 1970s and intensified in the 1980s. While boat migration ceased briefly in the early 1990s following the election of Jean Bertrand Aristide, it resumed when the elected president was ousted during a military coup. The plight of those dubbed by the American media the Haitian "boat people" both on the sea and after reaching land in America, has had a profound impact on the Haitian diaspora and is documented in the music of popular musicians such as Ti Manno. After facing the perilous boat journey between Haiti and Florida newly arrived Haitian immigrants then had to face an American media that found in immigrants an easy scapegoat for economic problems and an increased drug trade in major urban centers in the US. The negative stereotyping of immigrants in general combined with the specific history of Haitian/American relations to generate a particularly negative stereotype of Haitian people; "Haitians were portrayed as ragged, wretched, and pathetic and were said to be illiterate, superstitious, disease ridden and backward peasants. They became visible scapegoats for the failures of US capitalism" (337). Exasperating this situation was the failure of Haitians already living in the US (prior to the 1970s exodus from Haiti) to advocate for their newly arrived compatriots. The forces of internalized racism, ethnicism, and classism served to further divide the diasporic Haitian community making them unable to present a unified or cohesive front against negative media reports and systemic discrimination against both newly arrived refugees and Haitian immigrants in general. As Glick-Schiller and Fouron explain, "The general ideological attack on

the Haitian population coupled with the negative images of desperate illiterate peasants landing on American beaches and the policy of detaining Haitian refugees as undesirable, found them totally unprepared. Immersed in conflicts over class, color, language and Haitian politics, and distracted by a proliferation of leaders distrustful of each other, Haitians were unable to respond in a united, cohesive and effective manner" (337). Ti Manno's Kreyole lyrics spoke to the problems Haitians faced in the US including racism and the scapegoating of Haitians as the primary carriers of AIDS into the US but also spoke to the internal conflicts that kept Haitians in the diaspora divided from one another. Glick Shiller and Fouron explain:

> Better than any leader of any Haitian organization had ever done, he put into words and music what was on their minds: despair, fear, paranoia, anger, pride, courage, and love. He sang about their contrary emotions; he described their experiences. Ti Manno described the suffering and alienation of the immigrant who found himself a stranger without voice, place, or recognition in the new country. (338)

Haitians, who had developed, as a means of coping with the hostile environment a strategy of invisibility when it came to their Haitian-ness, found in popular music not only a means of collective expression, but a way of healing and reclaim a damaged national pride. What Glick-Schiller and Fouron call the "Ti Manno movement" urged the generation of a transnational identity that unified Haitians in the diaspora through their pride in a Haitian national identity. Ti Manno's music and lyrics, influenced by the reclamation strategies of black nationalism, set the stage for Haitian popular music produced in the diaspora that similarly repositioned or reclaimed Vodou as a socially empowering force and something with which Haitians could identify. In this way, Vodou transmitted via the conduits of popular music production, stakes a claim outside of Haiti that, while it owes much to the Haitian roots music scene, is heavily influenced by diasporic concerns. The newly energized diasporic interest in Haitian politics of the late 80s and early 90s aided the then struggling roots music scene, allowing it to gain foothold abroad. In addition, Haitians who remained in the diaspora also took up the growing interest in roots music; "Sanba-like groups, both informal and

commercially oriented, formed in Miami (Kazak), Boston (Batwel Rada), New York (Rara Machine, Rara Djakout)" (Averill 180). It is this legacy that has generated the music produced by groups such as Vodu 155.

Having immigrated to New York from Haiti as teenagers, brothers Lionel and Constant Bernard formed Vodu 155 and released a self-titled album with Island Records in 1995. The album has ten tracks and most of the pieces are performed in a mixture of English and Haitian Kreyole. The work contains many elements of *mizik racine*, in particular the incorporation of Vodou cosmology, rhythms and praisesongs. However, Vodu 155's music incorporates other musical influences, including Jamaican reggae/dancehall, and American funk and hip-hop. The band (which includes bassist/producer Bill Laswell, guitarist Nicky Skopelitis, and reggae legend Sly Dunbar on drums) moves easily between these diverse musical styles. The title of the first track of the album, "Vodu Funkadelic", speaks to the cultural mix embedded in Vodu 155. The lyrics link the local, the archetypical Haitian "yard" to the global ubiquities of "abroad"; "Why the Vodu funkadelic/ from the yard /all of Haiti 'till all will spread and come abroad/ Aw yes the Vodu funkadelic." The lyrics are also a telling example of the missionism embedded in the cosmology of Vodou—the recipients of Vodou, in its multiple forms, are "rocked" by its effects even if they don't believe in or recognize the signifiers they may be consuming; "Vodu rock 'a make me rock too," and another, "Vodu rock 'a with 'a Haitian *a dos*, Vodu rock 'a with Jamaican *a dos*, Vodu rock with American *a dos*, European's don't know but them 'a Vodu rock too." The second track "Zaka" is more closely aligned with the legacy of *mizik racine*. Starting with the fragment of a praisesong, the piece invokes the *lwa* Zaka, a spirit that has come to symbolize the allegiances with the rural poor that roots musicians seek to consolidate. Like "the yard" referenced in the first piece of the album, Zaka is a code which signifies allegiances with roots music and the connection to Vodou that such allegiance symbolizes. The roots music movement was initially conceived as a countercultural movement. Roots musicians distinguished themselves not only through musical style but also in

appearance. The politics of roots music and its links to rural discourses led musicians to adopt dress and hairstyles that carried symbolic import for the rural "peasantry". In particular the straw bags, hat and sandals and the rolled up jeans worn by so many roots musicians are emblematic of the agricultural *lwa*, Kouzen Zaka. Karen McCarthy Brown explains:

> The spirit's humble demeanor, that of an illiterate peasant, actually reveals
> his importance: he functions to remind devotees of their roots, of their need for family (a group that includes the ancestors and the spirits), and of their connection to the land. (Brown 36)

Drawing on the *sanba* call and response format typical of much *mizik racine*, Vodu 155's piece "Zaka" invokes the powerful image of this *lwa*. Thus, the music of Vodu 155 carries within it markers of roots music and the cultural specificity of Haitian Vodou that clearly carry significance for the "insider". But the mixing of specifically Haitian Vodou signifiers with other signifiers, including the musical forms of reggae and hip hop, destabilizes any clear notion of authenticity or simple allegiances to the political ideologies often embedded in popular music movements.

Although situated at a remove from the concrete local politics of Boukman Eksperyans' "Ke'-M Pa Sote", songs like "Vodou Funkadelic" and "Zaka" seem to generate their own *pwen*. But who is the target of this *pwen*, who gets the point? Again, in the double speak of Vodou groove, religion is positioned in proximity to authenticity and authority. But as location and context change, so does the way in which Vodou signifies. Via Vodu 155, the cosmology of Vodou is spreading, not only through Haitian popular music, but also through musical commodities produced in the diaspora. Unlike the liner notes of Boukman Eksperyans' *Vodou Adjae* album, the insert of *Vodu 155* offers no explanations and no translations. Instead, only the lyrics speak to the oppression facing both Haitians and Vodouists, sometimes in a brutally blunt way. A lyric in track six, "Mama Dadu", asks "If you do not know what I know, how can you say Vodu is shit?" Here there is nothing of the conciliatory explanations clarifying Vodou for

a global audience. Like most *pwen*, the *voye pwen* of Vodu 155 has multiple targets. Drawing on the legacy of Haitian roots music makes this album appealing to a Haitian and diasporic Haitian audience. But the World Beat target of Boukman's work seems to have shifted. Vodu 155 insists on a de-localized Vodou identity represented as powerful, all pervasive and African. Such a discourse shifts to target a more "Pan-African" allegiance. As McAlister observes in her analysis of the emergence of rara performance in New York:

> While the Brooklyn Rara is a statement of Haitian ethnic distinctiveness from all other groups, the Rara is also, paradoxically, an affirmation of Afrocentric identity and Pan-Africanism. Because the celebration takes place in a country where Haitians become part of a Black minority, Rara members see links between themselves and other African peoples (205).

But what happens when this urge for a "Pan-African" approach to the dissemination of Vodou slips out of the grasp of those who have a geographical, religious and cultural connection to the tradition?

D'Angelo's album *Voodoo*, released with Virgin music, carries few if any of the cultural markers of *mizik racine*. There is also nothing in D'Angelo's publicity material that suggests he is ethnically connected to Haiti or explicitly connected to Vodou. Still, the visual material illustrating the album clearly depicts images of a Vodou ceremony. The back cover of the album shows shirtless drummers in the background as an *ounsi* (initiate) dressed in the typical white of temple service dances with a live sacrificial chicken. Another picture inside the insert depicts D'Angelo himself dancing with a rooster. Whether these images depict a "real" or a staged Vodou ceremony is less significant than the fact that a ceremony is depicted. There is no explanation for these images. The liner notes open with a statement by D'Angelo in which reference to Vodou is also left unexplained:

> To be the son of a preacher man was once African American cultural royalty. As traditional churches have grown empty many of us have been left to wander these haunted castles like that displaced Prince of Denmark, contemplating the paths of our mothers…The Aquarian Age is a matriarchal age, and if we are to

exist as men in this new world many of us must learn to embrace and nurture that which is feminine with all of our hearts (he-arts). But is there any room for artistry in hip-hop's decadent man-sion? Have we walked our timberlands sole-less...soul-less?

When you pour that wine on the ground in that video shoot that has become your life will you be ready to hear the voice that pours from the bottle to inebriate the very ground on which we walk? It is libations such as these that are the start of every voodoo ceremony.

In this unabashed mix of ideological, spiritual and even commercial signifiers, there is nothing of the clear connection between the tropes of Haitian Vodou and the critical political and cultural commentary that permeates the work of Boukman Eksperyans and Vodu 155. However, I would suggest that the simple presence of the representation of Vodou in this popular culture text carries significance. Although seemingly generated at a geographical and cultural remove from the previous albums, D'Angelo's *Voodoo* is another point of contact along the thread of Vodou groove and it vibrates in resonance with the others.

The rhetorics of Black Nationalism—a holistic matrix of symbols, political ideology, and social practices—not only resists neo-colonialism and a resurgence of right wing racism(s), but also celebrates the "memory" of cultural roots. It is this movement that has spawned the controversial term "neo-voodoo", which posits a new Vodou practice reclaimed from "traditional" Vodou but purified by removing (or ignoring) elements thought to be Western or white. The rhetoric of neo-voodoo is about belonging. More specifically, it is about consciously seeking out and creating communities of belonging based on identifications with specific religious and cultural practices, symbols, and ideas.[36] In a way, neo-voodooism attempts to "remember" where one belongs. Since, cultural lineage for African - American people has been fragmented, this memory is not necessarily concerned with historical accuracy. Consequently, it is an elusive factor in the analysis of Vodou identity. The merging of a commentary on

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[36] Paul Gilroy speaks about this mode of belonging through the ideological concept of "Africanness" in "It's A Family Affair" in *Black Popular Culture* [ed. Gina Dent, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995].

the genre of hip hop with spiritual representation in the text included with D'Angelo's album can be read as part of this discourse of belonging. Searching for authenticity in such a discourse misses the point. Nonetheless, authenticity has a currency and a market in the distribution and dissemination of cultural commodities and certainly in the marketing of popular music. Although D'Angelo's album draws on a type of "pan-African" authenticity and authority very different from that of the bands examined earlier, this representation keeps the strand of Vodou groove, which is the plot of this analysis, alive.

From D'Angelo's representation of Vodou we can return to *Kanaval* steeped in questions of ambiguity. After the success of the *Fugees*, Haitian born artist and Fugees band member Wyclef Jean released his own wildly anticipated first album *Carnival* with Sony Music in 1997. The earlier success of the Fugees had a great deal of significance for disenfranchised and marginalized Haitian youth across North America. In "Voices of Hope", Jessie Colin reports on a sociological exploration of Haitian youth identity in North America and is struck by the influence of the *Fugees* on this identity group:

> In 1997, this hip-hop group won a Grammy award. During a performance at the Grammies, Wyclef Jean, the lead singer of the group, wrapped himself in the Haitian flag, an image that was broadcast across the world and left deep impressions on many young Haitians in the United States (Pierre-Pierre, 1998). The influence of the Fugees came through loud and clear in this study. One participant said he used to not reveal his ethnic identity, but because of the popularity of the Fugees, he now freely admits that he is Haitian, and he said frankly, "It makes me feel good to no longer have to be in disguise" (Mathieu, 16 years old). Marie-Jose stated, "Until the Fugees came out, I can honestly say in the past, people did not support Haitians, that's true! But now, it seems that there is a lot of support." She went on to say, "I am going to be honest: sometimes I used to say I am not Haitian, or if they don't ask me, I would not volunteer anything. But now with the Fugees, I feel stronger since I feel I don't have to betray Haiti anymore." (203)

Jean continues to bring Haiti and Haitian identity to the forefront of public awareness in North America, both in his music and through his own outreach

work in Haiti and America[37]. But although *Carnival* is peppered with proud commentary on being Haitian and Haitian-American, an element of disguise surfaces. While the Fugees and subsequently Jean may have fought the ethnicism embodied in Haitian-American immigrant experience, neither the Fugees, nor Jean's *Carnival* proposes the same empowerment for a Vodou identity. How, then, can this piece resonate with the other harmonies of Vodou groove in this analysis?

Jean's *Carnival* shares much in common with the other examples of roots music already examined in this analysis. Like the work of Vodu 155, the album is presented in an unapologetic mixture of English and Haitian Kreyole. Kreyole pieces such as "Jaspora" recall the *sanba* call and response so characteristic of *mizik racine* and the album synthesizes reggae, and hip-hop in much the same way as did groups like Vodu 155. The album also makes use of "pan-African" rhetoric. However, unlike the other albums, Jean's work makes little explicit use of the rhetoric, musical tropes or signifiers of Vodou. The heart-wrenching track titled "Gunpowder" invokes many of the same tropes of unification under the rubric of a transnational (and Pan-African) identity that has been prevalent in much of the music of Vodou groove. Evoking locales such as Zaire, L.A., Brixton, Brooklyn, Jersey, Australia, and New Zealand, Jean makes a clear link between the violence that occurs in these places and the disenfranchisement of blacks and indigenous populations across the globe; "we can't stop the violence/because the war is not over/until you can feel, love peace and hear silence/but I smell gunpowder/ [...] /Lord, I head for revenge in the city of Port au Prince." These lyrics, with their invocation of the Haitian capital, connect the struggles of Haitian people with the struggles of black and indigenous peoples in multiple locales, paralleling many of the pan-African connections discussed above. The cry for revenge in this song evokes the revolutionary rhetorics of

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[37] Jean co-founded The Wyclef Jean Foundation in 1998 to provide musical education to youth. The organization also helps out Haitian orphanages. See www.Wyclefjeanfoundation.org for more information. More recently, Jean has launched non-political movement and organization, Yele Haiti, aimed at empowering youth and rebuilding the country through charity work. For more information on Yele Haiti see http://www.yele.org/ (last accessed June 14, 2006).

Black Nationalism that seek to right the injustices of racial subjugation found in the works of Boukman Eksperyans, Vodu 155 and even D'Angelo. However, despite allegiances with other albums discussed in this analysis, Jean's work makes almost no explicit reference to Vodou. On occasion, the lack of reference to Vodou seems marked. Later in the song "Gunpowder", for instance, the singer asks, "I wanna know why Christians pray/but it is still the same way?" (referring to the continued violence that is the subject of the song). Although expressing dissatisfaction with Christianity, no spiritual or religious alternative is offered. For a diasporic audience the absence of Vodou in this album would resonate almost as strongly as its presence resonates in the other albums discussed. In addition to the lack of textual references to Vodou, the album insert also generates a space in which the absence of Vodou is notable—depicting ambiguous images of a carnivalesque, rather than an overtly Vodou, nature—recalling Haitian *Kanaval* without referencing the Vodou rituals and practices which occur there. Vodou is an uneasy subtext in *Carnival*, troubling the text of the album but never surfacing completely.

In part, the absence of Vodou resonates so loudly in Jean's work because of the strong presence of references to Haiti and Haitian experience. Unlike D'Angelo, who seems to adopt Vodou as a means of positioning himself closer to a pan-African authority and authenticity, Jean makes his appeal to the politics of authenticity without evoking the religion. By utilizing the Kreyole language, evoking Haitian locales and history,[38] and describing Haitian-American experience, Jean insists that the cultural specificity of Haiti is (or should be) a source of not only pride, but also connection to other "African" experiences and struggles. However, the cultural signifiers of Haiti are inextricably linked to the cultural specificity of Vodou which, in a cyclical turn, are inextricably linked

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[38] In "Jaspora", one of the Kreyole songs of the album, the lyrics mention "Toussaint" and "Dessalines", referring to two historical leaders of Haiti. Both François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines were leaders in Haiti's Revolution (1791-1803). Interestingly, both are also now *lwa*, or gods who appear in Vodou possession rituals. For more discussion of the symbiosis between Haitian history and Vodou practice and cosmology, as well as a discussion of the "afterlife" of Toussaint and Dessalines in Haitian Vodou, see Joan Dayan's *Haiti, History and the Gods* [Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995].

back to the discourses and history of Haiti. The lack of visible Vodou in Jean's work is thrown into relief by the Carnival theme that runs throughout the album. It is hard *not* to make a connection between Jean's *Carnival* and the annual Haitian festival of *Kanaval* with its undercurrent of religious practices. The "Carnival" of Jean's album exhibits many of the characteristics of Afro-Caribbean festivals— including Haitian *Kanaval*—operating as an elusive, subversive force, a place where "anything can happen"[39]. Running through the album are a series of skits and interludes in which Jean himself is on trial for being a "player" a "bad influence" and above all a "revolutionary". In this court narrative, the music of the *Carnival* album is cited as evidence of his ability to "incite riots". Again, it is hard *not* to recall the real riots incited by numerous *Kanaval* and Rara performances in Haiti, including those of Boukman's "Ke'-M Pa Sote".

In the interludes in which Wyclef stands trial for inciting riots with his songs, there also runs a theme or trope of confusion, ambiguity, and misunderstanding. Mistaken identity is part of a play with language and sound, prevalent from the very first track of the album "Intro/Court/Clef/Intro" where Jean himself is mistakenly identified as someone else. This trope of mis-naming and misunderstanding remerges in the interlude "Closing Arguments", where the District Attorney of the skit misunderstands Jean's defense. In "Closing Arguments" the voice of the D.A. is heard reiterating the connection between Jean's subversive (criminal) behavior and the music of the Carnival; "In closing, ladies and gentlemen of the jury / I'm not gonna sit here and bore you with a long, drawn out story / Or excuse, of why I think Wyclef is guilty / I'm gonna stand by the exhibits as well as the tapes." He then proceeds to list many of the songs of the *Carnival* album as evidence of Jean's guilt. Jean's defense responds in a heavy Haitian accent; "Ok, uhh, ladiessss, and gentle-men, of the juwy / As you can see nuttin has been proven here today / Deez witnesses dey brought ere don't not have evidence / To incriminate my client eh? / If he's not guilty he's innocent

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[39] This phrase, "anything can happen" is repeated throughout the *Carnival* album and is the title of one of the album tracks.

/ If he's not detrimental to the society therefore he positive! / As I say before, dis case is pure bishop." Here speech becomes a marker of identity (namely Haitian or American) even as it is shown to be a mode of communication that occasions moments of subversion or risks of failure altogether. By introducing a character who speaks in heavily accented English, the album generates speech which circumvents the norms and conventions of "official" English and the institutions it represents. This evocation of "types" of speech performs in much the same way that *pwen* functions to form coded communication in the vernacular, everyday speech of those living in Haiti. The word "bishop", causes some confusion in Jean's playful audio-court as the prosecutor counters; "Your honor see, this, this is exactly what I'm talking about / I mean I've been meaning to ask this the whole time / Who the hell is bishop? / And why the hell hasn't he been brought on the stand?" The response to his question is undeniably comical; "Bishop, bishop, not true, false, bishop". And finally comprehension dawns for the prosecutor; "Ohh, bullshit!" In this humorous interchange, misunderstanding stands in for conclusion and the listener is left not knowing what the outcome of the trial is to be as the interlude dissolves into the final songs of the album.

Although never explicitly articulated, it is clear that Jean's album *Carnival* has spurned the oppression of those who would limit its revolutionary nature simply by achieving circulation. Dissemination of the music of *Carnival* is the antidote to the arbitrariness, confusion and misunderstanding of institutional oppression represented by the court and trial theme of the album. Arguably, Jean's work plays with ambiguity, evoking yet another form of double speak as the sometimes incendiary and sometimes revolutionary nature of Haiti's *Kanaval*, with all it's religious significance, is overlaid with Jean's overtly Haitian-yet-not-Vodou *Carnival*. Given the cultural references to Haiti in Jean's work, it is hard not to see his *Carnival* as a secularized version of Haitian *Kanaval*. Elizabeth McAlister defines Rara music, from whence Jean admittedly draws his musical

inspiration,[40] as consisting "of an outer, secular layer of Carnival "play" surrounding a protected, secret inner layer of religious "work" (31). I am not seeking to imbue the sometimes marked lack of Vodou in *Carnival* with intentionality, but would argue that the strictures of popular music production—allowing Jean to evoke pan-African and Black National discourses that derive concepts and images of subversion and connection from representations of Haitian identity—inevitably creates ties to the signifiers of Haitian Vodou. In Jean's work the signifiers of the cultural specificity of Haiti surface and those of Vodou are submerged but, arguably, the connections between these signifiers make enough noise to sustain the thread of Vodou groove.

It is difficult to speak of the carnivalesque without referencing Bakhtin's convincing analysis of the folk culture of the Middle Ages. His conceptualization of the degradation of the carnival certainly speaks to ambiguity, subversion and inversion: "To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously in order to bring forth something more and better" (21). However, further analysis of Bakhtin's work reveals an uneasy sense of an essentialized identity expressed in the context of the carnival as a momentary subversion (or transcendence) of hegemonic Foucault-like dominance. Instead, carnival or *kanaval* can be seen not as a moment of subversion but as a continuation of the very ethos of the Vodou religion, something that simultaneously challenges and reinforces hegemonic control. Offering an alternative view of Carnival, Richard Burton explains that:

> Carnival is viewed [...] less as a ludic subversion of society "as it is" than, in Victor Turner's useful term, as a "magical mirror" of it; less as a ritual of reversal than [...] as a "ritual of intensification" in which the forces that govern ordinary life are expressed with a particular clarity, and eloquence. (157)

It is this view of Carnival that fits an analysis of Jean's work. In part, the subversive quality of Jean's *Carnival* parallels the structures of Haiti's *kanaval* where the authority of institutional power (the court theme in Jean's album) is

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[40] See, for example, an interview with Wyclef Jean in, Robert Everett-Green, "Wyclef Gets Heavy in Haiti", *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Canada: July 29, 2004. R3

mirrored in such a way as to reveal its problematic and arbitrary power. As Averill explains, *kanaval* is:

> the most important crossroads of music and power in Haiti. The *kouday* ambience of carnival, the tradition of *chan pwen* in carnival songs, the powerful impression made by tens of thousands of lower-class Haitians in control of the streets, and carnivalesque (Gede-esque) exuberance (obscenity, exaggeration, verbal play, parody, excessive consumption, the grotesque, debasement, sexuality, license, transgression, masking, conflict and Signifying on hierarchies) all contribute to an event that is potentially threatening to the state. (154)

Despite the power plays that occur over *kanaval*, the subversion of the carnivalesque as it is expressed in many Afro-Caribbean societies lies in the ambiguity it creates around cultural signifiers. It is this ambiguity that is expressed by the lack of explicit Vodou in Wyclef Jean's *Carnival*. The cycles between production and reception of popular music create social networks in which concepts, images and identities circulate along with the musical commodities in which they are embedded. Through this circulation, signifiers and images are transfigured, sometimes accruing unforeseen meaning. Stretching between the performances of "Ke'-M Pa Sote" in Haiti in 1990 and the production of an album such as *Carnival* by a diasporic Haitian are a series of images, concepts and evocations, all of which take on different significance in differing contexts and generate differing processes of identification with the cultural specificity of Haiti despite a temporal and spatial remove from that nation. In this way, an album such as *Carnival* can work to transmit the religious and cultural specificity of Haitian Vodou even while making almost no reference to the religion. Although references to Vodou in *Carnival* are largely absent, the very last image in Jean's album insert depicts him dressed in a suit and leaning upon a cane. Here Jean is unmistakable in the typical garb of *Gede*, a Haitian Vodou spirit or *lwa*, who always appears at *kanaval* and, among other things, is a trickster.

Vodou groove offers tricks of transmission, a means by which Vodou cosmology is disseminated not as authentic or inauthentic, but as a string of

cultural signifiers that shift their meaning according to context and place. The work of Boukman Eksperyans, Vodu 155, D'Angelo and Wyclef Jean represent not only products of a complex system of cultural commodities and commodification, they also signify production within that system. The representations of Vodou levied by these commodities do not offer a unified picture of the religion, nor a unified means by which Vodou identity could be structured or articulated around the markers of identity encoded within Vodou-in-music. Instead they make connections that span not only space but also time, insisting on the reclamation of a lost or fragmented cultural memory while at the same time fragmenting any notion of cultural unity. The virtual networks articulated by Vodou groove constitute spaces where the multiple strands of signifiers and multifarious practices of signifying coalesce for a moment. Like the other texts of which it speaks, this text is an act of Vodou groovology, the "study" of Vodou groove, the point, or *pwen*, of which is to insist upon another node on the thread of Vodou groove as Vodou weaves itself into theoretical frameworks, popular culture and global markets. Vodou groove infects the pathways of musical production, spreading along these paths in ways that subvert any notion of Vodou as a powerless social force. Vodou groove is not simply music. It is also the sounds, sights, and sense of Vodou transmitted across time and space through the vehicles, the *chwal*,[41] of popular culture. Vodou groove is the tracks that lead from *kanaval* to *Carnival*, criss-crossing the globe irrespective of borders or boundaries. Vodou groove is the dust of these tracks, the dusting of authenticity that is authorized by discourses that challenge the very notion of authenticity and purity, even as they insist upon virtual spaces of community, connection and solidarity. Vodou groove is the way in which Vodou insinuates itself into popular culture and global markets, infecting "world music" discourses and cannibalizing these same discourses—forever blurring the boundaries between the authentic and the imitation. What Vodou groove *is* is ambiguous because it exists in ambiguity, it means different things in different places, and it means multiple things in many places. Vodou groove is a celebration of that which is not fixed or static. It is a

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[41] The "horse" or host "mounted" by the *lwa* of Haitian Vodou during the rituals of possession.

celebration of the surprise and indeterminacy of syncretism. Vodou groove translates the specificity of Haitian Vodou to the reality of transnational music production, a carnival writ large where, to quote the double speak of Wyclef Jean, "anyt'ing can happen."

Coda: Taxi Talk or Fieldwork on the Go

On entering a taxi in Montréal, I find myself making conversation with the driver. He asks me where I am from and I reciprocate the question. On learning that he is from Haiti, I ask him from what city in Haiti he comes from. Through glances in rear view mirrors we are having a conversation in motion that is not quite face-to-face. He tells me he is from Port-au-Prince and asks me if I know Haiti. "A little," I say. "I know Boukman Eksperyans," I tell him. "Ah Boukman," he says with a laugh, "you know Boukman?" "Yes, I know Boukman." In this brief exchange I send my own *pwen*, or at least, I participate in a type of coded communication that perhaps only needs to occur between members of an often secret and stigmatized religious group. In Montréal, in the brief exchanges that happen in everyday life, "knowing Boukman" is code. It is a code which signifies allegiances, sympathies, a certain favorable outlook toward the Vodou religion and toward the politics associated with *mizik racine*. The Haitian diaspora is a diverse place. While it is commonly thought that the vast majority of Haitians practice the Vodou religion (or serve the *lwas*), there is a rise in Protestant religions both in Haiti and among the Haitian diaspora.[42] In addition, the long held attitude of the elitist movement in Haitian culture, which posits Vodou as a folkloric tradition of both the poor and the past, continues to be highly derisive of Vodou labeling it as a crude and archaic cultural practice, the complex demands of which keep those who embrace it in poverty. Those who feel that Vodou is part of the Haitian problem, or who, in an embrace of Protestantism, feel that Vodou is a superstitious practice, will

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[42] See Karen Richman's "The Protestant Ethic and the De-Spirit of Vodou" [in *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America*, Karen I. Leonard et al (eds), Walnut Creek, Calif: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. 165-187].

generally not, at least in casual conversation, admit to "knowing" Boukman Eksperyans, with a laugh or a smile. On the contrary, there are those whose derision of Vodou lies so near the surface that they cannot help but speak against it. The invocation of the band Boukman Eksperyans is a communicative code that operates in Montréal far from the local specificity of Haiti where popular music signifies allegiances, making those allegiances visible, if only for a moment.

Visible Vodou: Examining the Ephemera

A Vodou clairvoyant is said to have the gift of "eyes," which is the ability to discern spiritual power, pwisans, where others see only matter.
Donald Consentino, "Doing Vodou"

The literal and virtual movement of the Vodou religion in North America—via the spiritual marketplace, cyberspace, and routes of migration and immigration—is almost always accompanied by an uneasy traffic in "voodoo". As an intrinsic aspect of North American popular imagination, voodoo has come to modify a host of popular representations and commodities that seem to bear little relation to the religion itself. The word voodoo, bound up with the fraught history of Haitian-American relations, summons a multitude of assumptions and associations that become condensed into the minutia of voodoo ephemera that circulate via the channels of popular and commodity culture. Most of these popular representations and cultural commodities seem easy to dismiss as misconceptions, misinterpretations, or stereotypes of the Vodou religion. Certainly, stereotypes of Vodou abound in popular culture. Voodoo dolls, zombies, and graveyard rituals are only some of the images that have come to be associated with voodoo in the North American popular imagination. Yet these images are not so easily discounted when tracing the pathways Vodou traverses in the course of its burgeoning growth in North America. Increasingly, popular forms of voodoo can (and do) generate points of access for newcomers who find the religion by following the sometimes circuitous routes suggested by the circulation of cultural commodities. An analysis of popular forms of voodoo can reveal the ways in which these images and artifacts, no matter how seemingly removed from Vodou, carry something of the ethos of the religion embedded in their form. While some may argue that popular images, stereotypes and "misspellings"—such as the colloquial double "o" spelling of voodoo—render the Vodou religion itself invisible, I argue that regardless of how Vodou/voodoo is popularized or commodified, artifacts in popular culture generate moments of

visibility for the Vodou religion. This visibility is delimited by the multiple histories and narratives distilled into those commodities that connect themselves to and are aggregated by Vodou. As these artifacts circulate through multiple social spheres, they become resources for religious practitioners who both draw popular representations of Vodou into the religion and police these same representations as authentic or inauthentic. How practitioners understand these artifacts becomes part of a process of religious identification contingent on how practitioners recognize, evaluate, or transfigure commercial objects. Vodou in contemporary North America is definitively marked by the collision between circulating popular forms of voodoo, and a network of practitioners actively engaged in processes of evaluation.

Vodou (or voodoo) has a large presence in popular culture. Not only a repeated trope of film, television, and popular music, it is a ubiquitous modifier of a plethora of pop culture artifacts. An excavation of popular forms of Vodou/voodoo—what can be described as ephemera, including comic books, spell kits, voodoo dolls, and other "kitsch"—can elucidate how the Vodou tradition is both transmitted and transfigured by popular representations and commodities. Such an excavation is not without risks. As Donald Consentino explains, "Vodou suffers from our ignorance, but more seriously from our presumption of knowledge. Pins in dolls, sexual orgies, devil worship, black magic: we ascribe such a farrago of nonsense to 'voodoo'" (1996:2). The risk inherent in looking at those images, masquerading under the banner of voodoo and popularizing or even debasing the Vodou religion, is that this act of looking reinforces the very stereotypes that a critical understanding of the religion seeks to undo. Yet an analysis of colloquial forms of voodoo can reveal not only the negative perceptions associated with it, but also a complex discourse of transfiguration, re-appropriation and reclamation that merits further attention.

The word voodoo is used in varied and seemingly heterogeneous ways in popular discourse, although it is generally meant to evoke a sense of

primitiveness, exoticism, and sometimes even subversion. When one speaks of voodoo science[43] or voodoo economics,[44] voodoo is being used to conjure up notions of falseness, trickery, and fraud. Such phrases imply that those who *believe* in that which voodoo modifies (a particular brand of economics or science, for example) are uncritical or easily taken in. Although seemingly distanced from religion altogether, such uses of voodoo implicitly presuppose that voodoo (and by implication Vodou) is a false belief. This derogatory use as an adjective connoting charlatanism, even if used in ignorance, may well have its roots in negative stereotypes of the religion and may indeed perpetuate such stereotypes through its use. However, when the term is used to brand non-religious objects—from clothing lines,[45] to car parts,[46] to gaming software,[47] music accessories,[48] and computers—it evokes something different, often suggesting the image of alternative culture or a sense of exoticism. Certainly, voodoo is not the only religion to figure in the commercial processes of branding and advertising. As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King point out in *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, the structures of the "spiritual marketplace" not only commodify aspects of religion and religious practice, but also utilize religion as a tool in the branding of business enterprise (141). Carrette and King suggest that via the structures of capitalism and corporate interest, religious and cultural signifiers are imbued with a "cachet value" that can benefit businesses that connect their products to religious symbols and discourses for corporate gain. Indeed, corporations that incorporate voodoo into their brand name seem to be tapping into a particular image of voodoo not only as exotic,

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[43] Notably, "voodoo science" is used in the title of Robert Park's book *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud*, Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[44] "Voodoo Economics" is a term most often used as a critique of "Reganomics". Most famously used by former US president George H.W. Bush, the term is now in use as a criticism levied against the economic policies of the current US administration (as of 2006).

[45] See, for example, http://www.voodoodolls.com.au/ (last accessed July 6, 2006).

[46] See, for example, http://www.teamvoodoo.com/Voodoo/Knobs.html (last accessed July 6, 2006).

[47] For example, "Voodoo Vince" is a Microsoft video game for the Xbox platform released in 2003. Vince is a "voodoo" doll who must, during the course of the game, overcome obstacles, including zombies. There are numerous other examples of computer software brands that make use of the term "voodoo".

[48] For example, the company Voodoo Lab makes amps, pedals and other music accessories under the company name. See, http://www.voodoolab.com/ (last accessed Jul 6, 2006).

rebellious, and cool, but also as powerful. Such companies align their products with a conceptualization of voodoo as a potent (if secretively and mysteriously so) source of power meant to induce a desire in consumers for not only the product but the image voodoo lends to a brand.

Voodoo PC, as its name implies, is a company that produces and sells high-end, luxury personal computers and media systems. While their marketing material never explicitly addresses the use of voodoo in the company's brand name, they clearly play upon many of the ideas often associated with popular images of voodoo. The machines designed by Voodoo PC are often referred to as "exotic"[49] and shoppers can choose from computer models named "Rage", "Omen", "Hexx", and "Idol". The Voodoo PC "Doll" is a small computer workstation designed to be portable. Their laptop models are called "Envy". Such product subtitles align well with the Voodoo PC brand, capitalizing on ideas such as danger, anger, idol worship, voodoo dolls, and hexing that are often associated with popularized concepts of voodooism. In addition to the language used to describe them, Voodoo PC products are also marked with tattoo-like graphics depicting bold "tribal" patterns, further linking the company to exotic (ethnic or black) images of an alternative culture and differentiating themselves from status quo business-style computers. To further the reach of their brand, Voodoo PC offers an on-line boutique—or what they call a "Vootique"[50]—which sells items of clothes sporting Voodoo PC logos, tribal graphics used on the computer casings and even the popular iconography of the voodoo doll, which is the logo for the "Vootique". How does this image of voodoo, accompanied as it is by notions of magic and tribalism, come to function as part of the branding strategy for a highly technological product? In part, Voodoo PC and other companies who brand themselves with the term voodoo are capitalizing on what voodoo can evoke in a consumer. As Zygmut Bauman suggests in *Globalization: The Human*

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[49] From the press section of Voodoo PC's website: "the new Voodoo home is the birthing canal of our *exotic* machines that will not only change your mind on what a computer is all about but hopefully the entire world's" (http://www.voodoopc.com/company/companyPage.aspx). Last accessed July 6, 2006. Emphasis mine.

[50] http://www.cafepress.com/vootique (last accessed July 6, 2006).

Consequences, in the climate of contemporary consumer culture, "[c]onsumers are first and foremost gatherers of *sensations*; they are collectors of *things* only in a secondary and derivative sense" (83). Thus, what voodoo evokes (a sense of exotic or mystical power, a coolness that lends itself to a must-have feeling) validates the technological superiority that Voodoo PC seeks to promote. Without delving into a discussion of the demographic Voodoo PC may be targeting with their conglomeration of branding and nomenclature, it is clear that companies like this are marketing image, sensation and even affect, as much (if not more) than they are marketing product. This process of marketing disseminates a certain image of voodoo dependent on a constellation of ideas, images, and concepts associated with the word. The Voodoo PC company illustrates how voodoo, used as a branding tool, can signal a type of "cool" based on the sense of exotification and glamorization of whatever artifact, idea, or group of products to which voodoo happens to be attached. But how are we to understand this use of voodoo, so different in tenor and tonality from its pejorative use in phrases such as voodoo science and voodoo economics? Do these varied uses of the term, and the different images that they invoke, represent different voodoos, distinct images of popular voodoo circulating in North American culture? And what do these popular narratives have to do with the Vodou religion? The answers to these questions are complex, but reveal an intricate interaction between the use of voodoo as adjective or brand and the signs and signifiers of the Vodou religion itself.

The roots of this interaction are located, at least partially, at the juncture of colonialism and racism that delineates the history of Haitian Vodou. During the colonial period, an image of Vodou/voodoo as an exotic, dangerous, and primitive religion sprang up, often perpetuated from colonial and racist ideologies and the economic interests that benefited from such ideologies. Successive phases of colonial rule in Haiti lead to a myriad interpretations of the religious practices of the place. In his essay "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou", Laënnec Hurbon suggests that many popular conceptualizations of Vodou can be traced to

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American contact with post-revolution Haiti. The relationship between Haiti and the United States has long been a fraught and highly politicized one, a tension that perhaps intensified as Haiti moved from a French colony to an independent nation. Since Haiti was the only Caribbean colony to enact a military overthrow of a ruling colonial power, Hurbon suggests that negative images of Vodou crystallizing during this period were fed, in part, by a deliberate attempt on the part of American politicians (among others) to portray Haiti not only as a primitive but also vengeful and dangerous nation. Labeling the newly formed, predominantly black nation of Haiti as "uncivilized" and dangerous suggested that Haitian independence was a fundamentally flawed endeavor. This image of independent Haiti as dangerous and uncontrolled, in turn, provoked a colonialist fear of the spread of unrest and uprising to other colonies and paved the way for foreign control—often in the form of American invasions and interventions—of Haiti. As Hurbon explains, "[w]ith slavery still prevailing throughout the Caribbean, as well as in the U.S., it was necessary to isolate and strangle Haiti so as to avoid all contagion of the bad example it represented by the escape of slavery" (183). Foreign unease with Haitian sovereignty, a problem which plagues Haiti to this day, undoubtedly led to the production and dissemination of many negative images of Haiti and Haitian Vodou. Hurbon argues that the structures of slavery that underpinned the development of the American nation created strife between Haiti and America as Haiti struggled to overthrow the legacy of slavery on its own terms. Hurbon notes that even after the Civil War in the United States, the racism that circumscribed Haitian American contact was far from losing its intensity (183). American politicians and military officials, who were conditioned by an American history of slavery and a systemic denial of black civil rights and freedoms, had difficulty understanding the predominantly black nation of Haiti as a sovereign nation of free citizens.

The complex interplay between racist ideology, concepts of nationhood, and sovereignty intersected with the political, economic, and military will of the United States during American occupations and interventions in Haiti, and

structured the way in which Haiti and Haitian Vodou was apprehended and subsequently represented by Americans. Given this context, many stereotypes about Haiti and Haitian Vodou as primitive, dangerous, and exotic were "hardened off" at those moments when Americans have been in the most direct contact with Haiti, namely during the US military occupation from 1915 to 1934, the interventions in 1994, and perhaps also in the most recent intervention of 2004.[51] As Hurbon explains, the history of racism and slavery as well as the intersection of Christianity with American ideas of nationhood means that "from the moment that the United States becomes interested in the military and political domination of Haiti, it already holds a ready-made ideology toward Vodou, which it interprets as an expression of a state of barbarism from which the Haitians must be delivered" (183). And as Joan Dayan elaborates in "Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods", "It should not surprise us that during the American occupation, from 1915 to 1935, tales of cannibalism, torture, and zombies were published [...] What better way to justify the "civilizing" presence of Marines in Haiti than to project the phantasm of barbarism?" (14). Images of Haitians as barbaric generated during this time were further fed by a conceptualization of Vodou as a motivating factor behind Haitian uprisings and revolutions.

During the American Occupation (1915-1934), American military linked Vodou to the activities of the Cacos, a peasant resistance force that sought to oust the US military from Haiti. By linking the Vodou religion to the Caco resistance fighters, the threat of anti-American violence instigated by the Cacos became a justification for the persecution not only of the resistance fighters, but also of the religion itself (Hurbon 188). The anti-Vodou message generated through this military strategy and preserved in writings by American military leaders of the time, was rife with images of Vodou as dark, menacing, primitive and yet exotic and was carried across the globe, in no small part via journalistic, anthropological,

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[51] It should be noted that while the 1994 and 2004 interventions in Haiti were predominantly US led, other countries, under the umbrella of the United Nations, have participated significantly in issues of Haitian sovereignty. Canada, in particular, has played a major role politically, militarily, and economically in the most recent interventions that saw Haiti without an elected government from February 9th, 2004 to February of 2006.

and travel writing. Writings penned by American marines in particular caught the attention of a global audience. As Hurbon illustrates, texts such as *The White King of La Gonave: The Cult of Vodou in Haiti 1915-1929* (1931) written by Lieutenant Faustin Wirkus, an American marine stationed in Haiti, received wide public interest in America and Europe. Hurbon explains the reach of this interest; "there had been articles written in French, German, Italian, Icelandic, Russian, Czech, and even Japanese on Wirkus" (188), who attained his fame, in part, by regaling an interested European and American public with stories about how he was worshipped like a "king" by the "primitive" inhabitants of the isolated region of Gonaïves, in Haiti. Through the writing of Wirkus[52] as well as a journalistic interest in the lives and stories of such individuals, a pervasive and particular image of Haiti and Haitian Vodou was disseminated to a global audience in the first half of the twentieth century. This image was comprised of stories of cannibalism, black magic, and erotic rituals, all of which had, as their basis, a particularly racist and Christian-centric understanding of black and Afro-Caribbean religious practices. These sensationalistic accounts were designed for a Western audience for the purposes of entertainment and propaganda, serving to further support military interventions in Haiti.

It would be easy to suggest that the misrepresentations of Vodou generated through the institutions and ideologies of colonialism, invasion, and racism, are simply that—misrepresentations. Yet to do so would be to fail to account for the epistemological structures of Vodou, and the ways in which these structures shape how practitioners come to understand and interact with "misrepresentations" of their religion. Vodou is a religious system adept at reabsorbing problematic images and concepts, transfiguring them into religious images, artifacts, and even cosmological figures. For instance, it is not uncommon for figures of a colonial past to re-emerge as gods, or *lwa*, in the Vodou pantheon. Sometimes called "*les dieux de circumstance* or *de politique*" (Dayan 1997: 21), these emergent gods

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[52] Others who wrote notable travelogues during this time were William B. Seabrooke (*The Magic Island*, 1929) and John H. Craig (*Cannibal Cousins*, 1932; *Black Baghdad*, 1932).

represent both colonized *and* colonizer identities. One such character is a *lwa* by the name of Captain Daybas who, prior to his incarnation as a lwa of Vodou, was a United States Marine. As discussed by Milo Rigaud in *Tradition voudoo et le voudoo Haïtien,*[53] when Captain Daybas visits contemporary Vodou practitioners via the conduits of possession, he and those possessed by him can speak only English (not Creole, like most of the *lwa* of Vodou) (1997:23). The ritual of possession thus creates a space for the (extra-somatic) "remembering" of the characteristics and attributes of a colonizer. It would be easy to categorize Captain Daybas as an anomaly, an individual historical figure who, perhaps, inspired admiration in the Vodou practitioners who then "remembered" him into the Vodou pantheon. Joan Dayan however, offers another explanation for this *lwa*: "It has been said that the rigor, authority, and cruelty of the American Marines so struck the Haitian imagination that many of the foreigners' qualities showed up in the contours or expressions of other loa" (23). Dayan suggests that figures such as Captain Daybas are not so much anomalous, as symptomatic of a process by which the characteristics of "dominant" culture (be this the culture of French colonialism, the culture brought by American Marines, or a contemporary culture of consumption, for instance) are incorporated into the religion as fragments of memory. The rituals of possession revitalize this memory, making it relevant and resonant for present-day practitioners. As Dayan explains:

> Whenever Captain Daybas appears, history is in some sense reconceived and made part of the present political and economic scene. God and servitor speak the memory of a particular colonial relation in all its caprices of power: we are pressed to think again about any ideology of domination; about the peculiar relation *between* those who called themselves "masters" and those who found themselves "servants". (23)

Constituted (at least in part) under the conditions of slavery, Vodou gathers the remnants of an economic system predicated on the disenfranchisement of a people into a complex assemblage of signifiers and symbols that simultaneously remembers the horrors of slavery and sheds the shackles of such memories. In the

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[53] Known in English translation as *Secrets of Voodoo* (NY: Arco, 1969).

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same way that historical figures are "reconceived" in the present, objects are also transfigured through the praxis of Vodou. The transformation of mundane into sacred, of mass produced objects into objects of ritual power, so characteristic of Vodou, is acutely visible in the visual spectacle of the Vodou altar.

Finding Darth Vader in Brooklyn

Vodou altars constructed for the *lwa* are multilayered spaces filled with objects, icons, and images. Each *lwa* has particular objects associated with him or her and so someone familiar with the iconography of Vodou can often "read" an altar, identifying the *lwa* for which a particular altar is constructed, or even recognizing the "work" that objects on an altar are meant to accomplish.[54] Although the multiple signifiers found on Vodou altars may be legible (due in no small part to their proximity to each other), they are by no means consistent. Vodou altars are filled with varied objects—from the most intricate and carefully crafted religious items to the most mass-produced items—that have become inscribed with complex meanings. In *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, Joan Dayan describes the multitude of objects she encounters in a *honfour*[55] in Haiti. Among the numerous items and images, Dayan sees an iron ball and chain, a startling evocation of the legacy of slavery embedded in a sacred space. Despite the not uncommon physical presence of the remnants of slavery, Karen McCarthy Brown suggests that "slavery is a topic virtually never voiced in Vodou ritual. There are no Vodou songs that make use of the Creole words *esklav* or *esklavaj*, slave or slavery. Yet slavery is constantly being referred to and commented on in Vodou ritual technologies" (2001:32). In the space of a Vodou altar, the remnants of slavery become part of a visual lexicon that speaks to the centrality of history and

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[54] For example, items of food may be placed on an altar as a form of sacrifice; photographs and scraps of paper with writing on them may signify "intercessions" requested on behalf of a practitioner.
[55] Colloquially, *hounfor* is sometimes used to refer to an entire Vodou temple but more often references an inner compartment of a temple that is specifically devoted to altar space. The temple as a whole is more usually known as a *peristyle*. One *peristyle* may house multiple *hounfor*.

memory to the practice of Vodou. Objects such as the ball and chain are not used simply to evoke memory but to draw memory into the present so that it may be utilized as a resource for Vodou practitioners who transcribe their own experiences and struggles onto the narratives condensed into the visual languages of Vodou. Dayan suggests that the collections of "stuff" found on (or in) Vodou altars exemplifies "a particular way of putting things together; condensing epic stories into visual claims on the imagination" (xii). For Dayan *hounfor* are spaces of "absorption, renewal, and adaptation", the images in them part of "a visual encrustation, where things thought disparate or incongruous appeared simultaneously, and on an equal footing" (xv). Dayan's work illustrates how the legacy of slavery, powerfully evoked by the ball and chain in the Haitian *honfour*, is reabsorbed into the cosmological structure of Vodou, not as a simplistic memory of slavery itself, but as a way of re-channeling the power of domination back into the religion.

The process of reabsorption and transfiguration of mundane objects into artifacts that perform ritual function is not limited to the physical fragments of Vodou's historical past, but encompasses all manner of items. In a Vodou altar located in a back room of a botanica[56] in Brooklyn, I glimpsed not a ball and chain, but, unmistakably, the gleaming black plastic figure of Darth Vader.[57] He sat impassively in among bottles, woodcarvings, photographs and scraps of paper, chromolithographs of Catholic saints, bowls of liquid and coins, and a large crucifix. Here Darth Vader was being made congruous with the *lwa* Ogoun. Ogoun the warrior is not a single *lwa*, but rather a family of *lwa* who share similar characteristics. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Ogoun can act as a vehicle for remembering the fraught and multifarious military and political history of Haiti and so, "to explore these issues as fully as possible, Ogoun has subdivided" (96). Although belonging to the same

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[56] Botanicas are stores, common to many black and latino neighborhoods in North American cities, that sell ritual products and supplies.

[57] Interestingly, in the imagery documented in the seminal catalogue *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Darth Vader also appears, but as part of a Bizango altar, as a stand in for the *lwa* Bawon Samedi. (302)

"family" of spirits, each Ogoun—Ogoun Balin'dio, Ogoun Ferraille, or Ogoun Shango,[58] for example—has his own characteristics and signifiers. When I spied the Darth Vader figurine tucked onto the unmistakable Ogoun altar at the back of the botanica, I thought immediately of Ogoun Ferraille, although the maker of the altar refused to specify which Ogoun exactly his altar was for. Ogoun Ferraille is a fierce and physical god, associated as his name implies with the properties of iron (as well as the technologies and craft necessary to forge this metal) and is often portrayed with a sword, a common accoutrement of many of the Ogoun. Ogoun Ferraille, like all the Ogoun, is syncretic with "Sen Jak" or Saint Jacques, the Catholic saint who fought in the Crusades. Thus, even in his more Catholic guise, Ogoun Ferraille represents a history of war and militarism. While the image of the Crusades evokes the traditional iconography of a warrior equipped with sword and shield, the iconography of the *lwa* of the Vodou pantheon, including that of Ogoun Ferraille, is continually "updated". Ogoun Ferraille, when he manifests not only via ritual but also through the representations collected for him on Vodou altars, transposes an archaic image of the warrior onto more contemporary images of battles circumscribed by the modern tools of technology and industrialized culture. In this way Darth Vader, who marshals both the archaic (and spiritual) disciplines of the warrior as well as futuristic, technologized weaponry, becomes a fitting "representative" for Ogoun Ferraille in the diaspora.

In the spaces of the diaspora, Ogoun's sword is transformed into a laser (or, more properly, a light saber) and the signifiers of Ogoun are transposed onto the artifacts of pop culture. To some, Darth Vader may "read" more like an iconic "bad guy" than an iconic warrior, making his presence on a Vodou altar—a religion readily associated with negativity, darkness and even malevolence— somewhat disquieting. I would argue, however, that the menace and (literal) darkness associated with the fantasy character of Darth Vader is not lost on the Vodouist who situates him on an Ogoun altar, not far from a lithograph of a

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[58] Shango is the name of a Santeria deity. Ogoun Shango, when appearing in Vodou rituals, marks a growing interconnection between Santeria and Vodou in the diaspora.

Catholic saint. In the "visual encrustation" of a Vodou altar, Darth Vader is recouped but not necessarily redeemed. On the contrary, Vader, in the context of an Ogoun altar, may well signify the paradox of the power of a warrior (or, more generally, of military might), which can corrupt and confuse those that wield it. In the narrative of Star Wars, Vader's character is somewhat ambiguous, his allegiances somewhat tenuous. Indeed, Vader's story bears at least some passing resemblance to the stories of those warriors of Haitian history: Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Touissant Louverture, Henri Christophe. Considered fathers of the Haitian nation, Dessalines Touissant and Christophe distinguished themselves during the Haitian Revolution, rising through the ranks of the revolutionary army to become the early leaders of the young nation. In the cosmology of Vodou, these historical characters have become linked to the Ogoun family of Vodou spirits, embodying the ambiguities of power relations in both Haitian history and contemporary Vodou communities. As Brown explains:

> Through the countless Ogou possession-performances that occur in Haiti and in Haitian immigrant communities each year, many around Ogou's feast day in late July, Haitians remember their paradoxical military and political history. They preserve and analyze its lessons and apply them to the places in their own lives where power is the issue. (1989b, 96)

By conceptualizing Ogoun as a tool of memory, Brown suggests that the structures of the "possession-performance" collapse the meta-narrative of history into the specificities of character and narrative. In this way, the multiple and complex layers of Haitian history become condensed, sedimented, or shorthanded into the practices of possession-performance. The Ogoun encompass the political and military history of Haiti, but the narratives that the Ogoun disseminate through ritual are not romantic or nostalgic. Instead, they tell of a military and political history of uneasy alliances, un-kept promises, and betrayal.[59] The complex, bittersweet, historical narratives and contemporary significance of national figures such as Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Touissant Louverture

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[59] For further discussion of Haiti's history, see Joan Dayan's *Haiti, History and The Gods* [Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995]. See also, "Virtual Vodou Part I: Mediated Vodou" for a more detailed discussion of the historical figure of Jean-Jacques Dessalines and his role in the cosmology of Vodou.

become caught in the costume, gesture, songs, and "props" that signal their arrival as *lwa* in possession rituals. While these *lwa* seldom represent romanticized ideals of military might and national prowess, their appearance in possession allows practitioners to visit both the archetypal warrior and the historical persona, characters who have tasted both victory and defeat, slavery and monarchy, and who generated knowledge, narrative, and a host of signifiers out of the ambiguity that exists between the identities of empowerment and disenfranchisement.

Similarly, the iconic figure of Darth Vader has come to signify both the corruptibility of power and a search for redemption and return, a narrative that aligns well with those of the Ogoun of Vodou. However, Vader's ambiguity extends beyond the narrative of Star Wars into the complex discourses that surround pop culture production and dissemination. Although tempting, as Vader sits gleaming black on a Vodou altar, it would be far too simplistic to suggest that Vader's literal blackness stands in for black identity and its connections to the history and cosmology of Vodou. It is, however, worth remembering that Vader, as represented on film, has always been somewhat of a racial hybrid; a white character (in the Star Wars narrative) given voice by the (iconic) black actor, James Earl Jones. In this hybridity, Vader once again touches upon the ambiguity of Ogoun who is, like Captain Daybas, sometimes understood to be a white deity. When whiteness comes into contact with the cosmology of Haitian Vodou, it does so by carrying all the tension of a history of colonization—and the ensuing master-slave relationship—into the present. Darth Vader, absorbed into the context of a Vodou altar, can signify multiple ambiguities, the power of the warrior wielded for either good or ill, the sometimes dubious benefits of technological "progress", and the complex hybridity of blackness and whiteness represented by the Ogoun themselves.

In many ways Darth Vader is an apt icon for an Ogoun altar. However, such a pop culture "stand in" for Ogoun is not entirely unprecedented. Ogoun is a prominent figure in Haiti, where icons signifying him are constantly "updated" to

reflect his contemporary influence. In "It's All for You, Sen Jak!", Donald Consentino observes, for instance, Haitian taxi drivers paying homage to the *lwa*, in sometimes "flamboyant obeisance," by painting "the image of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo on the back of tap-taps" (247). [60] The use of pop cultural icons such as Rambo or Darth Vader in Vodou practice and iconography is not dissimilar from the use of mass produced lithographs of Catholic saints, also a characteristic aspect of Vodou practice. As Consentino explains, the mass reproduction of an object such as the chromolithograph of a Catholic saint, rather than diminish its spiritual potency, enhances it:

> Mechanically reproduced by the millions, these lithographs are nonetheless sacred, in the same way that millions of St. Christopher medals, or knickknacks stamped with the Virgin of Guadalupe are sacred in popular Catholicism. Their commonness does not render them common, nor their ubiquity vulgar. Rather their availability is a sort of miracle, a proof of the divine presence encoded in the mysteries of lithography. (246)

The "encoding" of divinity in the production of lithographs of Catholic saints has its parallel in the encoding of Ogoun in the figurine of Darth Vader that appeared on a Brooklyn Vodou altar. In both cases, mass produced objects are revisioned. This revisioning allows practitioners to see cultural commodities as sacred objects. For Vodouists this is an intrinsic part of a religious cosmology that regularly condenses complex social, historical, and spiritual narratives into single signifiers. The ideology that underlies this process of revisioning mass-produced cultural commodities stands in opposition to many (Western) critics of commodity culture who suggest that commodification inevitably leads to social alienation.

In part, what critics of commodity culture target as alienating is the scope of post-industrialized production. Mass production, like mass media, is charged with separating individuals not only from production, but also from social consequences. But perhaps something else is happening in the workings of the massive machine that is global capitalism. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin suggests that what is diminished in

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[60] Tap-taps are decorated buses that can be found in most Haitian cities.

the age of mass production is the proximity of the copy (the mass produced object) to its original. For Benjamin, this separation of copy and original dissolves the "aura" of the original, its particular history, its location in a specific time and place. Though the dissolution of specificity is one consequence of mass production, there is a power in the repetition of mass production that can amplify the signification associated with objects produced *en masse*. Theorists of language and orality have explored how repetition carries a certain social force by creating new possibilities and meanings within shifting social contexts. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. speaks extensively about the role of repetition in black vernacular traditions where signifying (or what Gates has also called doublespeak) is a mode of repetition that encodes black difference. Gates relates repetition, central to the processes of signifying, to the structures of jazz music and particularly the play of improvisation. Improvisational repetition in music or in language situates the same signifier (or sound) in differing contexts; "in this sort of revision, where meaning is fixed, it is the realignment of the signifier that is the signal trait of expressive genius" (64). Doublespeak is predicated on the understanding that not all similar "sounding" speech acts carry the same force within discursive systems. In other words, doublespeak assumes, contrary to the Habermasian ideal of consent, that the same utterances can (and even should) carry sometimes radically differing meanings.[61] If this notion of repetition is mapped onto the repetitious production of the cultural commodity, it possible to understand how the very unmooring of the copy (or the repetition) from its original allows it to accrue a doubled meaning, one which is shaped by the very contexts (or social spheres) into which that repetition or copy falls.

It is through repetition that signifiers used to subjugate individuals and groups can acquire new signification, new layers of meaning. In her analysis of speech acts in *Excitable Speech,* Judith Butler explains that a "disjuncture

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[61] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. Frederick Lawrence, and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987. 199

between utterance and meaning is the condition of possibility for revising the performative, of the performative as the repetition of its prior instance, a repetition that is at once a reformulation" (87). For Butler, repetition has the potential to reformulate not only the efficacy of a particular speech act, but the relationship (of authority and insecurity) that speakers have to the force of historicity embedded in that speech. One of the most obvious instances of this repetitious form of doublespeak occurs when slurs or stereotypes are repeated, recouped or reused by those who are habitually subjugated by them. This is a form of speaking through and speaking back that potentially severs such slurs from their subjugating origins (93). Extrapolating on this framework, stereotypes embedded not only in language but also in cultural commodities and mass media can be recouped, repeated, and reused by contemporary Vodouists. Understanding repetition as a facet not only of speech but of commodity culture itself allows for an exploration of how commodities not only amass multiple and complex meanings as they circulate through multiple social spheres, but also how they can function to constitute social relatedness (rather than the social "disembedding" often theorized by critics of commodity culture). [62]

Darth Vader is a recurring symbol in Western popular culture, found not only in his cinematic form but mimeographed onto countless surfaces and molded into numerous objects. When this repetitious image appears in plastic figurine form on a Vodou altar in Brooklyn it does not loose the meanings it has acquired in mainstream popular culture, but gains new layers of signification. In the transition from mundane to sacred status, the mass-produced object carries the narratives of popular culture into the sacred discourses of Vodou, merging the two in a complex play of signification. But can the same transformation undergone by a Darth Vader figurine in Brooklyn occur with images and artifacts of voodoo, those objects that carry misrepresentations and sometimes blatant stereotypes of the Vodou religion? Are these images, artifacts, and representations recouped and transformed in the same way that the mass-produced lithographs of Catholic

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[62] "Disembedding" is a term used by Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991].

Saints are absorbed into the Vodou religion? Can the often troubling representations of voodoo be absorbed into the religion in much the same way that the actual shackles of slavery become part of the visual lexicon of the Vodou religion? Or do popular images of voodoo perpetuate unredeemable stereotypes of Vodou and dilute the religious tradition through the process of cultural appropriation? The answers to these questions are not simple or definitive. While I would argue that popular representations of voodoo can form a compendium of quasi-knowledge about the Vodou religion that often acts as an initial point of access for newcomers to the religion, voodoo is still a problematic term. Undoubtedly, not all images of voodoo are absorbed into the religious cosmology and those that are transfigured into religious artifacts or imbued with religious signification are not necessarily all submitted to the same processes of absorption. In addition, Vodou practitioners themselves often resist the colloquial use of the term voodoo in popular culture, deriding the term as debasing and offensive. Several well-known *mambo* and *houngan* (priestess and priest) have circulated (mostly online) petitions decrying the use of terms such as "voodoo science" and "voodoo economics", asking public figures to apologize for debasing the Vodou religion and to retract their use of such offensive terms. On the political front, both Vodouists and Haitians are quick to respond to associations made between Haiti and negative uses of the term voodoo. In 1999, when US Senator Jesse Helms accused the US government of "subsidizing witchcraft" by allowing the USAID[63] program to fund "voodoo ceremonies" in Haiti,[64] there was strong reaction from many prominent members[65] of the North American and Haitian Vodou communities, who were quick to point out the offensive nature of Senator Helms's use of the term voodoo and his equation of the Vodou religion with "witchcraft". Precisely because of its negative connotations, voodoo is policed within North American Vodou communities. Even so, as Vodou gains global

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[63] United States Agency for International Development

[64] See Don Bohning's article "US Subsidizing Witchcraft, Helms Complains" in the Miami Herald, March 15th, 1999.

[65] See, for example, the prominent Houngan Max G. Beauvoir's rebuttal to Helms's comments at http://www.vodou.org/senator_jesse_helms.htm (last accessed July 6, 2006).

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traction in the spiritual marketplace, it is often sold alongside a voodoo that merits closer attention.

Corporate Voodoo: Revisioning the Commodification of Religion

An examination of popular representations of voodoo collides not only with efforts from within Vodou communities to police such representations, but also with scholarship which sees the intersection of faith, popular culture and commercialism as either incommensurable with or as a debasement of religion. In *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, R. Laurence Moore argues against the still pervasive insistence that North American culture is a characteristically secular one, suggesting that this insistence stems from a discomfort with commodified religion; "much of what we usually mean by speaking of secularization has to do not with the disappearance of religion but its commodification" (5). The rhetoric of anxiety, that surfaces in the works of many critics of the "culture industries", around the "mass deception" of individuals living in a world progressively more homogenized by cultural commodification and mass media, plays out in scholarship that critiques what seems to be the increasing commodification (or even commercialization) of religion. In *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, authors Jeremy Carrette and Richard King—aligning themselves with the work of scholars such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer—suggest that free market ideology is increasingly encroaching upon and indeed, constituting, all aspects of cultural expression (including religion) "without the conscious knowledge or consent of society as a whole" (ix). In addition to suggesting that the processes of cultural commodification lead to the unconscious deception of social beings, such scholarship also manifests a tendency to view religion as a thing of the past. Max Weber's influential assertion that the forces of modernization led inevitably to the "disenchantment of the world"[66] contributes to an understanding of religion as a

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[66] See, for example, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [Talcott Parsons (trans.), NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958] and *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* [H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), NY: Oxford University Press, 1946].

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pre-modern concern that has been (or will soon be) replaced by the rituals of consumerism and the "enchantments" of commodities, mass media spectacles and entertainment. This notion of religion-as-past, along with a failure to critically account for forms of visual and material religious practice, has resulted in scholarship that tends to disavow the ways in which popular religious practice interconnects with such modern developments as industrialization, the emergence of mass media and new technologies, and an increasingly globalized consumer culture. Such an approach disallows the possibility of analyzing the complex ways religion and commodity culture intersect.

In part, the unease surrounding commodified religion stems from the idea that that which is touched by the processes of commodification cannot have an "aura" of authenticity. The commodification of religion, it is sometimes thought, creates inauthentic religious artifacts, practices, and even belief systems. Yet religion has always been part of global trade and economic systems. In many religions (including Vodou) the conducting of religious practices (or services) and the circulation of sacred artifacts are an intrinsic part of a culturally specific system of commerce. Vodou practitioners are expected to pay a *mambo* or *houngan* (priests or priestesses) for certain spiritual labor including the making of *wanga* (or spells), initiations, and divinations or "readings". Similarly, *mambo* and *houngan* take responsibility for the practitioners in their congregation or community, providing them with help and support, sometimes financially. Even the *lwa* themselves are occasionally offered money (although the amount is usually symbolic) in return for certain services. The *lwa* Azaka—a Vodou god symbolically and literally connected to the complex investments (both actual and emotional) in farming and agriculture—is particularly concerned with systems of commerce and finance. Azaka often appears in the typical garb of a Haitian "peasant" or farmer and as such he represents connection to the land as well as to the ancestors of the Vodou community. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains in *Mama Lola*, although he is rooted in the geographic and cultural specificity of Haiti, Azaka is an important *lwa* for Vodouists who live in the diaspora partially

because he reinforces connections to Haiti as well as to networks of community and kinship in the diasporic context "where there is an inevitable tendency to break old relationships and seek out new and more profitable ones" (37). By trading in the currency of interpersonal connection, as well as the more tangible economics of the successful harvest, Azaka signals the symbolic import of commerce in Vodou, where financial success for the individual is always balanced by a spiritual and social obligation to an extended family and community. As Brown explains, in Azaka's "hands money takes on quality as well as quantity" (69). In Vodou, economic exchange is imbued with spiritual value and situated in a complex social interplay of generosity and reciprocity. Practitioners experience religion and commerce as interconnected both through faith-based conceptualizations of economic exchange or financial gain and specifically through religious practices of consumerism and materialism. In *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, Raquel Romberg explores what she calls the "spiritualized materialism" of the healing spiritual tradition of brujería:

> brujería has elevated material acquisitiveness and desire for success to a higher moral and spiritual order of aspiration. Indeed, burjos and their followers see material and spiritual progress as well as the attainment of high social status as not only morally legitimate quests but also visible signs of being "blessed" by the spirits, in addition to being a spiritual "calling" and a godly duty. In this space Puerto Rican brujería has become a form of "spiritualized materialism", which does not imply that it has adapted to a capitalist-invested materialism but rather that profit and success (under capitalism) can become infused with an ultimate moral purpose, once spiritual forces are believed to have intervened in achieving these goals. (2)

For religions such as brujería and Vodou, forms of commerce are commensurate with the systems and epistemologies of faith. As Vodou grows, both in terms of a burgeoning number of new practitioners and in terms of a growing visibility in the spiritual marketplace, practitioners transfer the small-scale commerce that governs the interactions of local Vodou communities to the global stage. Thus, the commodification of Vodou, although not unproblematic, is not antithetical to the ethos of the Vodou religion. However, the still prevalent assumption that

commodification debases or dilutes religion is an inherent characteristic of the context in which contemporary Vodou circulates.

Romberg's analysis of "spiritualized materialism" contrasts sharply with the analysis presented by Carrette and King in *Selling Spirituality* where the investment of profit and success with spiritual purpose is understood predominantly as a form of cultural and religious appropriation:

> Like the selling to private companies of public utilities and services in our modern neoliberal economies, such as gas, electricity, water, healthcare and transport systems, the material and cultural 'assets' of the various religious traditions are being plundered, 'downsized' and sold off as commodities. 'Religion' is facing a 'takeover bid' from the business world, without the protection of the state. (16)

Certainly, Carrette and King are coming to the analysis of religion and the marketplace from a different perspective than Romberg. They are concerned not with how particular religions adapt themselves to conditions of consumerism and commercialization, but how practices of consumerism and commercialization avaristically draw on religion for profit. However, these two seemingly separate impulses—that of religion to become commercial and that of corporate industry to commercialize religion—are not necessarily as divergent as they seem. It is true that the flip side of religious consumerism is a set of commercial and corporate practices that increasingly draw on religious signifiers, symbols, and sometimes even ideology to further their own "brands". This "corporatization" of religion, can often manifest as cultural appropriation of the worst kind. Yet the insistence that the commercialization of religion has a negative effect on religion—that it damages it in some way—reveals an underlying assumption that religions, particularly those that have a history of social marginalization and disenfranchisement, are inherently powerless institutions. This assumption underlies much of the work of Carrette and King who, citing works such as *Corporate Voodoo: Principles for Business Mavericks and Magicians*,[67]

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[67] Rene Carayol and David Firth, *Corporate Voodoo: Principles for Business Mavericks and Magicians*, [Oxford: Capstone Publishing Ltd., 2001] is a text written by "business strategists". It

determine that business discourses co-opt "a popular image of voodoo" "to promote corporate ideology and success" (144). Carrette and King suggest that this use of voodoo as part of the processes of branding disassembles and even replaces the complex specificity of the Vodou religion with a corporate brand of voodoo, rendering Vodou-as-religion invisible. As Carrette and King rightly observe, the authors of *Corporate Voodoo* never clarify how their "Voodoo" business philosophy "relates to the people and traditions of Haiti" (144). For Carrette and King this failure to account for an authentic Haitian Vodou in the context of a corporate strategy that masquerades as a spiritual quest is symptomatic of the "silent takeover of religion" by corporate interests. However, the text that Carrette and King cite as a primary example of the dilution of the Vodou religion in the marketplace is, perhaps, not as entirely divorced from a religious ethos as Carrette and King suggest.

In fact, the introduction to *Corporate Voodoo* does attempt to illustrate how the "corporate voodoo" business strategy relates to a religious tradition, offering readers a originating myth for the Vodou/voodoo religion, locating Africa as its birthplace and generating an image of a belief system that is inherently subversive (a means by which West Africans were able to resist the totalizing effects of colonialism and imperialism) (3). After positioning Dahomean Vodou[68] as a belief system born out of resistance to the hegemony of colonialism, Carayol and Firth go on to explicitly connect their idea of "corporate Voodoo" to the history of the slave trade, the loss and dislocation that engendered and the

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is part of a growing genre that suggests the need for a mind-body-spirit connection to achieve success in business.

[68] It has been suggested that Haitian Vodou is "descendent" from the West African Yoruba-Dahomean belief systems (etymologically "Vodou" is thought to be derived from the Dahomey term for spirit; "vodoun"). While the authors of *Corporate Voodoo* adopt this "origin myth" of Vodou, the idea that Afro-Caribbean religions are simply derived from African religious traditions can obscure the discontinuities between African and Caribbean religious traditions. For further discussion of this see Stephan B. Glazier's "Contested Rituals of the African Diaspora" and Sidney M. Greenfield's "Recasting Syncretism...Again: Theories and Concepts in Anthropology and Afro-American Studies In Light of Changing Social Agendas" [in *New Trends and Developments in African Religions*, ed. Peter B. Clarke, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998] and Richard D. E. Burton's *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997].

spiritual continuity Vodou created in the New World for those dislocated by slavery. These wide-reaching connections are made in a startlingly short segment of text:

> From the 1600s until the close of the 18th Century, between eleven and fifteen million black people were removed from Africa by the slave trade.
> Voodoo was a way for its practitioners to get back to something natural, instinctual, reverential - something earthy and elemental, something with a bite and a rhythm and a groove to it, something hot, something joyful, something that would make you shout out loud, something that could transport you back home. Corporate Voodoo offers a similar promise. (3)

While the connection made between a history of Afro-Caribbean spiritualities forged in the disenfranchisement of slavery and a notion of the "promise" of corporate success seems, admittedly, somewhat spurious, the connection between the "Voodoo" of *Corporate Voodoo* and the Vodou religion is far more tangible, and indeed more recognizable than Carrette and King indicate in *Selling Spirituality*. While it is clearly not the intent of Carrette and King to fully explore the commercial circulation of popular forms of Vodou, their insistence that commercialization inevitably dilutes "authentic" religions (144) until they are unrecognizable or disconnected from their "true" form makes it difficult to understand the significance of religious references and remnants found in popular cultural representation, productions and commodities. *Corporate Voodoo* is not a representation of the Vodou/voodoo religion that is easily celebrated. It offers problematic (and to some, undoubtedly offensive) representations of Vodou/voodoo as a system of determining business practices rather than a religious faith. Yet the image of Vodou/voodoo offered in the pages of *Corporate Voodoo* is not a wholly negative one. Although sometimes ambiguous,[69] on the whole *Corporate Voodoo* disseminates an image of the religion as something subversive and empowering. While most would pick up a book such as *Corporate Voodoo* in order to further individual or corporate financial success, the opening text of the book may also act as point of access to the Vodou religion itself.

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[69] In *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life* [Thousand Oaks, Calif, Sage. 2005], Steven Pile discusses the ambiguities of *Corporate Voodoo*'s business strategy. 86-87

Certainly, many newcomers to Vodou first learn of the religion via popularized images of voodoo that contain no more than fragmented references to the Vodou religion (if that) much like those found between the pages of *Corporate Voodoo*. Although it is easy to see the discourses of popular culture as appropriating religions, it may be useful to try and reverse this perspective. Perhaps *Corporate Voodoo* is not simply appropriating an image of voodoo for commercial gain but perhaps something of voodoo/Vodou is appropriating the workings of popular culture for its own gain. The infusion of large-scale commercialism and commodification with spiritual purpose and intent is an extrapolation of an epistemological system that has allowed Vodou to circulate through dominant and sometimes hostile cultures. With a long history of marginalization and disenfranchisement, Vodou is adept at piggybacking on other social, religious and even economic systems.

"Vodou never talks about Vodou": Visible Invisibles

When speaking with one young neo-Vodouists, Aliah, who I had met via the corridors of cyberspace, I asked her what she thought of *Corporate Voodoo*, handing her a copy. Aliah had already shared with me how she came to Vodou via a host of signs and signifiers, including, most notably, an episode of the X-Files that examined the mysteries of Haitian Vodou (episode 2:15, "Fresh Bones"). She glanced at the cover—which depicts a black and white photo of a disembodied pair of hands, almost obscured by a haze of grey smoke, playing an African drum with the word Voodoo emblazoned in red splattered ink—and laughed. "Pretty typical." "Yes." I agreed. She was quiet for a few minutes while she flipped through the pages. Then she turned to the back cover leaf where a picture of the authors, René Carayol and David Firth, was located. "Huh. Maybe he is a Vodou," she said, pointing to Carayol's photo. "Why do you say that," I asked. "Because he is black?" "Maybe," she said. "And his name is French. Like he might come from Africa. And he talks about African Vodou." "So," I asked tentatively, "you don't mind this book?" "Mind," she asked, "why?" "I don't

know," I fumbled, not wanting to put words into her mouth. "How would you compare it to that X-Files episode?" "Oh, that was better," she said. "More researched." And then after a pause she added, "but this is okay." "Really?" I asked. She laughed at my incredulity, or perhaps my transparency. "Well, it is okay if this guy is a Vodou guy." "And if he isn't," I asked. She laughed again. "Seriously," she said, "I'm no *mambo*, so maybe...but this doesn't bother me. Why should I care if this guy writes a book that says that Vodou is gonna help you make money? Half the people who go to *mambo* and *houngan* are asking for money and it works." "Vodou works?" I clarified and she nodded. "But the authors aren't really talking about Vodou," I argued, "except a little at the beginning." "Nobody talks about Vodou," Aliah retorted. "Vodou never talks about Vodou. Everything is serving the *lwa*, the mysteries...we don't ever go to Vodou ceremonies, we go to marriages, birthdays."[70] "I guess so," I acquiesced.

In a few short minutes Aliah decoded *Corporate Voodoo* and situated it on a continuum of authenticity—or perhaps more specifically congruency with the Vodou religion. Using signifiers such as blackness and African ethnicity, she quickly decided that the book was "okay". For her, *Corporate Voodoo* is "nothing great"—it isn't "well researched" and does not provide her or others with much valuable information about Vodou—but she doesn't find it overly offensive either. Certainly, others would find this representation of voodoo/Vodou more offensive or at least problematic. The variance that exists in how individuals respond to and evaluate a pop culture voodoo both speaks to the diversity that exists among Vodouists and to the diversity of practices, ideas, and ideology that falls under the rubric of Vodou. This is not to so much suggest that pop culture voodoo is accepted verbatim (as it were) into the practices and ideological circumference of the Vodou religion, but that it is often approached with an understanding of the ways in which Vodou superimposes itself onto other cultural and religious systems. This transcription of Vodou onto other cultural signifiers

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[70] "Marriages" and "birthdays" refer to spiritual marriages (between a Vodouist and a *lwa*) and birthday celebrations for the *lwa*, which usually occur on the same day as the corresponding feast day of the Catholic saint with who the *lwa* is syncretically connected.

and systems can render Vodou invisible, but this invisibility is strategic and the processes of coding and decoding required to make Vodou visible are part of an epistemology by which Vodouists come to understand the place of their religion in the world. Well aware of the negative stereotypes of Vodou, Vodouists not only occasionally mask their own religious practice or affiliation in ambiguous language or covert practice, they also "read" Vodou into their world—making equally ambiguous language, images, and objects perform a Vodou that may be only visible to some and even then visible only some of the time.

With a long history of persecution, Vodou has been a secret and secretive religion for much of its history. The persecution of Vodou in Haiti occurred not only under colonial rule, when the religious practices of African slaves were outlawed, but also continued after the Haitian revolution. "Anti-superstition" campaigns perpetuated in the 1940s by the Catholic Church in Haiti involved wide-spread destruction of temples, articles and any objects associated with Vodou as well as the persecution of *houngan* and *mambo*, in an effort to encourage Haitians to abandon the religion.[71] Even after the 1950s, when the Catholic Church halted its official campaign of intolerance, less-systematic and sporadic instances of the persecution of Vodou have occurred until the present day. The anti-Vodou sentiment so obviously present in Haiti had its parallel in the US, where the persecution of New Orleans "Voodoo" and other African-American spiritual practices has had an equally long history.[72] In 1987 Haiti adopted a constitution that guaranteed the rights of individuals to practice any religion and while such inclusions have contributed to the increased visibility of Vodou, the religion is still characterized by a secrecy that can render it hidden and invisible in many social contexts. Many scholars have suggested that the originary Catholic syncretism intrinsic to Vodou historically operated as a way for

[71] For further discussion see, Laënnec Hurbon's *Les Mystères de Vaudou* [Paris: Edition Gillimard, 1993] and David Nicholls' *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Color and National Independence in Haiti*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979].
[72] See, for example, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992] and Kimberly Hanger's *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans*, 1769-1803 [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997].

Vodouists to hide or "mask" their religious practices from slave owners and Catholic missionaries.[73] While many would argue that syncretism in Vodou has a more deep-seated cosmological significance than the mere "masking" of the religion, Vodou is adept at wielding secrecy and invisibility as viable strategic tools for its practitioners. For Vodouists, there is power in secret knowledge and strength in invisibility.

Vodouists are not the only religious community to strategically benefit from the invisibility that can characterize religious practices and beliefs that do not receive public attention. In *Between Jesus and the Market: Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America*, Linda Kintz explores the role of women in right wing Christian religion in the US. Kintz argues that stereotypical images of women meant that the role of women activists in what some see as the growth of right wing conservatism was often ignored. Kintz suggests that the trivialization of conservative women's activism

> actually worked to their advantage, giving them a cover of invisibility for a wide range of effective organizing, which recalls the invisibility that descended over fundamentalists and evangelicals after the Scopes trial of 1925. At that time, secular observers presumed that their influence had been contained once and for all, only to discover that they had simply gone into hibernation to build up very effective church communities, grassroots organizations, and national networks, the results of which we see all around us. (3)

This notion of religion working "under cover" is an apt one for Vodou, which has historical propensity to thrive during periods of persecution.[74] Vodouists use invisibility as a strategy, as a means of co-existing in a society that may be hostile toward their religion. Vodouists in North America, for example, often adapt the precepts of their religion, transfiguring overt markers of Vodou into subtle signs that are recognizable primarily to those familiar with the religion. In Canada and the US, unlike in many places in Haiti, feast days for the *lwa* of Vodou are

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[73] For further discussion see Leslie Desmangles' *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

[74] Many Haitian Vodouists recall a growth in Vodou immediately following the anti-superstition campaigns of the 1940s. There are similar memories of Vodou thriving under colonial repression.

celebrated inside, often in basements, so as to hide gatherings and rituals from outsiders.[75] This adaptability is not without its problems, often causing stresses and strains on a community that must work hard to preserve continuity with a Haitian Vodou "homeland" while negotiating the conditions of the diaspora. However, the transfiguring of objects and images to serve a spiritual purpose is an intrinsic part of the praxis and cosmology of Vodou. When these transfigured objects are "borrowed" from other cultural or religious symbol systems, or from mass-produced pop culture and mass media representations, Vodou is carried on a diverse set of images and artifacts that circulate beyond the geographic specificities of Haiti and its diaspora. Unpacking Vodou from these objects requires acknowledging the layers of meaning that become embedded in cultural commodities and popular representations.

Undeniably, popularized images of voodoo do sometimes carry negative stereotypes and misrepresentations of the Vodou religion. Yet even such instances of pop voodoo can be situated on a continuum where the discourses of knowledge and ignorance about the Vodou religion enact an always uneasy tension. This tension surfaces through manifestations of voodoo, in part, because even colloquial uses of the term are embedded with multifarious meanings. As Judith Butler explains in *Excitable Speech*, contentious names or labels have "a historicity, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name, has come to constitute the contemporary meaning of a name; the sediment of its usages as they have become part of the very name, a sedimentation, a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force." (36) Any and all uses of the term voodoo carry multiple histories, including the often-fraught histories of Vodou, Haiti, and the relationship of both to the histories of North American imperialism and European colonialism. Regardless of how the signifier voodoo is employed, regardless of what it is attached to, it disseminates

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[75] For further discussion of the ways in which ritual practices of Haitian Vodou are adapted to the conditions of the diaspora see Karen McCarthy Brown's "Staying Grounded in a High-Rise Building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou" [in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999]. 79-102

fragments of the religion as well as its socio-political positioning within North American culture. This "sediment" is carried along in a stream of popular commodities. Pop culture artifacts make visible the historicity of the religion, calling into question the relation of discourses of Vodou (and voodoo) to discourses about Vodou. Although the commodification of religion is often thought to dilute, debase or even secularize religious traditions (Moore 5), it also provides avenues for adaptation, allowing locally specific religious and cultural signifiers to achieve wide circulation. Popular culture allows Vodou to piggyback on economic and institutional modes of commodity distribution, hitching a free ride, as it were, on the global flow of commodity culture that disseminates Vodou well beyond the local context of Haiti.

But how do these, albeit problematic, images of Vodou, so closely tied to its Haitian heritage (and the geo-politics of Haitian independence) become unmoored from the specificity of Haiti altogether? How does Vodou become, as Joan Dayan laments in the introduction to *Haiti, History and the Gods*, "a hollowed word, a chunk of life ripped out of context and used for all kinds of popular fictions ("voodoo politics", "voodoo dolls", and "voodoo economics") (xvii)"? How are these "popular fictions" made and how do they circulate. And, even more specifically, how are these popular fictions recuperated? How do images so completely unmoored from the specificity of Haitian Vodou become specifically Vodou again? Sifting through the layers of sediment of voodoo reveals something curious embedded in popular images, artifacts, and representations—a pervasive social and arguably religious structure encoded into the grit, glitz and gleam of pop voodoo. While some scholars have suggested that popular culture itself takes on the characteristics of religion,[76] this analysis examines how popular cultural artifacts become absorbed into religious practice, cosmology and epistemology.

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[76] See, for example, David Chidester's *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* [Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005].

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There exists a complex interaction between the experiences of "neo-Vodouists", or newcomers to the Vodou religion, and circulating images of Haiti and Vodou embedded not only in media representations, but in a host of ephemera. The path that leads new practitioners, who are often unfamiliar with any aspect of the religion, to Vodou can be strewn with symbols that seem only vaguely connected to the specificity of Haitian Vodou. Encounters with representations and commodities associated with Vodou, or voodoo, and Haiti are often understood by these individuals to be signs from the gods (or *lwa*), which then become positioned in a narrative of discovery and conversion. For many newcomers to the religion the journey to Vodou—how they access or are "called" to the religion—is a very important aspect of their spiritual identity, one that they understand as commensurate with the cosmology of the Vodou religion. Embedded in the narratives of discovery and conversion of new Vodouists is a complex and critical understanding of the vectors of commodification and globalization that bring newcomers to the religion. These individuals are acutely aware of the claims of inauthenticity and cultural appropriation that can be levied at their interest in Haitian Vodou and they develop rhetorical and discursive strategies with which to answer such criticism. For those not genealogically or geographically related to Vodou, the journey to the religion can seem circuitous, marked by ambiguity.

Some come to Vodou as a result of their involvement with other religious traditions. It is not unusual for the *houngan* and *mambo* of Vodou to be fully initiated into religions other than Vodou and this concurrence of multiple religious practices by the ritual specialists of Vodou provides practitioners with access to multiple religions. For instance, A Vodou priest or priestess may also be initiated into Santería or Condomblé and as such, their sacred spaces may have altars devoted to both the *lwa* of Vodou and the *orisha* (or the *orixás*) of Santería. Similarly, ritual specialists from other religions are often also initiated in Vodou. Thus, a significant number of newcomers have been "referred" to Vodou via other religions. One now initiated *houngan* (or priest) explains his journey to Vodou as

the end result of a spiritual quest that took him first through Wicca, and then the Ifa/Orisha[77] tradition, before he was directly referred to Vodou by an Ifa priestess:

> I had always been a seeker for spiritual knowledge since a child, as a teen I was ready to put it to practice. That led to my involvement with Wicca. In my early to mid 20's a Wiccan friend who owned a spiritual store met a priestess in the Ifa/Orisha tradition. I became involved initially as a solo practitioner then I became a member of an [Ifa] house and received most initiations except for the priesthood. It just seemed to get put off. I continued to practice for a number of years (I still do) though I moved on, as I was searching. Through a reading from a visiting Ifa priestess it was revealed my priesthood was not with Ifa but in the Vodou tradition.

However, even these "referrals" to Vodou are often understood as commensurate with a spiritual calling to the religion market by material signs. Looking back over his journey to Vodou, which took him through many different religions before he became a Vodou priest, this *houngan* explains how he was guided by encounters with Haiti; "throughout my life there had always been references to Haiti or Vodou. I would stumble across Haitian art at a flea market. So, the spirits have always been guiding my life and my spiritual growth." For those coming to the religion from outside it, Haiti can signify Vodou and the signifiers of Haiti (imported to North America) can operate as points of access to the religion. Not only can images and representations of Haiti function as points of entry for newcomers to Vodou, Vodou is also synonymous with blackness for many prior to their initial encounters with the religion. Another newcomer to Vodou speaks of having a long time "affinity" for "black cultures" and "black music", suggesting that these general affinities guided her toward the specificity of the Vodou religion. For those removed not only geographically from Haiti, but also socially from black identity, the journey to Vodou is fraught with complexity. Newcomers to Vodou negotiate a complex set of signifiers that reference the transnational politics of Haitian Vodou in the diaspora, the history of Vodou in North America, and the identity politics of black religiosity. Getting to Vodou,

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[77] Ifa is an African religious tradition, sometimes referred to simply as Yoruba. Orisha is the Yoruba word for deity. For further discussion see Margaret Thompson Drewal's *Yoruba Ritual: Play, Agency, Performers* [Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992].

then, requires an unpacking of these sedimented meanings embedded in conceptualizations of Vodou.

While some are literally referred to the Vodou religion from other religious traditions, for many the path to Vodou can be even more ambiguous. One practitioner, Vanessa, speaks of "finding" Vodou through a commodified representation of the religion, a route that shapes the first encounter of many newcomers with the religion; "I was having trouble in my life, nothing was going right. My marriage was ending and [my husband] was being a jerk...I hated my job, everything just felt bad. I was pretty down. A friend gave me this doll [*The Little Voodoo Kit: Revenge Therapy for the Over Stressed*].[78] I thought it was pretty funny at the time. I admit I used it once or twice! Then I thought there might be something to it. I just googled [voodoo] and found out more and more about it and the more I did, the more I was sure that this was something that was missing from my life". Later, Vanessa told me that she felt that the seemingly innocuous and humorous voodoo doll kit had actually been a sign, a means of "opening the door" for her to the Vodou religion.

While some practitioners come to Vodou via tangentially related commodities such as spell kits or the ubiquitous Voodoo doll, others speak about being called to the Vodou religion through even more ambiguous encounters. Shelia, a mother of two, tells how she had no knowledge of, or interest in, the Vodou religion when her daughter bought her a purse for her birthday. Inside this (rather conventional) handbag was a small makeup bag with the word Voodoo scrawled across its white leatherette surface. Both Shelia and her daughter were bemused by this unexpected and unintentional arrival and they returned to the store thinking it must have made its way into the bag by mistake. But when they arrived at the store where Shelia's daughter had purchased the handbag they were told that the small voodoo purse was not an item for sale at that store. Now

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[78] *The Little Voodoo Kit: Revenge Therapy for the Over Stressed*, NY, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

officially the owner of this strange item, which was, in Shelia's words, cheap and ugly, put it in the bottom of a drawer and forgot about it. "But then," Shelia explains, "I began to see 'voodoo' everywhere." Shelia remembers buying a pair of pants, only to the notice the word voodoo stitched onto the pocket. Her son bought a CD with voodoo in the title. She recalls a friend sending her a postcard from New Orleans with a sign into the background that read "Voodoo" in large black letters. Another friend sent her a chocolate voodoo doll. Which was strange, Shelia recollects, "because I wasn't the type of person who liked such tacky stuff." Shelia insists that her friend knew that of her and yet, "just had to get me that silly doll."

For Shelia, all of these encounters with commodified voodoo, in its various forms, were a way for the *lwa* of Vodou to communicate with her. "They were trying to get my attention. They were calling me." Prior to all this Shelia, who was born Anabaptist, had no real interest in any particular religion. As she explains, "I wasn't really Anabaptist, it was just my Dad who was, and it was more like heritage than a religion, you know? We went to whatever church was close by. We went to an Anglican church for a while, when I was young, eventually we just stopped going at all." Shelia insists that she was not searching for Vodou when she first began to encounter popular forms of voodoo. "I definitely wasn't looking for anything. I do remember feeling a bit jealous of people who had really strong faith, like they were lucky. I guess I felt guilty that I didn't have a strong faith, that I didn't make an effort to go to church." Despite an apparent disinterest in religion of any sort, "Vodou found me," Shelia explains. When her friend who had sent her the postcard returned from New Orleans, she told Shelia about a tour she had taken which had explained the spiritual heritage of New Orleans Voodoo, taking tourists to several spiritual sites and botanicas, and ending up in a temple where Shelia's friend got to watch a Voodoo ritual conducted by a local priestess. It was this description that finally sparked Shelia's active interest in Vodou. She took her son to New Orleans, ostensibly to attend a jazz festival in the city, and signed them both up for the same tour her friend took.

Recalling that tour, Shelia remembers a powerful feeling of sadness; "I remember almost crying, I was so sad. Like I had lost something I really loved. Like I had forgotten something so important". When she left the tour and while waiting for her son to come out of a gift shop, Shelia, still emotional, dropped a shopping bad she had been carrying. A black man wearing a hat and walking with a limp helped her retrieve it. When she looked up again he was gone; "That was Legba," Shelia explains, "I think that was the first time I saw him." Legba is known as the *lwa* of the crossroads. He walks with a limp and a cane because he has one foot in the visible (or real) world and one foot in the world of the invisibles. He is the first *lwa* called at any Vodou ceremony and he opens the door for the other *lwa* that follow. After this encounter Shelia pursued a spiritual path in New Orleans itself, working with a priest there. She was later initiated into Haitian Vodou "because that seemed right." She considers herself to be a practitioner of both forms of Vodou.

While the journey to Vodou may be littered with ephemera that seems to instigate awareness of the religion for those newly coming to Vodou, the relationship of these popular representations of voodoo to the religion that newcomers come to know and practice is not uncomplicated. As one practitioner explains, "I was always drawn to those voodoo dolls and stuff. I had no idea that they were insulting to the religion." Thus, while the *lwa* of Vodou may provide new practitioners, obviously unfamiliar with the more "traditional" signs and symbols of Vodou, with the colloquial signifiers of a pop culture voodoo, newcomers to Vodou must "read through" these pop culture objects in order to get at the Vodou religion. The unpacking of sedimented meaning embedded in popular representations of voodoo is, in part, a decoding of a Vodou discourse that hitches a ride on the seemingly unrelated signifiers of popular voodoo. Often the voodoo ephemera which marks the path to Vodou for so many new practitioners operates purely as a point of entry and is discarded once the religion has been accessed. Occasionally, however, aspects of pop culture voodoo are reabsorbed into the religion.

Although its presence is policed by many members of Vodou communities who argue that it has no place in the religion, the voodoo doll is one such example of re-absorption. While the voodoo doll, (a classic pop culture icon reputed to exert remote control over an individual via the manipulation of an effigy) has long been a stereotype with little basis in the religion,[79] contemporary Vodouists in North America will now sometimes sell voodoo dolls as part of their spiritual enterprises. These dolls are often akin to (and sometimes identical to) the *pakèt* common in Vodou practice. *Pakèt* are cloth bundles of herbs, prepared by ritual specialists usually during the course of private work with individual practitioners (or clients), primarily for the purpose of healing. These *pakèt* resemble wide based bottles with skinny necks that are bound with thread, rope, or ribbon and are often topped with feathers, jewelry, or even small crucifixes. *Pakèt* can be "male" or "female" and female *pakèt* are distinguishable by thin branches (or "arms") that extend from the neck of the bundle. Sometimes *pakèt* are made specifically for certain *lwa*.[80] While the voodoo dolls sold by some "spiritual merchants" may take on more human characteristics, they are often filled with the same herbs, topped and bound with the same materials, and meant to perform the same spiritual work as *pakèt*. As Vodou gains in popularity and moves into the aisles of the spiritual marketplace, it is often both efficacious and profitable for those marketing the artifacts of the religion to attract consumers with the colloquial terms with which they may be most familiar. Thus, when sold *en masse* (rather than through the interpersonal and one-on-one relationships that develop between ritual specialists and practitioners in small Vodou communities), the *pakèt* of Vodou practice sometimes poses as a version of the popularized voodoo

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[79] It should be noted that dolls and doll-like figurines are not uncommon in Vodou practice. These figures are distinguishable, however, from the classic pop icon "voodoo" doll by the intent with which they are used in ritual. They are not conceived of as effigies and are seldom referred to as "dolls".

[80] There are many different forms of *pakèt* and the oft-used appellation, *pakèt* Kongo, may recall its African origins as an instrument of healing and divination. For further discussion of Haitian Vodou *pakèt* and its connection to African spiritual traditions, see Robert Farris Thompson's "From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti's Africanizing Vodou Art" [in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Donald Consentino (ed.) Exhibition catalog. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995]. 91-119

doll.[81] Often, this transfigured version of the voodoo doll becomes an opportunity to disseminate education about the Vodou religion and dispel myths, including that of the doll itself. For example, one website that sells icons, ritual supplies and other artifacts of Vodou on-line explains to consumers the difference between the sacred voodoo doll they sell and the popularized version with which many consumers may be familiar; "These sacred Voodoo Dolls are not like "Hollywood" dolls; you do not use these sacred Voodoo Dolls to harm others or "stick" pins into the Voodoo doll, they are exquisitely handcrafted to enhance your personal connection to the Divine Voodoo Spirits."[82] Sometimes, however, the use of the voodoo doll as a means of reaching out to new practitioners may slip from promulgating a conscious and carefully measured message aimed at dispelling popular stereotypes into an in-between place where the signifiers of Vodou and the popular cultural representations of voodoo no longer occupy clear polarities. Taking a closer look at representations of voodoo in popular culture lets us see what can be read into these artifacts and representations as well as what gets taken back out of them.

Pegasus, Pop and Packaging: The "Unofficial" Status of Vodou

Representations of voodoo in popular culture have a life outside of the Vodou religion. They circulate in places often far removed from the practices and discourses of Haitian Vodou. This is the case with a particular bar of "voodoo soap" (manufactured by Blue Q™) that came to me as a gift from a friend who knew of my interest in pop culture representations of the religion. The bar of soap was purchased at an obliquely named store in Toronto called Red Pegasus. Despite its name, Red Pegasus isn't a store that specializes in the mythic, nor does it stock, particularly, religious items or artifacts. But my friend, Julia, spotted this

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[81] It should be noted that the effort to make the artifacts and services of Vodou more marketable *en masse* does not always mean popularizing Vodou *per se*, but can also involve associating Vodou with other popular and perhaps more "known" spiritual concepts. This site, for example: www.bongamusic.com/paket.html clearly markets the more traditional Haitian Vodou *pakèt*, but does so by suggesting that the *pakèt* will improve the Feng Shui of the consumer's home.

[82] From, http://www.erzulies.com/authentic_voodoo.php (last accessed July 6, 2006).

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soap—which reverses curses or brings good luck depending upon how one employs it—and thought of my research. Julia, herself a proclaimed agnostic, has an odd obsession with collecting icons and although she isn't definably religious, she tells me her fascination with the icons is that they enable her to, in her words, "squirrel away these objects of someone else's faith." To Julia, however, these icons don't fall into the same category as the voodoo soap she found in Toronto; "I think the soap is a little different than the icons (or any other gaudy religious stuff). Voodoo is sort of like pop religion, people obviously don't know a lot about it so it's easier to package up and tongue-in-cheek it." Religious and seemingly quasi-religious stuff such as the voodoo soap are part of the ways in which spirituality becomes written into the semantics of commerce. Soap, baths, oils, and other cleaning products are part of the ritual work of Afro-Caribbean religions, such as Vodou and Santería, and a prevalent aspect of North American or New Orleans spiritual practices. In *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, Carolyn Morrow Long examines the (North American) charm belief of people of African descent and the evolution of a spiritual products industry of which this soap could be part.

Long traces the shift from the small-scale creation of hand-made charms to the large scale manufacture of some spiritual products. The mass production of charms and ritual artifacts would seem to signify a dilution of both the authenticity and the power of charms and artifacts hand crafted by ritual specialists. And Long does observe that, in the cases she examined, none of the rituals that usually accompany the (small scale) production of charms and spells were "performed during the manufacture of commercial spiritual productions" (103). In addition, large scale manufactures often make substitutions for the ingredients necessary to produce charms, either because substitutions are cheaper or because state institutions and organizations (such as the Food and Drug Administration in the US) restrict the use of certain ingredients. Because of the circumstances of mass production of spiritual charms, Long suggests that the power of the charms and spiritual productions lies not in the efficacy of either the

ingredients or the conditions of their making but in "the color and scent of the products, their titles, and the highly evocative images on their labels" (103). In this way, the ritual efficacy that is imparted through the processes, ingredients and materials used in hand crafted charms and spiritual objects is transferred, at least partially, to the visual culture of the mass-produced commodity. As Long explains, the effectiveness of mass-produced spiritual objects lies in the layers of symbols that accrue as an intrinsic part of the process of producing such objects *en masse*; "the users of spiritual products have transferred to these manufactured goods their belief in the properties of traditional charms, rendered magical because they are composed of symbolic ingredients and activated by symbolic rituals. Spiritual products [mass produced] are thus a symbol of a symbol" (104). It is this layering of symbolism or signification—not unlike the sedimenting of meaning that occurs when mass-produced chromolithographs of saints or plastic moulds of Darth Vader are transfigured into religious objects by Vodouists—that imbues objects distanced from the spiritual work that "traditionally" goes into their making with religious signification. As these mass produced spiritual objects circulate they accrue layers of meaning that extend beyond their religious specificity, becoming part of a complex language, coded and decoded by consumers. A bar of soap meant to bring luck or banish curses would be a common enough sight in botanicas local to many black and latino neighborhoods in North America, but is understood differently when encountered in a Toronto gift store. While Long explains how mass produced religious commodities become imbued with new layers of symbolism and meaning for certain religious consumers, even more layers of signification accrue when these specifically religious objects slip out of the specificity of particular religions. A bar of voodoo soap has been transported from a locale where it may be part of a larger cultural and religious context to a gift shop. In this apparent decontextualization, or deterritorialization, a bar of voodoo soap takes on new meaning in the traffic of cultural commodities. Such an object is transformed from a religious commodity into a novelty item or a piece of kitsch. But how does this artifact become imbued with this shift in signification? What are the processes by which Vodou becomes

recognizable and unrecognizable, visible and invisible? What are the renderings that make Vodou, as my savvy friend observed, seem easier to package up, tongue-in-cheek fashion, than the icons of institutionalized religions? The "spiritual marketplace" can create a pervasive religiosity that circulates in the commodities and commodifications of popular culture. Even if the ways in which individuals experience religious commodities are submitted to varying interpretations, they all form a collective negotiation not only of moments of religiosity but also of the hectic traffic routes which convey individuals to that intermediary space where the intensity of the spiritual marketplace demands a concurrence of multiple beliefs and knowledges.

Implicit in the pop-packaging of Vodou/voodoo is often an apparent lack of general or widespread knowledge about the religion itself. This epistemological gap—which can manifest between the religion and its representations—is bolstered by the categorization of Vodou as an "unofficial" religion. A religion without creed, or official text or binding institutional structure is potentially more susceptible to the rapid transformation in meaning demanded by the strictures of consumption in a capitalist culture. "Unofficial" religions such as Vodou intersect in interesting ways with a growing movement toward "unofficial" spirituality in North America. In *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, Robert Fuller traces the historical conditions that led to a growing movement toward religious de-institutionalization and links this movement to the growth of metaphysical religiosity and new-age spirituality. Fuller also illuminates how difficult it is for the "unchurched" to coalesce without official and state sanctioned institutions. Nonetheless, they do form groups and networks around shared experiences, practices and beliefs. Although, as Stewart Hoover points out, these practices are "increasingly disconnected from religious institutions, doctrines and histories."[83] Arguably, the traffic of spiritual or religious commodities not only facilitates but also perhaps even augments the

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[83] Hoover, Stewart M. "Visual Religion in Media Culture" [in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, David Morgan and Sally M Promey (eds), Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001]. 146-159

coalescing of new religious groups or communities sometimes labeled new age or neo-spiritualities. Neo-spirituality, like other forms of de-institutionalized religions, can encompass practices that exist both apart from and alongside the strictly liturgical structures of "official" religion, a concurrence that could also be categorized as vernacular religion. Some scholars have suggested that Vodou is a vernacular religion that has borrowed from the structures and images of Catholicism, using these to mask Vodou and Vodouisants from systemic persecution. While the suggestion that Catholicism has simply masked Vodou can be problematic, failing to account for the way that it forms an integral part of Vodou cosmology, this concurrence of seemingly conflicting belief systems within Vodou cosmology is also characteristic of neo-spirituality, or religiosity forged (at least in part) by the conditions of commodification. The commodity culture that spawns the spiritual marketplace speaks not only to the multitude of religious and spiritual signifiers circulating in popular culture, but also to something of the movement between them, the blur that happens when individuals jump from one moment of spiritual signification to another, when the boundaries between secular and sacred, even between religions themselves dissolve and become permeable. In the intensities of marketplaces, practitioners can bounce from one spirituality to another, the elements of which are so dispersed they can often be perceived only in fragments, and even then only momentarily.

Oh Brother! Subversions in Popular Culture

Often these fragments are both structured and elicited by socio-political discourses that intersect with popular representations of religion and spirituality. The comic series Brother Voodoo is a good example of such an intersection. Brother Voodoo appeared briefly in 1973 as part of the Strange Tales Marvel Comic Series. The 1970s saw a concerted effort on the part of mass media producers to characterize minorities (and particularly African Americans) in media representations. The movement, which was notable in television and film (in the "blaxplotation" genre of films, for example), had its counterpart in the

world of comics, but was not without its problematic representations. As Fredrik Strömberg explains in *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*, despite the advent of the superhero comic genre in 1938 with the introduction of Superman, "and despite the large portion of Black people in the U.S.A., there were for a long time no Black superheroes" (129) in American comics. On the contrary, black representation in comics was comprised of a series of stereotypes and misrepresentations, which served to perpetuate the systemic racism of mid-twentieth century American society. However, with the advent of the Civil Rights movement in the US, the ensuing social change of the 1960s was reflected in the world of comic books. Although the Black Panther of Marvel Comics, who first appeared as part of the Fantastic Four series in 1966, is often credited with being the first black superhero, he was cast as an African character,[84] revealing a tendency prevalent in mainstream comic book production of the time to render black representation as both "other" and dislocated from the social context of the US.[85] Still, in the world of comic book superheroes, filled with (literal) aliens and mutants, otherness is not wholly unusual.

Like the Black Panther, Brother Voodoo was one example of a growing trend to position black protagonists at the center of the action.[86] Unlike the Black Panther, who is clearly of African ethnicity, Brother Voodoo's connection to mainstream US is both more tenable and more fraught. When the reader first meets the protagonist of the comic, Jericho Drumm, he is introduced as a Haitian-born, US educated psychologist—steeped in the technoscientific and secular discourses of his adopted American home—who dismisses that which he thinks of as the archaic superstitions of his homeland. In the first issue of the series (Strange Tales #169), which details Jericho's background, his transformation into

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[84] More precisely, the Black Panther is a generic title for the African leader of the mythical Wakanda people and has had, throughout his tenure, several incarnations.

[85] While black superheroes were becoming visible in mainstream comics, black comic creators were developing companies that generated more positive images of black and ethnic comic book characters. One such company was Milestone Media, for more discussion of this see Jeffery A. Brown's *Black Super-heroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* [Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001].

[86] In addition to Black Panther (also by Marvel), others included the notable Black Lightening series by DC comics.

a superhero, and the conditions which occasion this transformation, Jericho Drumm returns to Haiti (from the US) to be by the side of his dying twin brother, Daniel. The reader is first introduced to Jericho in the context of this return and, in the broad strokes of comic book narrative, is made to wonder about both the reasons that caused Jericho to leave Haiti and those that kept him from returning for so long; "the man who stepped from the plane was not yet Brother Voodoo, Lord of the Loa and the darkling powers—but merely Jericho Drumm, author, scholar, noted psychologist—an accomplished man, granted—but today only another man coming home—to a home he has not deigned to visit in almost a score of years" (11). A few frames later, this return to the impoverished nation of Haiti from the US prompts Jericho to wonder about his childhood; "Could my brother and I really have run laughing down these mud-rutted streets barefoot? Could Daniel and I really have been happy children—while growing up in such despair? Well why not my man? Why not? The laughter of children knows no social distinction!" (12). Jericho's return to his homeland develops the narrative conditions necessary for Jericho's transformation into a superhero. By alluding to Haiti's social problems, as well as a tension between diaspora and homeland (as well as a corresponding tension between science and religion that develops later in the series), which Jericho must negotiate, issues of social injustice, the disenfranchisement of the Haitian people, and acceptance of a Haitian heritage becomes the impetus for Jericho's transformation into Brother Voodoo.

Jericho's twin brother Daniel is an *houngan*, a priest who—accepting the spiritual and cultural heritage Jericho eschewed—sought to protect his community from "spiritual darkness" and social injustice. Early on, the reader is introduced to Brother Voodoo's first nemesis, Damballah, whose curse (via the iconic voodoo doll) causes Daniel's illness and his eventual death. The narrative wavers between defining Damballah as a god and as a "zobop", a priest who practiced "the cursed black magic". But despite this ambiguity, the comic clearly draws on signifiers of the Vodou religion that are unmistakably recognizable to those familiar with both Vodou and the Haitian Creole language. Creole words such as *houngan* and

wanga pepper the pages of Brother Voodoo. *Zobop*, the word used to describe Brother Voodoo's nemesis, is a Creole name sometimes given to a priest initiated into Vodou who chooses to work with "the left hand", or toward a negative or destructive end.[87] Even Damballah would be recognizable to those familiar with Vodou, although he has been transformed from a *lwa* often characterized by a marked lack of verbosity to a wholly carnate being who, like so many antagonists of the genre, spends much time pontificating about his evil plans and extensive powers. In the Vodou pantheon Damballah is syncretic with St. Patrick and often represented through the iconography of the snake, which features prominently in the visual representation of Brother Voodoo's nemesis. These references to and signifiers of the Vodou religion embedded within the Brother Voodoo comic series can, of course, be understood simply as cultural appropriation, the borrowing of the Vodou religion for the purpose of selling comic books. However, given the number of representations of Vodou that stray so far from the religion as to be virtually unrecognizable, it is interesting to note the cultural "accuracies" embedded in Brother Voodoo. The signifiers of Vodou and the Creole terms contained in the comic book may lend the series an air of authenticity, making aspects of Brother Voodoo recognizable to those familiar with the Vodou religion. Yet the narrative of Brother Voodoo does more than simply reflect some aspects of the Vodou religion. It also develops a particular representation of Vodou that, although undeniably problematic at times, carries a rather complex message.

The narrative conditions of Brother Voodoo set up a series of conflicts, both internal and external, that Jericho must resolve in order to come into his power as Brother Voodoo. Such conflicts are an intrinsic part of the comic book genre. However, their resolution in the context of Brother Voodoo creates a rather subversive set of congruencies. To step into the superhero role, Jericho must come to accept his cultural heritage, battling an internal conflict between the successes

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[87] Although it is known *zobop* is not in common use among the Haitian Vodouists with whom I work (nor is it in use among those neo-Vodouists who gain familiarity with Creole religious terms). The more commonly used term for a priest who "works with the left hand" is *bokor*.

and achievements possible in the diaspora, and the pull of the disenfranchised and impoverished homeland of Haiti. This conflict between home and diaspora, cultural heritage and cultural assimilation, is paralleled in a similar conflict between religion and science (or, more specifically, medicine). At the start of the narrative, Jericho insists on the efficacy of his medical knowledge even as Daniel insists on the efficacy of Vodou/voodoo. Jericho asserts that "as a doctor" he will be able to cure Daniel, while Daniel insists that his illness—the result of a "cambre" or curse (15) placed on him—is incurable. Despite Jericho's emphatic insistence that Vodou curses are nothing more than "dark-age drivel", Daniel dies, beseeching Jericho with his dying breath to find a Papa Jambo, in the "jungle", "for if anyone can defy Damballah's evil, it is he" (21). Daniel's death does more than provide the impetus (namely, Jericho's desire to avenge Daniel's death) for Jericho to seek out spiritual power, it also posits spiritual power as superior to scientific knowledge. This is not an unusual supposition in comic books, which are, after all, filled with the inexplicable and supernatural. However, in Brother Voodoo this reversal of the secularization thesis (that as scientific and rational thought gain supremacy, the power religion has over individuals and groups will diminish), also renders the knowledge and education gained in the diaspora (or, more specifically, America) somewhat lacking. Perhaps inadvertently, the narrative of Brother Voodoo positions Haiti and Vodou and the cultural knowledges of both as superior to (or, at least, more efficacious than) the cultural knowledge of the US. This reversal of a dominant social order is prevalent throughout the Brother Voodoo narrative, when, for example, Brother Voodoo must continually swoop in and rescue hapless UN workers who, not knowing the land or the social layout of Haiti, constantly wander into danger. While the UN is portrayed (uncritically) as on the side of "good", it is also portrayed as weak and requiring protection, which comes in the form of an emblem of Haiti itself— Vodou/voodoo incarnate in the walking, talking form of Brother Voodoo. This somewhat subversive representation is not without its ambiguities. The comic is rife with the typical stereotypes of Vodou, including dolls, zombies and cemeteries. In addition, visual portrayals of many of the black characters in the

comic series, including Brother Voodoo himself, are full of both the primitivism and the colonial imagery that has long characterized black representation in mainstream media. For example, Papa Jambo is a barely clothed wise old *houngan*, who resides deep in Haiti's "jungle". Yet under the apprenticeship of this stereotypical figure, Jericho becomes skilled in the mystical arts of Haitian Vodou, his powers augmented to the level of comic book superhero status when Papa Jambo transfers the spirit of Jericho's dead brother Daniel to Jericho himself, rendering him doubly strong (Strange Tales #170). Brother Voodoo, now enlightened as to the true power hidden in the Vodou religion, stays in Haiti[88] and champions the downtrodden.

Brother Voodoo is filled with misinterpretations of Vodou, misunderstandings of Haiti and even missteps (including the superhero costume in which Brother Voodoo is clad, which received much criticism from fans for being offensively tribal). Critics of black representation in comics have argued that the comic book genre generates a visual discourse which juxtaposes seemingly contradicting elements in such a way as to normalize difference, making it not only less threatening, but also less distinct. Thus, black comic book characters, such as Brother Voodoo and Black Panther are in a double bind of otherness that is simultaneously rendered distinct from and hegemonized with a concept of normal that is inherently white. For both Brother Voodoo and the Black Panther, their rendering as more obvious others from Africa or Haiti neutralizes the way in which their blackness may signify otherness *within* American society. If blackness comes from elsewhere, America can still be conceptualized as fundamentally white. As Richard Reynolds explains in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, this discursive splicing is facilitated by the genre itself; "A comic book narrative or cover-design can effortlessly draw conflicting elements into a visual relationship, thus resolving any contradictions which might have seemed to exist" (77). Reynolds goes on to suggest that "[c]ontinuity, and the ability of sequential art to

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[88] Although Brother Voodoo is the superheroic champion of Haiti for most of the Strange Tales series, his "work" takes him to New Orleans (Strange Tales 172 and 173).

resolve contradictions simply by including them in the same panel, has made it difficult for any black superheroes to inscribe any ideological values of their own" (77) onto the narratives of mainstream comics. For Reynolds, the visual representations of mainstream comics insist on a particular decoding, which makes it difficult to "read" black characters, such as Brother Voodoo, as truly empowered. And certainly, Reynolds' criticism holds true when looking at the problematic images and rhetoric that abounds in the Brother Voodoo series.

However, the comic also injects a concrete and sometimes subversive discourse about Vodou into the plethora of stereotypes and typecasting. The comic series evokes a strange mixture of the everyday rituals, objects and language of Vodou practice alongside the bright, cartoon-like comic book language of the supernatural and the super heroic. Perhaps even more interesting is the way in which the Brother Voodoo comic series describes a battle between "good" and "bad" Vodou, a discourse that cannot help but evoke an ongoing struggle around Haitian Vodou and its incorporation into the often violent political discourses of Haiti.[89] The magical realism of the comic book genre also allows Brother Voodoo to generate a powerful and perhaps even empowering image of an often maligned and derided religion. The second comic in the Brother Voodoo series depicts Brother Voodoo's nemesis, Damballah, holding a "council of Vaudou". To this council all the "leaders of all of the cults of the world" have been invited to watch a demonstration of the awesome power of Damballah in action, the purpose of which is to understand that Damballah is the most powerful of all spiritual leaders. Although this event is disrupted by Brother Voodoo himself, it suggests a powerful image of the Vodou religion. The comic also plays with the notion of a global dissemination of religion as Damballah calls forth

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[89] For example, the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986) was marked by the use of the images and discourse of Vodou. Francois Duvalier, in particular, modeled his political image on the image of Baron Samedi, adopting the tone and dress of this lwa of the Vodou pantheon in an effort to make himself appear powerful and untouchable. This period is often seen as a negative time for the Vodou religion, when many houngan and mambo were corrupted by the political regime, and was followed by a symbolic and literal "uprooting" of what was seen as the negative elements of this politically corrupt use of Vodou. For more discussion of this, see David Nicholls' *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Color and National Independence in Haiti*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979].

"representatives from places where Voodoo was thought to be only a word" (14). In this interesting turn of phrase, the comic book writers of Brother Voodoo evoke not only the historicity of Vodou, but also a self-reflexive consciousness about this historicity. Vodou, in the world of the Brother Voodoo comic series, is *not* only (a vaguely recognizable) word, but a whole matrix of symbols and signifiers that represent discourses about Vodou as much, if not more, than they represent Vodou itself. The images of Vodou that are portrayed in the comic book series are undoubtedly influenced by the rhetoric of Black Nationalism that emerged in North America in the 1960s. Like the movement of a "Vodou groove"[90] instances of "visible Vodou" intersect with multiple social discourses. Through the circulation of popular cultural objects such as comic books, an image about Vodou tailored to social discourses like Black Nationalism emerges and is disseminated via popular culture.

Comic books, like all genres, have their own set of codes and conventions. However, these codes and conventions are not necessarily embedded in the comic book form, but are dependent on how comics are understood by both readers and writers. Comics such as Brother Voodoo created within a certain social context and era (specifically, the growing consciousness of the marketability of black identity in the late 1960s and early 1970s) amass different codes and conventions when viewed at a distance from the time of production. Despite its problems, Brother Voodoo is not anachronistic; it has come to accrue different layers of meaning as it continues to be part of the world of comic books (even though no longer in production as a series). As Mila Bongco explains in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, "Comics accumulate signs and meaning possibilities that do not depend on one book, but rather on a series of on-going narratives" (90). These narratives can extend beyond the pages of the comic book, into the realm of fan-fiction and (often cinematic) remakes of the comic book narrative. Although the Brother Voodoo

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[90] See "Vodou Groove (or Transnational Tricks of Transmission): The Role of Popular Music in the Dissemination of Vodou Cosmology" in this volume.

series was discontinued after just five issues (interestingly, replaced with a comic-book version of the Jewish Golem), the comic book character has enjoyed a life that extends well beyond his brief employment by Marvel. Brother Voodoo still lives on as a periodic guest in other comic series, as well as in fan fiction, through comic book collectors and, most recently, in a proposal by the Sci-Fi Channel to produce a Brother Voodoo TV-movie, and even in a bid for presidency in 2004[91].
. In the discourses produced by fan fiction in particular, Brother Voodoo has outgrown many of his more problematic characteristics and has morphed into an entity with a much more extensive understanding of the Vodou tradition and cosmology than is expressed in the original comic books themselves. It remains to be seen how (or if) the Sci-Fi channel will update Brother Voodoo for television. However, his longevity is a testament to the way in which Vodou has long captured the imagination of North American producers and continues to colonize the markets of popular consumption.

Box it Up, Ship it Out: Selling Autonomous Religion

While Brother Voodoo sells Vodou inadvertently, as a by-product of the comic book genre and the endless search for new superheroes, *The Vodou Box*[92] (produced by Chronicle Books) represents a more direct form of marketing Vodou. This artifact distinguishes itself from some of the others discussed here so far in that it uses a Haitian Creole spelling of the word rather than the more colloquial double "o" spelling. And on the surface of things, *The Vodou Box* seems much closer to "authentic" Vodou than the other examples explored so far. *The Vodou Box* is, as its name implies, a cleverly designed box that houses a "spirit bottle" which, according to the back of the box, is "traditionally used for communicating with the spirits and keeping evil and negativity at bay." The box transforms into a stepped altar meant to house the "spirit bottle" and the kit

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[91] See, for example, http://voodoo.politedissent.com/index.htm (last accessed Sept 4 2006).

[92] *The Vodou Box*, San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books LLC, 2002. [Text by Manuela Dunn Mascetti].

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includes a book that provides an introduction to the Vodou religion and instructions for conducting a "Vodou ritual". The book that accompanies the kit is extensively illustrated with Haitian art and photographs and contains information about the history and practice of Vodou. Yet the packaging of *The Vodou Box* lends the book the air of an instruction manual. And certainly, the last portion of the book functions much like one, providing directions on how to build an altar and conduct Vodou rituals. This packaging of Vodou, complete with ritual object, altar and directions for use, seems meant to provide an autonomous source of knowledge about this particular religious tradition. Although providing suggested readings on Vodou and making visual links to Vodou ceremonies, *The Vodou Box* emphasizes an individualistic and "personalized" approach to Vodou. The book encourages the practitioner-consumer to visualize, to meditate and to "whisper" their wishes to the spirit bottle. This is a quiet and private representation of Vodou practice—one that is very different from the energetic dance and music filled rituals commonly associated with the religion—but one that fits better, perhaps, with a new-age sensibility. In *A Generation of Seekers*, Wade Clark Roof describes the inward turn that seems to have characterized the burgeoning of new-age spiritualism among the baby boom generation. This symbiosis of spiritualism and psychology can generate an approach to religion and spirituality which, combined with consumerism, can lead to a religiosity that is centered on self-improvement and individual practice. As Roof explains, the bridging of the spiritual and psychological realms is acutely visible in commercial self-help products where "[s]piritual growth and mental growth are considered one and the same [...] For many in the boomer generation who did not have a religious upbringing, or who have been cut off from organized religion," such commercial products "can introduce them to religious teachings and convince them that religion—defined broadly—is not so alien after all" (70). Arguably, the combination of spiritual or religious and psychological (or more particularly, "self-help") discourses that have been packaged up in a multitude of products— from books, kits, videos and DVDs, to conferences, workshops and classes—have made spiritual and religious ideas and practices both more accessible and more

autonomous. Consumers of such products can generate a spiritual practice very much dependent on "aloneness" rather than community. Indeed, *The Vodou Box* harbors a discourse that, by defining the religion in broad and almost generic strokes, makes it both less alien and more palatable to a consumer. The introduction in the book that accompanies the text defines the complex religion in this way; "Vodou is, above all, about honoring the spirit that inhabits every living form in our world. Vodou rituals and objects are crafted to honor that spirit and to promote well-being, healing, good fortune, good prospects, and everything that adds positive change to one's life" (11). This description of Vodou is not so much inaccurate as it is selective, carefully encoding the complex and sometimes ambiguous ideologies of Vodou into a language that is very much about attaining individual success and well-being. *The Vodou Box* packages Vodou up for the individual or autonomous consumer in such a way that no extended community, congregation or ritual specialist is needed to get started. In addition, the kit allows both religious authority and expertise to reside with the end user of this product. Objects such as *The Vodou Box* clearly carry familiar and recognizable signifiers of what some would call "authentic" Vodou. But what does this packaging of Vodou do to the shape of the religion itself? Do cultural commodities such as *The Vodou Box* move Vodou from a communal practice that is orally and physical focused (as evidenced not only through the song, dance and drumming that takes place during ritual, but also through the defining ritual of possession itself), to an individual practice that is based more significantly on a material and visual piety?

Certainly, *The Vodou Box* presents, quite literally, a particular picture of Vodou. The many reproductions of Haitian art, as well as the photographs of altars and other ritual objects found in the book that accompanies the kit evoke both the materiality and visuality that can shape Vodou worship. As has been discussed, Vodou altars are filled with objects, and the sacred spaces of Vodou are adorned with icons, photographs, chromolithographs and *vèvès* (symbols drawn to sanctify a space). Both visual images and objects function as points of access for communication with the divine in much the same way as the spirit bottle included

in *The Vodou Box* is expected to function. However, this spirit bottle is removed from the busy and cluttered space of what some may call a more "traditional" Vodou altar and shipped to a consumer who may have no knowledge about Vodou other than what is provided in this kit. In fact, it is suggested that the spirit bottle be placed not on a crowded altar, but instead "should sit peacefully in an empty space" (11). Indeed, the spirit bottle of *The Vodou Box* is stripped of more than just its locatedness in the hectic signifying that goes on within Vodou altars. It is also stripped of what could have, perhaps, been its own set of signifiers in another incarnation, its "clothing". Bottles form an important part of the material practice of Vodou, as they are often made to perform (and house) *travay maji*, or magical work. However, unlike the spirit bottle of *The Vodou Box* which is painted with simple lines in only two colors, the bottles of Vodou are usually colorfully "dressed" in a host of materials—from the string that ritually binds them, to mirrors, pins, beads, lace, sequins, and other materials—all of which attach their own meanings to the bottle.

In "A Sorcerer's Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti", Elizabeth McAlister describes the complex material and ritual significance of bottles used in some Vodou practices. These bottles are often made to house ritual "work", the purpose of which is to change or alter the situation of the practitioner or client for whom the bottle is made. This ritual work, or *wanga*, performed by *houngan* and *mambo* for private clients, is not a static or temporally finite practice but a dynamic thing that continues working long after the ritual has been completed, which is why it needs to be contained in a vessel. Sometimes housing "luck" or "love" or other emotions, human conditions or intents, but often containing "spirits" as well, these vessels contain powerful magic that must be carefully mediated by the objects and signifiers that come to "dress" the bottles. As McAlister explains each "bottle is speaking in a coded visual grammar that at once obscures its contents and reveals clues about it. The accumulated materials fastened to the exterior of the bottle—its clothing—are both hiding the inside and pointing to the charged, powerful presence of what is being contained" (313). The

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messages encoded on a "dressed" Haitian Vodou "spirit" bottle do what many of the signifiers of Vodou do; they condense complex history and meaning into a small space. McAlister describes one such bottle with the Haitian Creole term "*gwo koze*" or "big talk". These bottles are packed with extensive "visual vocabulary" and "visual puns" placed to both improve and protect the efficacy of the substance contained within and to warn others "in the know" about the meaning and the power of the magical object itself (310). The exchange that occurs when a *houngan* or *mambo* makes one of these bottles for a practitioner or client is clearly absent in the context of the "spirit bottle" that comes with *The Vodou Box*. Instead, the individual user of *The Vodou Box*'s spirit bottle is encouraged to "sit peacefully" and wait for answers from "within" (89). Like the messages of the kit's text that generate a selective picture of Vodou, one that is more palatable, perhaps, to a consumer familiar with the rhetoric of self-help spirituality, the bottle has been somewhat toned down or even tamed. Gone is its heady dress of complex signifiers and absent is its sometimes ambiguous purpose (for these bottles can be used to house malevolent magic as well as more benign ritualizing). Taking an artifact, such as the spirit bottle, out of the communal practice of Vodou and situating it in the spiritual marketplace not only runs the risk of "sanitizing" aspects of the religion, but also removes the checks and balances that community provides. It is through community that the full spectrum of the culturally specific memories and historicity of Haitian Vodou can be understood, and it is through the policing of community that the powerful rituals and magics of Vodou are set within a social context that "makes sense".

While Vodou is, undoubtedly, a communal religion based on both interpersonal connections of reciprocity and on public (or at least semi-public) ritual practices, some scholars have argued that contemporary religiosity in its many forms is becoming increasingly private and individualized. Mass media and popular culture allow individuals to learn about religion almost inadvertently, scavenging religious knowledge from the ever circulating artifacts and representations in popular culture. Forms of popular culture provide individuals

with points of access to religions, but can also operate as authoritative sources, as a means of cementing certain beliefs or ideologies by packaging them up in easy-to-use forms, such as *The Vodou Box*. This can lead to a form of non-denominational spirituality where popular expressions operate as manifestations of a set of beliefs that does not reside solely in one particular religion. If one looks at *The Vodou Box* in isolation, it may well seem to be encouraging a form of private practice that seems quite antithetical to the Vodou religion. Some practitioners have expressed a concern that Vodou is increasingly being practiced as a solitary religion. One individual with whom I spoke insisted that private practice is simply not "real" Vodou; "You can't just sit in your house and call yourself a Vodouisant! You have to celebrate the *lwa* at the big feast days, with many people to help serve them, many people to prepare the food. You have to visit your *mambo*, ask her for guidance. You have to do the first rituals [*mèt tèt*, *kanzo*] outside with lots of people to watch you."[93] Another individual, however, pointed out that private practice is, in fact, a large part of Vodou; "Everybody has his small space for the *lwa* in their home. People who are married[94] have to sleep alone one night a week. If a *houngan* prepares you a bath or a *wanga*, you do it alone. You wake up on your *lwa*'s day and you think of them, get ready for them, dress yourself in their colors, light their candle...all by yourself."[95] It is true that Vodou is a religion that is often practiced and maintained in the home, and as such is private and individual at least part of the time. It is also true that Vodou is a communal religion, one that is based on community and the complex processes

[93] This contributor is speaking about ritual practices in Haiti, which are more public than those in the diaspora. The *mèt tèt* (master of the head) ceremony takes place to determine which *lwa* is the guide or protector of an individual. *Kanzo* is the first level of initiation in Vodou (although initiation is not a necessary part of being a Vodouist). While some *houngan* or *mambo* will conduct *mèt tèt* ceremonies in the diaspora, it is traditionally expected that *kanzo* will take place in Haiti.

[94] Marriage, in this instance, refers to the *maryaj lwa* Vodou ceremony, which is conducted— much like Roman Catholic marriage ceremonies—in front of an officiating priest or priestess and witnesses. The *lwa* (present through possession) and the *vivan-yo*, or the living, trade I do's and promise loyalty, service and sexual fidelity (at least one night a week) to each other. One night a week these married practitioners sleep alone so that the *lwa* may visit them in dreams and through visions.

[95] Each *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon has a particular day of the week set aside for them. Those who "serve the *lwa*" will observe those days of the week associated with the *lwa* to whom they are closest by performing private rituals at their altars and by wearing the colors associated with that particular *lwa*.

of "witnessing" and reciprocity, as well the central public event that Karen McCarthy Brown has labeled the possession-performance.

How does *The Vodou Box* fit into the public/private nature of Vodou? If *The Vodou Box* can be understood as part of the same thread of "visible Vodou" to which the other artifacts examined in this analysis are attached, it is perhaps best understood not in isolation, but as part of a matrix of objects, images, representation, discourse and practices that, by virtue of commodity culture, mass media, and communication technologies, extends the networks and communities intrinsic to religions such as Vodou. For example, like many commercial forms of Vodou, the book's introduction addresses the negative stereotypes of the religion, but what emerges is not a static or reified view of Vodou but an image of the religion as embracing change and global growth. As the book explains, "Today Vodou—and its adaptations and expansions—is finally emerging from prejudice and persecution, and is being recognized as one of the most powerful cultural movements not only in Haiti, the capital of Vodou, but also in the United States, Brazil, Cuba, and the Caribbean" (9). Later the book describes the global presence of Vodou, asserting that:

> The loa travel with priests and priestesses and have been established in Vodou churches and congregations around the world. In Brooklyn, for instance, there are several Vodou practitioners who heal everything from bad luck to the misfortunes of an accident, a lost job, a robbery, financial troubles, or an illness. In New Orleans, Vodou priestesses make sacred ritual objects that are sold around the world. Vodou today is a source of fascination, having finally emerged from centuries of obscurity. (15)

Like the Brother Voodoo comics, *The Vodou Box* presents a subversive reversal of the stereotype of Vodou as a small, geographically specific, ineffectual religious practice. Instead, Vodou is presented as culturally powerful, globally influential and individually effectual. The objects, text and visual material that make up *The Vodou Box* present a holistic image of Vodou that encodes a certain image of the tradition, one that seems tailored to a particular consumer or practitioner. But whatever else it does, *The Vodou Box* disseminates a form of

knowledge about Vodou (indeed, as the text makes clear, this is part of its "intent"), in so doing it enters into ongoing conversations about what Vodou is, and what gets to count as Vodou.

The Vodou Box, the Voodoo Soap and the Brother Voodoo comics are examples of a host of ephemera that travels the routes of commodity production, occasionally bumping into each other. An examination of these objects, along with the representations of Vodou in the processes of branding (Voodoo PC) and the corporatization of religion (*Corporate Voodoo*), reveals an intricate picture of the religion. Although they present varied images—from the playful packaging of the Voodoo Soap, to the more educational tone of *The Vodou Box*—all of these representations and artifacts generate an authoritative image of Vodou. Vodou is presented not so much as a marginalized religion, but as a religion that people like to think of as marginalized, folkloric, quaint, or even ineffectual. From the warning on the box that the Voodoo soap is "not a toy", to the text of *The Vodou Box* defining Vodou as "one of the most powerful cultural movements", to the sometimes conflicted narratives and visuals of the Brother Voodoo comics, to the must-have-it image presented by Voodoo PC, these cultural commodities and commodifications generate an empowering and even subversive discourse about this long maligned religious tradition. Through marketing and packaging Vodou comes to function as a pervasive idea, which gets reiterated with every repetition. To be sure, there are other, less empowering images of Vodou that circulate along with these artifacts, and these objects themselves are not unproblematic. However, the historicity of Vodou is constituted by the discourses produced in the space between positive and negative representations of the religion. This historicity both elucidates and reproduces knowledge, playing with the tensions that exist between knowledge and ignorance about Vodou. In this discursive space the signifiers and discourses of religion freely circulate. And it is in these intermediate and often periodic spaces that the production and consumption of the stuff of unofficial religions, such as Vodou, often occurs.

The Voodoo soap, the Brother Voodoo comics, *The Vodou Box*, *Corporate Voodoo*, Voodoo PC, countless voodoo dolls and numerous other voodoo artifacts are fragments of public and publicized encounters with a subtle spirituality. They are pieces of a large matrix of spiritual practices and religious stuff, creating recognizable signifiers or moments of signification for consumers. These often transient moments of visible Vodou not only transmit knowledge to practitioners and consumers, but also function as vehicles for the dissemination of this complex religion. As Vodou circulates throughout North America, popular culture and cultural commodities become resources. Popular culture, and the artifacts through which it circulates, becomes part of a process of religious identification. The symptoms of this process can be easily overlooked or dismissed as insignificant markers of commodification or cultural appropriation. However, an understanding of religiosity in its minutia, or its circulation via the "small stuff" of popular culture—including not only popular music, television, and film, but also comic books, action figures, greeting cards, and all manner of seemingly quasi-religious or spiritual ephemera—is vital to an understanding of the relationship between culture, religion and media. The supposed invisibility of Vodou, such a profound part of its history as an Afro-Caribbean religion, is in fact contingent on a complex system of visible and visual codes and signifiers. As Donald Cosentino points out in the quote that opens this analysis, in Vodou, power resides with those who can see what others cannot. Through the circulation of commodity, multiple layers of narratives—including the history of Haiti, the rituals and myths of Vodou, and the mercurial cosmological changes Vodou undergoes as this religion moves across North America—become embedded in both the discourses about Vodou and Vodou discourse. What emerges is a strategy that allows Vodou to be at once visible and invisible as it traverses the routes of popular representation and commodification. Vodou insinuates itself into popular culture and global markets, colonizing these systems and cannibalizing them—forever blurring the boundaries between the authentic and the imitation.

Virtual Vodou (Part I): Mediated Vodou

Refugees run the seas 'cause we own our own boats
Hips Don't Lie—Wyclef Jean and Shakira

Many *mambos* and *houngans* with whom I have spoken during the course of my research talk of the changing faces of their "houses" and "families". The growth of Vodou is common knowledge among practitioners. I myself have witnessed a sea change in the reach and appeal of the religion. Though Vodou has always attracted the interest of those who have no genealogical or geographical connection to Haiti—the spiritual centre of the religion—access to the rituals and communities of Vodou were once circumscribed by secrecy and the geographic separation of Haitian Vodou practitioners from non-Haitians. Sometime in the last decade, a host of religious seekers[96] woke up to the fact that Vodou is not something confined to the "dangerous" and difficult-to-access rural spaces of Haiti, but is being practiced daily in their own backyards, as it were. The vibrant and active Vodou communities that exist in major urban centres in Canada, the United States, France, England, and other nations around the globe have become points of access for a large number of newcomers to the religion. At the same time, practitioners have begun to mobilize media in order to educate people about Vodou, to work toward religious tolerance, and sometimes to seek new members. Media has, arguably, been an instrumental part of the contemporary growth of Vodou and the growing interest of religious seekers. Although this movement of non-Haitians to Vodou has gone largely undocumented, the Vodou religion has garnered increased visibility in multiple public spheres (both in Haiti and in North America). The recognition of Vodou as an official religion in Haiti, scholarship on Vodou in North America, and the production of large-scale cultural and aesthetic events around Vodou (such as the traveling exhibit *The Sacred Arts of*

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[96] Wade Clark Roof uses this term in *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* [San Francisco and New York: HarperCollins, 1993].

Haitian Vodou[97] or the screening of the film *Des Dieux et Des Hommes*), have all contributed to the growing visibility of Vodou in certain public spheres. Though such media events intersect with new media technologies such as the internet and computer mediated communication practices in ways that further the reach of Vodou, it would be erroneous to assume that media, or what could be called the mediatization of Vodou, determines or even instigates contemporary changes to the Vodou religion. Instead, the always fluid religious tradition of Vodou is changing and adapting to the highly mediated and technologized world, in which many of its practitioners now find themselves, in much the same way that the religion changed and adapted to earlier social conditions. Similar to how Vodou absorbs aspects of popular culture representations of the religion—as practitioners encode and decode the dense layers of signification that accrue on circulating commodities in a complex processes of transfiguration and reclamation—media as both representation and practice is transfigured to serve religious purpose. Scholars such as Stewart Hoover have argued against thinking of religion and media as separate or competing spheres of influence on society and culture. Instead, Hoover suggests that we think "of religious practice inhabiting and emerging 'religious-symbolic marketplaces' constructed at the confluence of religion and the media" (2003:11). For Vodou practitioners, mediated Vodou, like commercialized forms of the religion generated within these "religious-symbolic marketplaces", can constitute moments of identification with the religion. While media often operates as a portal to Vodou, becoming part of the processes by which newcomers come to identify with the religion, it also occasions moments of debate within Vodou communities as practitioners seek to understand how it intersects with what it means to be a Vodouist in a particular time and place.

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[97] In "Doing Vodou" Donald Cosentino, who was instrumental in mounting the exhibit and is editor of the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* exhibition catalogue, discusses some of the implications of the exhibit for the increased visibility of Vodou in North America ["Doing Vodou", African Arts, 29:2, 1996. 1-5].

Within many Haitian Vodou communities exists a concern with how the mediation of Vodou renders religious experience an object of interpretation not only for practitioners who seek to authenticate their religious experience within the discourses of their religion, but also for scholars who interpret religious experience within the genres and categories of scholarship. Debate about how scholarship has affected both the public image of Vodou and actual religious practices is not new. In *Migration and Vodou*, Karen Richman discusses how during the period between 1930 and 1960, when some of the most influential early anthropological work on Haitian Vodou was being conducted (Courlander 1939, Deren 1953, Rigaud 1969), the interest of a "foreign, academic audience may have contributed to shaping the ritual traditions" in Ti Rivyè, a Haitian town often visited by scholars (123). Richman speaks of the development of "invented traditions" and the formalization of rites of passage as changes that occurred in Haitian Vodou (as practiced in Ti Rivyè) that may have been instigated, in part by the efforts of local priests to feed scholars' "appetite for ritual". Scholarly interest is certainly not the only cause of change in ritual practice. Richman discusses the economic conditions to which Vodou practitioners had to adapt during this time, including the loss of ancestral land, which necessitated a change in how ancestral spirits were ritually accessed (117). Nonetheless, the potential for academic scholarship to instigate change in religious practice and discourse is always present, not the least because scholarship has been one of the primary disseminators of information about Vodou.

The intersection between scholarship and religious practice was brought home to me during a conversation with a young Haitian practitioner. For much of her life Kara had defined herself as an an atheist. Kara belongs, in some ways, to a wave of upper middle-class Haitians who left Haiti during the period of the Duvalier dictatorship. These transnationals often share a form of socialism that

can lead to a conceptualization of Vodou, still the dominant religion of Haiti, as a hindrance to the progress of that troubled nation. For them, religion is an opiate of the masses, standing in opposition to modernity. Kara herself, however, does not quite hold this particular vision of modernity and its trappings. It is a belief situated more firmly in the generation before her. It is her parents who adopt most whole-heartedly such a fierce stance in the face of the troubled politics of Haiti. Kara's own politics have always been more conciliatory toward the reclamation of a Haitian nationalism that validates the place of Vodou in the narratives of nation building.

At the age of 23 Kara attended her first Vodou ceremony. She attended this ceremony not on the soil of her native home of Haiti, but in a basement of a house in Montréal's east end neighbourhood of Rivières des Prairie. The ceremony she attended was what she called a "marriage", referring to the *maryaj lwa* Vodou ceremony where a practitioner is ritually married to a Vodou spirit. The spirit who featured prominently in the ceremony Kara attended was Guedeh, the god whose birthday is celebrated in the days after Halloween. Kara told me that she wanted to dress-up as a "cyber-Guedeh" for the coming Halloween but wasn't sure how to construct her costume. Instantly appreciating what a "cyber-Guedeh" must be, I imagined an awesome (and impractical) creation swirling with thin filaments of copper wire, and twinkling lights surrounding the chalky white makeup, dark clothes and top hat that is so often the typical garb of the *lwa* Guedeh. It was a powerful image, merging the organic and the cybernetic, the spiritual and the technical. Guedeh is, perhaps, the most appropriate of all the *lwas* to be made incarnate within the highly technologized form of the cyborg. In the cosmological dramas of Vodou, Guedeh represents both death and healing. He arrives in possession with a raucous and irreverent humour full of sexual innuendo and overtly sexualized jokes, word plays and movements. Guedeh's seemingly hypersexualized discourse points Vodouists to what is sometimes the literal outcome of sex...birth. Guedeh connects the momentous events of birth and death to the social interrelations that structure practitioners' lives. Guedeh's

irreverence can also be directed toward social and political conditions. Sometimes labelled a trickster spirit, he uses humor in his running social commentaries. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains, "Gede has license to break all the social rules....He alone can satirize the powerful and the privileged" (361). In this role as social commentator Guedeh must take on many different forms in order to adapt to the specific social conditions in which Vodou practitioners find themselves. As Brown explains, "Like all the *lwa*, Gede[98] is both one and many; but his ranks are more populous that those of other spirits, and they grow more rapidly and more casually. New Gede personas appear every year around All Souls' Day. These new Gede are born at the forefront of social change, spawned by new occupations, new technologies, new social groups. There is a Gede who is a dentist, and one who is an auto mechanic; and now there is even a Protestant missionary" (376). For Guedeh, the highly mediated environment of cyberspace in which many new practitioners find themselves would naturally require a new cybernetic form. A cyber-Guedeh is sure to join the heavily populated ranks of this *lwa* before long.

In thinking up a cyber-Guedeh Halloween costume (Halloween being the North American equivalent of All Souls Eve, the start of birthday celebrations for Guedeh), Kara was paying tribute to the creative adaptations of this *lwa*. As Kara and I talked, my mind still wandering to images of cybernetic *lwa*, I began to realise that Kara was drawing much of her knowledge of Guedeh not from her experience of him in the Montréal Vodou ceremony, but from sources that could be classified as both secondary and academic. "Maybe I should dress-up as a cyber-Guedehlia!" she said, suddenly. "Guedehlia?" I asked, confused. The name was vaguely familiar. "Guedehlia," she repeated. "She is like a female Guedeh; she's in the *Mama Lola* book, at the very end." "Oh, that's right!" I assented, recalling Karen McCarthy Brown's description in her seminal ethnography of the potential emergence of a female form of the *lwa* so often associated with male energies (380). After talking with Kara, I realized that for her—someone who, one

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[98] Gede is an orthographic variation of Guedeh.

may assume, would have easy access to the dominant religion of her own place of birth—my connection to Vodou via the channels of academic research had become a useful resource for her own emerging exploration of the religion. More interesting perhaps is the way that both Kara authorized not her own direct experience of the Vodou religion, but experience that was mediated through the lens of academic scholarship. She had not encountered the goddess Guedehlia during ritual possession performances. Nonetheless, she took it for granted that she existed.

Certainly Karen McCarthy Brown's seminal ethnography *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* is a powerful example of the reach and implication scholarship has for contemporary religiosity. In addition to still being one of only a handful of studies of Vodou practice in North America, it is also an erudite elucidation of the complex issues framing the work of anthropologists researching diasporic religions. But perhaps more strikingly, *Mama Lola* has become a bible-like book for a host of new converts who use it both as a portal into the Vodou religion and as a way of authorizing Vodou practice and discourse. Mama Lola herself, the central subject of Brown's ethnography, has become well known and much sought after. She makes appearances at events such as those organized around the traveling exhibit the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, leads workshops, and endorses religious stores, products, and festivals. To give an idea of the scope of the significance that Mama Lola has incurred since the publication of Karen McCarthy Brown's book, it may be worth mentioning that she is sometimes referred to as the "Oprah Winfrey of Voodoo",[99] a moniker that not only signals her as a powerful personage who corrals the identities of blackness and femaleness, but that also defines her as a public media figure. The "Oprah

[99] In the last couple of years, this has become a fairly common colloquial appellation for "Mama Lola" that is particularly used in press material advertising lectures or rituals. It likely originated from the afterword of the latest edition of *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, where Karen McCarthy Brown uses it (389). One press kit for a colloquium on Vodou reads: "After 10 years experience of public speaking on Voodoo in the USA and its place of origin -- Benin, West Africa -- Mama Lola is gaining a reputation as "the Oprah Winfrey of Voodoo" for her engaging way of drawing audiences into conversation." See for example:
http://www.lsu.edu/highlights/022/religious.htm and
http://www.lsu.edu/lsutoday/020405/pageone.html (last accessed June 11, 2006).

Winfrey of Voodoo" positions Mama Lola as a mediator of the Vodou religion on a significant and wide reaching scale.

In the afterword to the expanded and updated version of her ethnography, Karen McCarthy Brown addresses the impact her book has had on Mama Lola: "Through our book and, later, through the attention brought to Vodou by the success of the "Sacred Arts" exhibition, Lola became something of a celebrity. People of all sorts began to seek her out" (389). These "people of all sorts" are often newcomers who seek access to Vodou, and sometimes to Mama Lola herself, after reading Brown's text. Mama Lola's reach as a respected ritual specialist has come to span vast geographic space. Karen McCarthy Brown explains that "over the last decade, Lola's spiritual "family" has grown in numbers and spread out geographically....Her spiritual work has taken her to several new places in the Caribbean and Central America, and she has also returned to places she knows, such as Massachusetts and Alabama, to do treatments on site" (389). She also tells of how Mama Lola was invited in 1993 as a guest of honour by Nicephore Soglo, president of the People's Republic of Benin, to participate in an international festival of "all peoples of the world who were associated with Vodou" (390). While Mama Lola practices a geographically dispersed form of Vodou that takes her to multiple points around the globe and connects her to multiple forms of Vodou (as well as other religious communities), Mama Lola-as-mediator is also a figure of authority not only for a community with which she directly interacts in "real time", but for an expansive, virtual community. This community is similarly dispersed over geographic space but networked via a web of listservs, websites and on-line stores, as well as botanicas, religious supply stores and annual events and festivals at which practitioners gather. In the on-line forums of cyberspace, Mama Lola's name is used quite literally to authorize the religion. 'Mama Lola recognizes' (or, conversely 'does not recognize') a particular *houngan* or *mambo*, is a variation of a phrase that can be read on countless listservs about Vodou. At the same time, practitioners debating what is and is not "real" Vodou will often directly cite passages from,

among other sources, Karen McCarthy Brown's text in order to make their case about the veracity or authenticity of a particular practice, belief, or symbol associated with Vodou. It would not be too outrageous to argue that Karen McCarthy Brown's text and Mama Lola's narrative have significantly contributed to both the growth and the changing shape of the Vodou religion in North America.

Scholarly texts such as Brown's have drawn much public attention to the Vodou religion and to Vodouists practicing in North America. Such exposure makes public not only Vodou itself but also the fluid practices of Vodouists like Mama Lola who often distribute their religious affiliations between multiple religious communities. Every year, Voodoo Authentica[100], a New Orleans store specializing in religious products and services, hosts VoodooFest, a celebration of the spiritual and cultural heritage of New Orleans Voodoo. On the 2004 VoodooFest poster, Mama Lola's name features prominently. In addition to meeting with individuals in private "sessions" during VoodooFest, she is, the interested reader is told, conducting the closing ceremony of the 2004 VoodooFest with her daughter Maggie (who also features in the text *Mama Lola*). She is also closely identified with Karen McCarthy Brown's ethnography. So much so that a passage on the poster encourages festival goers to "Remember to bring your copies of *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* - [Mama Lola will] be happy to sign them during your session." Brown's text has become part of Mama Lola's celebrity and, more importantly, part of the way in which Vodou has come to be known in North America. In the context of a New Orleans Vodou festival, Mama Lola is referred to not as a Vodou priestess, but as a Haitian priestess, a subtle modification to her title that still allows festival promoters to draw on the authority that Mama Lola gives to the Vodou religion, but also obscures the ongoing negotiation of the differences between New Orleans and Haitian Vodou. This negotiation of difference between forms of Vodou, and

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[100] Vodou Authentica's website: http://www.voodooshop.com/index.html (last accessed June 11, 2006).

between Vodou and other religions, is foregrounded, as newcomers to Vodou must define their own allegiances to similar but distinct forms of Vodou circulating in North America. Mama Lola's presence at the New Orleans VoodooFest, much like her initiation into Santeria, which Brown discusses in the afterword to her text (399), is public (and publicized) evidence of the interconnectedness of multiple forms of Vodou, and indeed multiple religions, in the context of North America religiosity.

For newcomers to Vodou, who often bring with them identification with other religions that they have encountered on their journeys, the ways in which public figures such as Mama Lola embrace multiple religions authorizes their own plural religious identifications. As one new practitioner explained to me, "Religion is not something you leave behind or throw away. It stays with you forever. I was raised Catholic, so I am that, and I am Wiccan. And I practice Vodou. All three are with me. Most people who practice Vodou are Catholic....The Wiccan goddesses are a lot like the Vodou spirits. Some of the spells [of both Vodou and Wicca] even use the same ingredients. So they make sense together." New practitioners, who come to Vodou via complex spiritual journeys, tend to see multiple religions as interconnected. By pointing out and insisting on the similarities between religions, they contribute to the processes by which seemingly "foreign" elements are incorporated into the aggregating Vodou tradition. While this is a process that can be full of tensions, sometimes instigating heated debate among practitioners, it is also a process that aligns with the epistemology of Vodou, which understands all religions to be fundamentally the same, merely called by different names and housed in different symbols, practices and buildings. As Brown explains, Vodouists aware of the mutability of religion believe that "there is only one religion, one God and one group of spirits. People simply call God and the spirits by different names" (306). Given this epistemological approach, it makes sense that Vodou aggregates not only aspects of other religions, but also religious practitioners from other religious and cultural backgrounds. While some would argue that Vodou is culturally appropriated by

those coming to it from religio-cultural backgrounds that are not genealogically or geographically connected to Haitian Vodou, newcomers to Vodou eschew that interpretation of their practices. Instead, they look to both the syncretism of Vodou (which makes Catholicism an integral part of the religion) and the multiple religious practices of public figures such as Mama Lola to justify and validate their own plural religious identifications. In so doing, these practitioners generate sustained interpersonal relationships that span multiple religious communities.

Religion, for both practitioner and scholar, is less easily understood in the abstract than in the concrete manifestations of intersubjective relationships. Religious worlds are visible in relationships between people, between people and their gods, and in the conditions and institutions that structure the limits and possibilities of such relationships. Mass mediation of religion can generate intersubjective relationships among people who belong to disparate and dispersed groups. It should be of no surprise that the work of scholars of contemporary religion becomes part of the currency of a spiritual marketplace driven by the technologies of mass media. As Robert Orsi explains in *Between Heaven and Earth*, "Our lives and stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media through which we scholars of religion encounter and engage the religious world of others" (3). Karen McCarthy Brown, who was initiated into Vodou during the course of her fieldwork, powerfully illustrates this point. Her narrative, woven in with Mama Lola's, is the narrative of a newcomer to Vodou. And her ethnography, which charts this journey even as it elucidates the complex workings of diasporic Vodou, also functions as a medium through which new practitioners, spiritual seekers and shoppers, come to know Vodou.

While they may have misgivings and concerns, practitioners of Vodou understand that cultural commodities, mass media, and communication technology have become vehicles for the dissemination and "advertising" of the Vodou religion. Although they actively police representations of Vodou, they also reconceptualize media and technology as vehicles for the *lwa*. They come to

understand the dissemination of Vodou to a wide audience as part of the growing global reach of the religion, and they see the tools of this dissemination—media and technology—as modes of transportation not only for the symbols and narratives of the religion, but for the *lwa* themselves, allowing them to travel, to reach people and places formerly inaccessible to them. There are risks associated with this dissemination. As Karen McCarthy Brown notes, "Vodou can share its wisdom and its healing techniques with a larger and more varied group; but as the group of potential devotees expands, the spirits will also become more universalizable, the faces of the spirits less transparent to those of the ancestors, and the stories that carry the wisdom of the religion more abstract" (308). Certainly, the mass mediation of Vodou risks rendering it less culturally specific, more universal and more abstract. However, as has been discussed throughout this analysis, Vodou always insists on cultural specificity, even as it negotiates innovation and change. Practitioners would argue that the cultural specificity of Vodou is, and will be, preserved by the *lwa* themselves. "I don't worry about it," a *mambo* from Toronto told me when I asked her about the potential loss of important aspects of Vodou due to the increasing numbers of non-Haitians in her "congregation". "Once, a little while ago, Haitians [in Toronto] were worried that Vodou was going to disappear because [our children] refused to come to rituals. They were too busy. Then new people came. Lots of different people. Lots of black people, Africans, Jamaicans, Ethiopians, and people from all over, white people too. The *lwa* were pleased. There were more people to serve them, more presents, more of everything. And then our children started to come again. They thought it was "cool" to do Vodou [now]. The *lwa* were happy." It is a failure to account for the ways in which sacred presences, such as the *lwa* of Vodou, insist on their own cultural continuity in the face of change that hinders a critical understanding of the ways in which Vodou is mediated.

In his latest book *Between Heaven and Earth*, Robert Orsi acknowledges that scholars have done important work deconstructing the secularization thesis that presumes modernity will breed secularity, rendering religion anachronistic.

Despite this, however, Orsi suggests that Enlightenment assumptions about modernity have permeated analytic frameworks to such an extent that there now exists a profound discomfort with the practices and experiences of sacred presences that characterize so many religions: "[W]hile it is true that religious faith has not gone away [as once presumed], sacred presences have acquired an unsavory and disreputable aura, and this clings to the practices and practitioners of presence alike" (12). More than simply acquiring a disreputable aura, the remnants of Enlightenment thought risk rendering sacred presences minor characters in the narratives of contemporary religiosity. And yet, these sacred presences are, arguably, particularly well adapted to negotiating the structures of mass media. I would contend that the cyber-Guedeh and Guedehlia that Kara and I spoke about in the weeks leading up to Halloween are far more than playful Halloween costumes. Rather, they represent an understanding of the ways in which the gods and goddesses of Vodou are potentially able to insinuated themselves into technologized and mediated worlds, not as metaphor, but as a presence that must be negotiated by practitioners and scholars alike. An examination of Vodou as a mediated, or mediatized, religion must take into account the ways in which media and technology function not as foreign elements introduced into an "authentic" tradition, but as tools that can be aligned with the cosmological structures and ritual practices of the religion.

In a paper titled "No More Journalists", Jacques Derrida speaking about the "return of the religious"[101] suggests a profound connection between the structures of mass media and religious ideals. Derrida's deliberately provocative definition of television, which links its remote transmission to the remote invocation of divine beings or "spirit", has clear implications for mediated Vodou. Television, Derrida explains, "implies naturally a medium or mediation, a remote message, instantly sent and received in a space that as a result is neither private

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[101] "Return of the religious" is a phrase that has been circulated among philosophers, including Jacques Derrida, Heint de Vries, Slavoj Zizek, Samuel Webber and others, to discuss the apparent resurgence of religion on "the public stage". See, for example, "In Media Res" by Hent de Vries in *Religion and Media*, [Samuel Webber and Hent de Vries (eds), Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001. 3-42].

nor secret. The breaking of the secret by a public message sent long distance implies a structure that likens it to the things of which religions speaks, first and foremost, to spirit." (2001:61). Like television, forms of mediated Vodou project Vodou and all its signifiers, symbols, and practices, into a space that is no longer "private or secret". However, this very publicization of Vodou makes congruent both technological and spiritual transmitters. Thus, both media and deities—both transmitters of Vodou in that both disseminate encoded signs and signifiers of the religion—come to occupy a shared discursive space. Derrida terms this symbiosis between religion and media "spiritualization-spectralization", which he suggests is produced by visual media productions of sacred events (61). The making visible of religion via media, or the rendering of religion into spectacle, further connects media to religious structures: "Spectrality permits the remote dispatching of bodies that are non-bodies, nonsensible sensations, incorporeal" (61). Of course, Vodou is rife with beings in various states of embodiment. Talk of beings without bodies, disembodied beings, partially embodied beings, or even bodies without "beings" in them abound in many religions, including Vodou. In Vodou, the *lwa* are only sometimes embodied (in possession rituals, for example), but can still "remotely" communicate with practitioners in the virtual spaces of dreams and visions. Vodou rituals take measures to guard against the intrusion of many restless disembodied beings—the dead who do not "cross over", *bokors*[102] who steal spirits and souls (*ti bon anges*) from afar through complex rituals of remote control, and zombies (*zonbi*) those enigmatic creatures who move about like soulless bodies. Within the cosmology of Vodou, disembodied beings are not unusual. The ritual technologies of Vodou are equipped to handle these beings unmoored from their bodies. In addition, the sacred presences and mystical beings of Vodou habitually communicate through "a medium"—the body of the possessed. When the *lwa* arrive in possession they do more than simply disseminate the cultural specificity of Vodou, they also function as sacred presences made visible,

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[102] *Bokor* can (although does not always) refer to a ritual specialist who "works with the left hand" or performs "dark magic". *Bokor* are usually associated with the creation of zombies, which in the Vodou tradition, do not always assume a physical form but can take the shape of vessels in which the "spirit" or soul of an individual is housed.

channelled through the conduits of ritual technologies. The disembodiedness of mediated space, while of a different order than that experienced in the ritual practices and everyday mysticism of the Vodou religion, is not wholly incongruent with the ethos of Vodou. As Derrida explains, media does more than disseminate information *about* religion: "religious phenomenon mediatizes itself not just in the form of information, pedagogy, predication, or discourse" but by rendering God (or gods) "visible" through the very structures of media (58). What Derrida calls the mediatization of religion is dependent on the intimate connection between the remote transmission of information through media and the mediation of sacred presence during religious rituals. Mediated religion transforms religious identity, challenging the notion that religion is "about" tradition and continuity in the face of a modern and highly informational world. Hent de Vries argues that religious responses to new media, globalization, commodity culture and other geo-political issues are never simply reactionary (a means of reaffirming tradition against modernization) but instead "adapt and reinvent religious identities, putting them into question as much as reaffirming them. Their supposed traditionality has modern—some would say, postmodern—features that affect both their content and institutional forms" (6). Public (and publicized) religions are "hypermodern" entities, globalizing forces that contribute to the pervasiveness of media and technology even as they grow and spread because of these same technological and media structures.

In the co-operative between religion and media (or technology), the sacred beings of Vodou become themselves mediated and technologized, but this is simply an extension of the mediation of sacred presence embedded in the religion. In the "traditional" structures of Vodou possession performances, which are designed to mediate and communicate with "sacred presences", the individual self is surrendered and unseated, the human body transformed into a conduit so that the *lwa* of Vodou may communicate with their congregation. Increasingly, the sacred presences and sacred artifacts of Vodou are packaged, produced and disseminated via multi-media spectacles such as VoodooFest (discussed earlier),

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tourist oriented performances and other mediated events. But does this packaging and production of Vodou render the mediation of sacred presence any less authentic? As De Vries explains, "informational vehicles do not simply transport a self-identical and transparent content of religion intact through a homogeneous space of flows" (2001:160). Transmitted via media, Vodou inevitably changes. But when the sacred presences of Vodou are packaged, commodified and mediated via multiple forms of technology, what changes is not so much the veracity, efficacy, or authenticity of religious structures and practices (as is often assumed), but the shape of the intersubjective relationships that constitute a given religious world.

In the context of understanding mediated religion, it is vital to remember that the intersubjective relationships between religious practitioners and their gods are *as* constitutive of a religion as are relationships between religious practitioners. After all, as Kara reminded me, Vodouists marry their gods. They do so in complex and public ceremonies. And this marriage is not simply a metaphoric one for a Vodouist. Those who marry the *lwa* must reserve one night a week for this important relationship. On this night, when they cannot sleep with their human partner for fear of angering their personal *lwa*, they sleep not in a bed alone, although this is how it must look to the casual observer, but in a bed reserved for their relationship with this distinctly non-human entity. *Maryaj lwa* ceremonies are conducted much like Roman Catholic marriage ceremonies, in front of an officiating priest or priestess, where the *lwa* (present through possession) and the *vivan-yo*, or the living, trade I do's and promise loyalty, service and sexual fidelity (at least one night a week) to each other. The *lwa* are as implicated as the living in this ritual contract (validated with a marriage certificate signed by both participants). And while the relationship between the *lwa* and the living occurs most often in the realm of dreams and visions, it is surely as important as the other intersubjective relationships that structure how scholars come to know religions such as Vodou. When the *lwa* of Vodou are integrated into the workings of mass media and cultural commodification, they carry with

them the threads of these intensely interpersonal relationships between practitioners and their gods. As will be explored further in this analysis,[103] the use of new media such as the internet by Vodou practitioners does not "disembed" the social relationships central to the religion. Instead, these relationships are restructured to account for an increasing separation in distance and duration of practitioners spawned, in part, by the globalization and mediation of the religion

Intersubjective relationships are both instigated and sustained through the structures of media, communication technology and cultural commodities. Media and commodities provide points of access to an increasingly public Vodou. The impact of a scholarly ethnography on North American Vodou and the ways in which Vodou is authorized and defined through events such as VoodooFest, stores such as Voodoo Authentica, and numerous listservs, websites and on-line forums, demonstrate a complex interconnectivity between multiple forms and genres which mediate the Vodou religion. Mediated Vodou provides a portal through which countless newcomers come to access the religion and authorize their experiences of Vodou. But how do newcomers of Vodou move from points of access into full belonging in the religion? How do they come to understand themselves *as* Vodouists? Like many religions, Vodou is an oral tradition. A vast compendium of knowledge is embedded in the histories and narratives disseminated through both casual storytelling between practitioners and large-scale ritualizing. Embedded within these narratives is a particular understanding of identity.

Strategies for Becoming

I have suggested before that Vodou is less something that one *is* and more something that one *does*. Practitioners, particularly Haitians, often define themselves as "serving the spirits" rather than as Vodouists. Within Vodou, religious identity is not a static birthright, but something that is achieved and

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[103] See "Virtual Vodou Part II: Techno-Vodou" in this text.

renewed through spiritual work. In a way, this understanding of Vodou as dependent on practice rather than identity facilitates the admittance of newcomers, whose originary identities (as belonging to a certain race, nation, or ethnic group, for example) tend to matter less than their participation within the religion. The focus on practice in Vodou also facilitates an understanding of mediated Vodou. Media "works" on a practical level to bring new "clients" to the ritual specialists of Vodou, to transmit the narratives and messages of the *lwa* of the religion, and to facilitate the maintenance of social relationships. Given the epistemology of Vodou—with its focus on religio-cultural ways of knowing the world that are rooted in religious practice and rituals meant to effect change in that world—it is not surprising that media is incorporated into the practices of the religion and is encompassed (or assimilated) as part of the mystical workings of the *lwa* of Vodou. However, despite an emphasis on praxis, it would be untrue to suggest that identity or, more specifically, processes of identification are unimportant within Vodou epistemology. The narratives and practices of Vodou reveal complex ontological processes as the uninitiated become initiated, humans become gods, and relatives become ancestors. Newcomers must negotiate religious affiliation with a religion that maintains cultural specificity with Haiti. How newcomers come to identify with the cultural specificity of Vodou, while negotiating space for themselves as members of other (specifically, non-Haitian) cultural groups has much to do with how identity is understood within Vodou.

One of the defining characteristics of Vodou can be found in the cosmological dramas that play out in what Karen McCarthy Brown has called possession-performance. Possession is an aspect of most Vodou ritual and is the most direct way for the *lwa* of the Vodou pantheon to interact with practitioners (although they also interact through dreams, visions and other forms of mystical communication). Through possession, where the *lwa* "ride" the body (*chwal*) of a human being, practitioners can directly speak with their gods. It should be noted that although possession is a defining aspect of the religion, it is not a complete ritual in itself but a larger ritual process designed to call the *lwa* to a ritual space.

As Karen Richman points out, large scale Vodou ceremonies[104] entail ritual action that encompasses "enthusiastic, spectacular, multimedia performance involving Catholic prayer (in French), drumming, singing (in Creole), dancing, visual art, parading, spirit possession-performance, and offering of food, drink, toiletries, and animal sacrifice" (2005:23). Into these intense moments of *comunitas*, or social interrelatedness, the *lwa* arrive, each displaying larger than life character traits—loyalty, perseverance, vanity, rage, generosity, greed, humour, and a host of others—that reflect exaggerated human characteristics. The *lwa* arrive in possession as heroes from Haitian history, as African gods transported to the Caribbean, and as mystical beings with the power to heal and divine. However, the *lwa* are not "perfect" beings in the ways that gods and goddesses are often conceptualized. When the *lwa* of Vodou arrive in possession they come with limps and missing limbs, injuries sustained in mystical (and actual) realms. The *lwa* arrive as alcoholics, petty thieves, and characters with violent tempers, as often as they arrive as nurturing mothers, healers, wise storytellers and comedic entertainers. The *lwa* of Vodou "are not models of the well-lived life; rather, they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside" (Brown, 2001:6). The extremes of temperament embodied by the *lwa* reflect, albeit in overstated form, the complex social conditions in which Vodou practitioners find themselves.

Like many other Afro-Caribbean cultural and religious systems, the epistemologies of Vodou make use of the tools of repetition, improvisation, mimicry and mimesis to transmit cultural knowledge that exists outside of the lived experience of an individual. All of these tools are pressed into use in possession performance. But the rituals of Vodou are more than simple transmitters of cultural knowledge. Instead, they occasion a space in which change can be imagined and strategized. It has been said that Vodou is largely a

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[104] Although possession-performance is most visible and most dramatic in large-scale communal ceremonies designed to "call" the *lwa* to a congregation, *houngan* and *mambo* will often speak of possession, or partial possession, when they are doing one-on-one spiritual work such as divination or preparation of ritual materials and objects.

healing tradition,[105] and certainly the healing of physical illness is an important part of the spiritual work of ritual specialists. However, the scope of healing employed in Vodou extends well beyond the physical. *Houngan* and *mambo* are constantly called upon to intervene in matters of the heart, to use their spiritual powers to sooth the problems of unemployment, and to virtually mediate strife with neighbours, family members, police and the justice system. These may seem like concrete problems, but their solutions require an acute understanding of social interrelation. Practitioners of Vodou have to understand how social relations can be underpinned by racism, sexism, economic exploitation and a host of other modes by which people can be subjugated, because their religious praxis demands they seek solutions to everyday social problems conditioned by these social narratives.

The reality of everyday life structured by social inequities and disadvantages is mirrored in the possession performances of Vodou. These possession performances are akin to what Robert Farris Thompson calls "songs and dances of social allusion". In *Flash of the Spirit*, Farris suggests that the carnivalesque performances of Caribbean culture and religion "however danceable and 'swinging', remorselessly contrast social imperfections against implied criteria for perfect living" (xiii). Through an interaction with each other and with their spirits, practitioners strategize against the hardships in their lives, even as they celebrate their successes. When the gods of Vodou arrive in possession they strategize with practitioners about how to change the real conditions of their lives. They listen to stories about illnesses, about job loss, about romances gone awry and they suggest solutions to these problems. Often these solutions take tangible form in the shape of concrete spells. Just as often solutions require that practitioners shift their paradigm, learn to see their problems in a new light and in so doing learn to help themselves. At one possession

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[105] See Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* [Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2001] and "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study" [*in Healing and Restoring: Medicine and Health in the World's Religious Traditions,* Lawrence Sullivan (ed.), NY: Macmillan, 1989. 255-85].

ceremony in Montréal the *lwa* Loko arrived, unusually, "in the head" of a practitioner rather than the *houngan* conducting the ceremony. Loko is the *lwa* who presides over initiation and as such, he tends to be closely associated with ritual specialists. On this occasion, Loko was displeased. He was unhappy with the service in general. He complained that the food set out to serve the spirits was poor and meager. He complained that the decorations that adorned the *houngan*'s ritual room were shabby. He asked how many of those gathered planned to be initiated within the year. He ticked at the few who voiced their desire for initiation. The presiding *houngan* was theatrically defensive. He told Loko, basically, that business was bad, many of his clients had lost their jobs, there was no money for a big feast, no money to send many to Haiti for initiation. Loko responded that the *houngan* should "get a better job". With great dignity the presiding houngan responded, "It is my job to serve you, Loko. You and all the *lwa*". "Then advertise," snapped Loko, unappeased. The *lwa* often propose very "real world" (and non magical) solutions to the problems of practitioners. In this case, Loko's dissatisfaction with the (apparent) impoverishment of the ritual preparations signalled a call for future expansion of the Vodou community. Rituals of possession are all about actualizing change in the "almost-present". The ritual spaces of Vodou—where the past is often virtually revisited, mimicked and repeated—are as much ontological as epistemological, as much about ways of becoming as about ways of knowing.

Improvisation, or "signifyin(g)", as Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, encodes black difference in cultural production that always remembers (or repeats) a black historicity, but it also constitutes an indeterminacy that prevents that difference from becoming static and reified (64). History is not actual, but virtual. It is something accessed through memory and mnemonic devices. Because of this, history is mutable—it may repeat itself, but never exactly, like the improvisational changes inevitable in re-enactment. The discourses of Vodou encompass an understanding of the virtuality (and mutability) of the past, and how that past is

closely tied to narratives and strategies of becoming in the future. The performances enacted and re-enacted by the *lwa* are based, in no small part, on their situatedness in a complex historicity. This is evident in the story of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a slave turned revolutionary, who eventually became the first emperor of Haiti. Occupying these two roles, at the extremes of the continuum of subjugation and privilege, Dessalines symbolizes an ontological narrative of possibility for the emergent Haitian nation and its people. Upon coming into power, Dessalines rejected French ideals, language, and even religion (particularly Catholicism), in an attempt to eject colonialism itself from the newly sovereign Haiti. Dessalines' first constitution was intended to reverse the entrenched, racialized division of the population that had existed under French colonialism. Dessalines effectively shifted the paradigm of colonialism. As David Nicholls explains:

> The first constitution of Haiti proclaimed that all Haitians no matter what their shade of skin were to be called "black"; this included even those German and Polish groups in Saint Dominique who had fought with the liberation movement and had become citizens [...] Furthermore, the constitution stated that no white man, whatever his nationality, should set foot in Haiti as a master or property owner, and that he was unable to acquire property in the future (Art. 12). Just as colonial Saint Domingue had been based upon a system of white superiority, so Haiti became a symbol of black power. (36)

By renaming Haitians as black,[106] regardless of their racial origins, Dessalines attempted to diffuse the legacy of race relations left by colonial institutions. After the Revolution the relations between the former slaves, predominately black like Dessalines himself, the "free colored" peoples or *mulattos* who had enjoyed freedom and privileges during the era of French colonization, and the whites who remained on the island, continued to be strained. By positioning blackness as the rhetorically and politically defining category of Haitian identity, Dessalines inverted the hierarchy of colonialism. As Joan Dayan succinctly explains, "Dessalines took the 'lowest rung' and made it a synecdoche for the whole" (25). In his speeches Dessalines made it a practice to conflate the distance between

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[106] In the semiotics of Haitian Creole the (re)naming of all Haitians "black", regardless of their ethnicity, means that all non-Haitians, are called *blans* (or "whites"). Thus, individuals of African-American descent who are not Haitian would be referred to as "white".

slave and emperor. He frequently referred to himself as Duclos, the name of the man who had owned him, in an attempt to instil a continued disdain for the French and to disrupt any continuity between France and the former colony by recalling the disenfranchisement and horrors of slavery. Dayan explains in *Haiti, History and the Gods:*

> Whenever Dessalines wanted to justify his hatred of the French, it is said that he liked to display his scarred-covered back. We should think for a moment about the figure of a hero who was once a slave, a man who would refer to himself as "Duclos" (his name in servitude), recalling for his listeners, even as an emperor, his identity as an item of property. Out of detritus came the redeemer. (19)

Issues of property, commodity and consumption were inextricably tied to practices of naming, and the symbolism and language used to define Haitian identity at the emergence of Haiti as an independent nation.

Dessalines' "heroic" status as emancipator and first leader of Haiti was short lived. His undoing may have been, at least partially, related to issues of property. As Dayan explains in her analysis, shortly after rising to power, Dessalines, in an attempt to redefine the legacy of colonial policies of land ownership, rescinded transfers of property made after October 1802. That particular October fell within the last year of the Haitian Revolution when defeat of Leclerc's French army became more possible and more probable. White land owners, predicting the fall of the French government fled Saint Domingue, hastily turning over the deeds of their lands to their offspring, the "free coloreds" or *affranchis*, who thus benefited financially and gained certain privileges and advantages from the legacy of French colonialism. By rescinding these transferred deeds, Dessalines quickly made enemies of this elite and powerful group. In addition, Dessalines' vision of the developing nation of Haiti alienated the *affranchis*, or the group Michel-Rolph Trouillot defines as the *anciens libres*— those who, prior to the revolution, enjoyed a measure of freedom and privilege which often included education in accordance to Western traditions. As Trouillot explains, Dessalines' radical social and economic polices alienated those who had been indoctrinated with Western concepts of civilization: "Ironically, many such

policies, including freedom of religion, equal rights for children born out of wedlock, and marriage and divorce laws favorable to women, have since become hallmarks of "civilization". But when they were formulated by Dessalines [...] such views were anathema to those who thought they held a natural monopoly on civilized behavior" (46). At the time when Dessalines was annulling transfers of property made after October 1802, he was also facing insurgencies from the south and west of the new nation. In part, these insurgencies were fuelled by those sympathetic to the elite *affranchis* who warned that Dessalines' land policies threatened the rights of the newly freed, or *nouveaux libres*. Dessalines the liberator was recast as Dessalines the dictator. It was during this period of growing unrest that Dessalines was assassinated on October 17, 1806, on the road to Port-au-Prince, at the juncture called Point Rouge. The assassination was well orchestrated by those sympathetic to the *mulatto* elite. In death, Dessalines was dismembered, the pieces of his body distributed to a crowd gathered in Port-au-Prince, rendering the former slave property once again. As Dayan, citing Thomas Madiou,[107] explains:

> His remnants—variously described as "scraps", "shapeless remains," "remnants", or "relics"—were thrown to the crowd. According to Madiou, American merchants hustled to buy his fingers with gold. "They attached an importance to the relics of the founder of our Independence that Haitians, transported by such horrible fury, did not then feel." That foreign merchants bargained for Dessalines' fleshly remnants tells us something about the role of Dessalines as martyr of liberty. (17)

Despite being bought as property in both life and death, Dessalines has had a purchase on the Haitian imagination that exceeds what seems like a systemic disenfranchisement through consumption of his body. Although denigrated at the moment of his demise, Dessalines eventually rose to prominence again, this time as a *lwa* (god) of the Vodou pantheon. Dayan suggests that Dessalines was quite deliberately reintroduced, after an almost 40 year absence, into the narrative of Haitian history as a means of "pacifying" the peasant majority who, despite the promises made after independence, found themselves in a position of economic

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[107] See Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti* (1847) [Port-au-Prince, Haiti: H. Deschamps, 1991].

and social subjugation similar to that of slavery. Gradually, the reconfiguring of Dessalines from his former status as dictator (a role in which he was cast primarily after his death) came to be a rhetorical substitute for the liberation of the masses from the shackles of poverty. According to Dayan, it was during this period (from approximately 1845 to 1904), as Dessalines was resurrected and monumentalized in the new narratives of Haitian nationalism, that Dessalines began to make his appearance as a *lwa* of Vodou (28). It could be argued that the second coming of Dessalines as divine being enacts a reversal of his former dismemberment and commodification in death. Yet Dessalines, re-membered, seems to represent an ambiguity that characterizes not only Haitian but Vodou identity as well.

This ambiguity of identity is generated by a layering of identities within the complex cosmological narratives of Vodou. In the ontological praxis of Vodou, multiple layers of identity accrue over the passage of time and with the transition from human to divine form. The historical figure of Dessalines already contains weighty identities, from slave to emperor, property to debris. When Dessalines moves from historical figure to deity he comes to signify even more layers of meaning. Dessalines, a Creole god or "*dieux de politique*" born in Haiti, has been absorbed by the Ogoun "family" of gods. Because of this process of categorizing emergent gods and goddesses, Dessalines the *lwa* is now often referred to as Ogoun Dessalines. The Ogoun family of spirits, associated as they are with the figure of the warrior and the politics of war and militarism, has come to represent ambiguities of power. The *lwa*, manifest in the possession performances of Vodou, function as tools of extrasomatic memory, allowing the narratives of history to become present and applicable in the everyday lives of Vodou practitioners. Yet these narratives are not romanticized visions of the past and, as such, do not evoke a simple identification with the heroic narratives so often disseminated through the channels of official history. Dayan writes:

> Called by the literate elite "the Great One," "the Savior," "the Lover of Justice," and "the Liberator," the Dessalines remembered by Vodou initiates is far less comforting or instrumental. They know

how unheroic the hero-turned-god could be. The image of Dessalines
in the cult of the people remains unequivocal and corruptible: a trace
of what is absorbed by the mind and animated in the gut. How
inevitable are the oscillations from hero to detritus, from power to
vulnerability, from awe to ridicule: a convertibility that Vodou
would keep working, viable, and necessary. (28)

Dessalines embodies multiple, and sometimes contradictory identities—slave and

monarch, revolutionary hero and reviled dictator, dismembered and remembered,

divinity and human. For Vodouists, Dessalines models not so much the collapsing

of multiple identities into a single persona, but a concurrence of seemingly

conflicting identities. The historicity inherent to the ritual dramas of Vodou is, in

part, how religious continuity is maintained in a predominantly oral tradition.

However, the historicity of possession performance is more than a simple history

lesson. Donald Cosentino explains in the introduction to *Sacred Arts of Haitian*

Vodou that "trance possession moves beyond mimesis. It does not simply recall; it

creates anew" (55). The mercurial identity shifts of the *lwa* of the Vodou

pantheon, both remembered and revised in the ritualized practices of possession-

performance, allow practitioners to understand identity as, among other things, a

variable and sometimes strategic process. The combination of possession-

performance and history lesson illustrates complex narratives of becoming,

enacted and remembered through ritual. Starting with the transplanting of the

identity (*gro bon ange*[108]) of the presiding *houngan* or *mambo* by the visiting gods

or goddesses of Vodou, rituals of possession render identity a blurred thing:

performed, reconstituted, and revised. It is in the ritual realm that the virtual

differences emblemized by the *lwa* become actualized and that "becoming" is at

once historical and possible.

For newcomers to Vodou, the ontological "play" that occurs when the *lwa*

manifest in possession-performance can serve to further authorize their own

position within the religion. The identity positions of the *lwa* do not seem to have

changed drastically with the influx of new practitioners (although Vodou is never

[108] *Gro bon ange* translates into big good angel (as opposed to the *ti bon ange*, or little good
angel). These angels represent aspects of the self for Vodouists. The *gro bon ange* correlates
roughly to individual consciousness.

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a static religion). There have always been *lwa* that represent all possible positions in the social spectrum, from poor to rich, male to female, colonized to colonizer. However, those *lwa* that have long served to mirror certain identity positions for Haitian Vodouists, now come to reflect the identities of newcomers to the religion. As one new practitioner explained to me, "People think that Vodou is only for black people, but some of the *lwa* are white, not just light-skinned, but all white, like me!" Another new practitioner recounts, "It was important for me to find a religion which accepted gays. In Haiti there are *peristyles* just for gay men, and some of the *lwa* are gay too". The *lwa* Ogoun, speaking to Karen McCarthy Brown through Mama Lola justifies the identity politics of non-Haitians belonging to Vodou in a different way. Says Ogoun to Brown, a white scholar:

> Did you know the Ginen spirit can love a white person? You don't know that? I think you have a *rasin* Ginen [an African root] in you...and Indian root...Jewish, too? You are a very intelligent woman. You could be a doctor, a lawyer. But no, you chose this. You don't have to come here. But you are searching...searching. You are digging. Why did you choose this? Because you have an African root in you! Do you understand what I am saying to you? (2001: 138)

The "African root" that Ogoun detects in Brown signifies more than a literal connection to an African heritage. It also provides a way into Vodou for those coming from outside the tradition. When Dessalines renamed all Haitians black regardless of their racial origin, he also re-categorized all non-Haitians white, regardless of their racial origins. What changed, when Dessalines re-baptized his world, was not so much the world itself, but how it was understood. Suddenly, black no longer meant what it once did. This ability to rename, transfigure, and re-conceptualise identity illustrates something of the ontological fluidity of Haitian Vodou. It is into this ontological improvisation that newcomers to Vodou step. By renaming along racial lines Dessalines re-signified that being Haitian meant being born in Haiti, regardless of race, shade of skin, or ethnic heritage. But Dessalines also circumscribed Haitian identity. Being *blan*, being white, meant you belonged outside. By finding in Brown an "African root" and pointing out that Vodou spirits "can love a white person," Ogoun explained how and why Brown, a seeming outsider, belonged to the Vodou religion. Ogoun's reconfiguring of

Brown's identity parallels the constant transformation and layering of identity exemplified in historical narratives like that of Dessalines. When newcomers search out Vodou they are also searching out religious affiliation or identity. In so doing, they must negotiate the ways in which Vodou intersects with race, gender, economic difference and a host of other identity positions in order to justify their belonging to a religion that is so closely identified with the geography and culture of Haiti. While some newcomers to Vodou find a mirror in those *lwa* of Haiti who—being white or having an unconventional sexuality—"look" like them, others find in themselves some aspect of identity (such as a black heritage, for instance) that links them to the religion. In both cases, issues of identity are very close to the surface for new practitioners and those genealogically linked to Vodou alike.

Is This For Real? Policing Identity

The complex issues of identity and identification are acutely visible in online forums and listservs dedicated to Vodou. These forums attract newcomers who are searching for knowledge about the religion as well as for religious community, but they are also populated by Vodouists whose practice of Vodou predates their online participation in listserv communities. One of the pitfalls often cited by online researchers is the risk that people online are not who they say they are.[109] In the introduction to *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan explain despite the fact that online experience is anchored in the "real" participation of individual users, it is also "disembodied" because the "physical interpersonality and the attending social cues for communication are absent" (6). While I was able to meet or speak by phone with many of those I initially met online and while listserv members often

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[109] For a critical discussion of identity in cyberspace or virtual reality, see Allucquère Rosanne Stone's "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories About Virtual Cultures" [*Cyberspace: First Steps*, Michael Benedikt (ed.), Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991. 81-118] and Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* [NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995]. See also Byron Burkhalter's "Reading Race Online: Discovering Racial Identity in Usenet Discussions" [*Communities in Cyberspace*, Mark Smith and Peter Kollock (eds), NY: Routledge, 1999].

meet each other in actual spaces and times, there are occasions when no one can be sure if the people they are interacting with online are "really" who they say they are. Time and time again the online practitioners with whom I spoke expressed indifference when it came to verifying the "real" identity of listserv members. One online practitioner suggested that policing the veracity of (online) identity was something best left to the *lwa* of Vodou: "the spirits know who you are, what you are doing." Another comment illustrated overt tolerance for the possibility that some people represent themselves online as something other than their essential and biological identities: "sometimes people get born into the wrong body, women get born into men's bodies a lot, in Haiti they are called *masisi*, they dress like women, wear lipstick. So if they come online of course they are going to act like women, of course they will." I asked one of the moderators of the Vodou Magic Listserv if she was concerned about whether or not people were who they said they were online. As I asked more and more leading questions about the identity of listserv members, the moderator, undoubtedly seeing through my line of questioning, got exasperated with me. "It just is what it is," she told me in no uncertain terms "of course people lie on the internet. I am sure some of the people on the listserv are not what they say they are, but they are learning about Vodou anyways, aren't they? What does it matter if a man says he is a women or a woman says she is a man? The list is about Vodou, not about people's sex." I was impressed with her insistence that real world identity was unimportant in online forums such as hers. But surely, I thought, issues of authenticity matter to Vodouists. I tried to get at the question another way. "What if," I asked, "somebody comes on the list and poses as a Haitian, as a Haitian [Vodou] priest, an expert?" Again, she dismissed my line of questioning, saying, "nobody can pretend to be an expert in Vodou. You either know it or you don't know it. You can't pretend. People ask your advice on how to serve and you give them good advice or you are full of shit. It is easy to see who is real and who is bullshitting. We did have one man who was on here talking big, saying he had been initiated in Africa, all kinds of stuff like that. I pointed out to him, and everybody else on the list, that he didn't seem to know the first thing

about [conducting Vodou rituals]. People on the list stopped talking to him. He went away." "Maybe he just signed up as a different person," I countered. "Maybe," she answered, still unconcerned. "Maybe then he will *really* learn something about Vodou." In online forums, where people are known by the words they type, behaviour is of paramount importance. This is not to suggest that identity is unimportant. On the contrary, issues of race, nationalism, sexuality and gender in relation to the Vodou religion are often topics of discussion in online forums such as the Vodou Magic Listserv. However, these issues tend to be discussed in relation to how Vodou is represented and understood, rather than in terms of how practitioners who signify different identities come to belong (or not belong) to the Vodou religion. For Vodouists on the web, as for Vodouists elsewhere, essential notions of identity seem to be far less important that the practices of Vodou. But how are the practices of Vodou reconfigured in cyberspace?

In the virtual meeting grounds of cyberspace the stories of Jean-Jacques Dessalines and other *lwa* of Vodou are told and retold in ways not unlike the retelling of such narratives in actual Vodou communities and events. In such online storytelling (much like its offline counterpart) varying aspects of Dessalines' character are emphasized, practitioners correct one another about historical and religious details, and ritual specialists add their voices to the retelling. A simple search of the archives of one listserv revealed that, in its approximately three year history, the story of Ogoun Dessalines was retold 7 times. More impressively, perhaps, the story of Erzulie Dantor (another *lwa* who makes an appearance in the Haitian Revolution) was shared among listserv members no less than 31 times. The *lwa* Erzulie Dantor, syncretic with a representation of the Virgin Mary from Poland (a black Virgin named Mater Salvatore, or Our Lady of Czestochowa) is depicted in Vodou cosmology as a single mother and sometimes as a lesbian, although just as often she is depicted as having (often troubled) romantic relationships with men. When angered, Dantor can be a difficult and occasionally violent spirit. Female *lwas* such as the Erzulies

(the family of spirits to which Erzulie Dantor belongs) often reflect the social roles and identities of women practitioners. As Brown explains, "in the caricature like clarity of Vodou possession-performances the Ezili sort out, by acting out, the conflicting feelings and values in a given life situation. By interacting with the faithful as individuals and groups, all the Vodou spirits clarify the options in people's lives; and the Ezilies do this especially well for women" (2001: 222). Erzulie Dantor's quick temper can be linked, in part, to her membership in the Petwo nation of Vodou. Nations in Vodou correspond loosely to the various African spiritualities or sects that came to make up Vodou as a whole. In addition to Petwo, most urban Vodou practices create ritual and altar spaces for the Rada and Congo nations (or *nachon*), thus only maintaining a few of the many nations that still circulate in the secret societies and rural practices of Vodou in Haiti. Unlike Rada and Congo, which are understood to be African nations, Petwo is a nation of spirits that was created on the soil of Haiti and carries the remnants of the Carib spirituality that existed on the island before colonization. Dantor (like other Petwo spirits) represents, in part, the often unspoken hybridity of the Caribbean where the influence of the indigenous people of the region often goes unacknowledged. In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren explains that the Petwo gods in Haiti were born out of a need for action under the new and horrific conditions of colonization experience by the transplanted African slaves. As Deren explains, the Petwo nation of spirits was born out of a "cosmic' rage:

> it is not evil, it is the rage against the evil fate which the African suffered, the brutality of his displacement and his enslavement. It is the violence that rose out of that rage, to protest against it. It is the crack of the slave-whip sounding constantly, a never-to-be-forgotten ghost, in the Petro rites. It is the raging revolt of slaves against the Napoleonic forces. And it is the delirium of their triumph. For it was the Petro cult, born in the hills, nurtured in secret, which gave both the moral force and the actual organization to the escaped slaves who plotted and trained, swooped down upon the plantations and led the rest of the slaves in the revolt that, by 1804, had made of Haiti the second free colony in the western hemisphere, following the United States. (62)

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It is to this, the Petwo nation, characterized by the fiery temperament of its spirits and its links to the Haitian Revolution, that Erzulie Dantor belongs. During the Revolution, Dantor the divinity assumed human form in order to fight alongside her people. In a twist common to the narratives of Haitian history, Dantor was wounded during the course of the Revolution, not by her enemies, but by those she fought alongside who, thinking she might betray them, cut out her tongue: "Danto was rendered speechless by her own people, people fighting on the same side, people who could not trust her to guard their secrets. When Ezile Danto possesses someone these days, she cannot speak. The only sound the spirit can utter is a uniform '*dey-dey-dey*'" (Brown 2001: 229)[110]. Unlike Dessalines, whose human form was restored when he assumed the status of divinity, the divine form of Erzulie Dantor continues to bear the wounds gained during her period of mortality. The act of betrayal in which Dantor incurred her wounds is constantly remembered in contemporary possession rituals where Erzulie Dantor, unable to speak to practitioners, must find some other means of communication. Like Dessalines, Dantor the *lwa* does not offer a comforting or romanticized version of resistance and revolution. Given their explicit connection to the fraught history of Haiti it is interesting that *lwa* such as Dessalines and, to a greater extent Erzulie Dantor, hold such interest for online practitioners.

The epistemological praxis of Vodou encourages revision. From the narratives of the *lwa*, practitioners draw out those aspects and characteristics that are most relevant to their lives and social conditions, suppressing those that are less relevant. One might guess that newcomers, who have no direct genealogical or geographic relationship to Haiti, would suppress the aspects of the *lwa* that tie them to the complex history of a country from which they are removed. Surprisingly, perhaps, the opposite seems to hold true. Dessalines and Dantor are popular in online forums precisely because of their connection to the revolutionary history of Haiti. In the stories of Dessalines and Dantor, newcomers to Vodou seem to find an empowering (although not uncomplicated) image of

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[110] Many Vodouists describe Erzulie Dantor as making the sound '*ke-ke-ke*'.

Haitian Vodou as a religion that inspires revolutions[111] and, in perhaps a more individualistic sense, subversion. Indeed, Dantor in particular, is often cast as a seditious, powerful woman who fought alongside men in the Revolution and whose very sexuality is subversive. Sometimes such interpretations by newcomers to the religion, particularly those that are seen to make some sort of revisionist claim about Haitian culture (as opposed to Vodou itself), are challenged by those who claim a Haitian Vodou lineage. These debates are particularly notable online where they play out in a public forum. Dantor's sexuality is one such point of conflict between online practitioners and Haitian Vodouists. Upon encountering Vodou, some individuals, who find themselves thrust into the spiritual marketplace due to intolerance in their inherited religious community, may romanticize its tolerant approach to different identity groups. Newcomers who are seeking religions in which they can find tolerance and acceptance tend to valorize Vodou as a religion which, for example, accepts homosexuals as practicing members and even as "ordained" ritual specialists. Such individuals may conceptualize Dantor as a lesbian, suppressing those aspects of her narrative which link her romantically to men. While Dantor's sexuality is often a flash point between newcomers to the religion and Haitian Vodouists (something which may account for the frequent discussion about her in online forums) the discussion is never framed in simplistic terms. Whether Dantor *is* or *is not* a lesbian is not up for discussion so much as whether her occasional romantic interest in women is a defining characteristic of her identity as a *lwa* of Haitian Vodou.

A Haitian priestess called Mambo Marie Pierre, who often visited the online forum Vodou Magic[112] where Dantor was frequently discussed, explained to me (after a listserv exchange in which Dantor's sexuality was a central topic)

[111] The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804)—which led to the ousting of the French government and military from Haiti—was said to have been initiated by a Vodou ceremony in the Bois Caiman conducted by the *houngan* Boukman (and, sometimes it is also said, an unnamed *mambo*). The blessing of the *lwa* garnered during this ceremony is often cited as the reason for the revolution's success.

[112] At the request of list moderators and to preserve anonymity, listserv names have been changed.

that, "Erzulie ge rouge,[113] who you call Dantor, is a mother to *all* Vodouisants. She protects her children, but she also gets angry with them if they do not do what she wishes. She loves men *and* women and she protects all her children but she gets very angry if a man beats a woman or hurts his child." I asked if the insistence by some newcomers on the list that Erzulie Dantor is a lesbian bothered her. "No. It is not important. Erzulie ge rouge loves all her children; of course, she protects her lesbian and gay children too. She is concerned about women, so maybe that is why some think she is a lesbian. But some people want to make her strong. She *is* a very strong, a very powerful spirit, but she can be soft too. She falls in love a lot. Sometimes she gets hurt by the ones she loves. She is angered by the sight of blood. That is why when we give a ceremony for her it is *mange sec.*[114] Sometimes when she comes [in possession] she vomits blood. She is strong, but sometimes she is hurt too." Mambo Marie Pierre astutely observes that the revisioning of Dantor into a lesbian deity (as opposed to a deity who offers protection to lesbian practitioners) comes from a group of practitioners who wish to see her lesbianism as subversive, empowering for women, and a reversal of a dominant patriarchal system. By pointing out that despite her strength Erzulie Danto is also vulnerable—an observation that recalls how Dantor was wounded by the "ones she loved" during the Revolution—Mambo Marie Pierre complicates this revisionary impulse. She does not deny Dantor's connection to lesbianism (although she would maintain that Dantor is a protector of lesbians, rather than one herself), but suggests that it is not an important aspect of her identity. Instead she focuses on Dantor's nurturing qualities, on how she must be treated with care and reverence by practitioners (in the preparation of a *mange sec* ceremony, for example), and on her vulnerabilities. The retelling of the narratives that lie behind the *lwa* who possess their practitioners is an important part of the Vodou religion. In cyberspace, these usually oral stories are transformed into texts visible to anyone with an internet connection and an interest in the discussion. In addition, these collectively created texts remain open to revision. While oral traditions like

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[113] Erzulie *ge rouge* literally translates as Erzulie of the red eyes. *Ge rouge* is an appellation that often signals that a *lwa* belongs to the Petwo nation.
[114] Literally, dry, or without blood sacrifice.

Vodou and stories such as those of Dessalines or Dantor allow for change and transformation, the hierarchical authority found in many Vodou communities (where the *houngan* or *mambo* may have a definitive interpretation of a particular story) is often missing in the context of cyberspace. In the narratives of the *lwa* told and retold online, newcomers to Vodou may find examples of characters who embrace a concurrence of contradictory identities that seem to mirror their own particular understanding of themselves, but they must also inevitably interact with a particularly Haitian interpretation of these narratives. A constant presence on the Vodou Magic listserv, Mambo Marie Pierre often inserts herself into online discussions about the *lwa*. She acts as a teacher and her position as a both a *mambo* and a Haitian means that she is usually treated with respect and her views are seen as authoritative. When Mambo Marie Pierre "polices" discussions about Vodou and issues such as sexuality, she does so in order to maintain and transmit the cultural specificity of Haitian Vodou. Her ability to see where newcomers to the religion "are coming from" when they assert particular views of Vodou or of the *lwa* and her tendency to complicate simplistic discussions by telling stories that shed light on the complexities of a given topic means that discussion and debate often proceed without rancour or anxiety. This is not always the case, however.

On another listserv, a similar discussion of Erzulie Dantor and lesbianism turned hostile. When I asked one Haitian participant, Jean, about his views on the discussion he expressed frustration with a preoccupation with sexuality that he saw as "not at all Haitian" and "not concerning Haitians." Jean felt that Vodou was an intrinsic part of Haitian culture and that discussions of Dantor and lesbianism were impinging on a particularly Haitian way of understanding sexuality. I asked if he thought queerness was a particularly North American concern. In his frustration, he questioned my own line of questioning: "Of course there are gays everywhere, in Haiti too. Vodou is a very tolerant religion. But this thread is stupid. There was not even such a thing [or such a word as lesbian] in Creole for a long time. The words came in with the Americans. These are

American ideas and they are because of how Americans saw things. They saw the priests [possessed by female *lwa*] wearing the *lwa*'s clothes, using perfume and they were all, 'look at the cross-dressers'. They got it wrong, like everything else they did. So the joke's on them. Dantor is a beautiful, strong woman, she has a child. These people want to make her like them. They want to try and turn Karnaval into a Pride parade, but [they] will be in for a surprise, wo! In Haiti this will never happen. Why do you want to talk about sex[uality] in the Vodou religion? Is it because it will get you a good job? The "Vodou homosexual" makes a good [title for a] book. I am sorry if this offends you, but there are more important things for people like you to talk about, like [our] history, our songs. Vodou should be recognized as a *bona fide* religion like Christianity, Judaism. [...] I am not saying that Vodou is intolerant. I just think that these are American ideas, not Haitian ones." Arguably, Vodou *is* a religion that is relatively tolerant of "queerness"—people who scholars of queer studies (among others) would classify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual may be initiated into all levels of the religion, including as priests and priestesses—but this tolerance does not negate the stigma associated with homosexuality in Haiti. The close links between Vodou and Catholicism, as well as the more contemporary popularity of Protestantism in Haiti (both Catholicism and Protestantism being religions which officially label homosexuality immoral) have fed the stigma associated with homosexuality in Haiti. In addition, the reported presence of transsexuals in Vodou ceremonies has become fodder for Christian missionaries who continue to demonize the Vodou religion as sexually licentious.

Sexuality is a complex issue in Haiti and for Haitian Vodouists tied, as it often is, to negative and racialized images of the religion. In *Infectious Rhythms: Metaphors of Contagion and The Spread of African Culture*, Barbara Browning examines how a complex confluence of racism, colonialism, economic exploitation, and cultural exchange comes together in metaphors and media images of Africa and the Caribbean as "contagions". These metaphors of infection and contagion were acutely visible with the advent of the AIDS crisis, where Haiti

was (falsely) blamed as an originary point for AIDS in the US. Haitians and Haitian immigrants were severely stigmatized by association with AIDS.[115] In this context, sexuality, and particularly sexuality that is configured as deviant, was (re)configured as a transmitter of disease. The implications for the association made between Haiti and (sexually transmitted) disease have been dire for Haitians. Social stigmatizing has led to economic and medical policies that have made it hard for Haitians to receive medical care or even medicine itself. But as Browning explains, the problematic connections made between sex, disease and blackness can have even more drastic consequences: "It is the conflation of economic, spiritual, and sexual exchange that has allowed for the characterization of diasporic culture as a chaotic or uncontrollable force which can only be countered by military or police violence" (7). Jean's palpable frustration with what he saw as American notions of sexuality that do not always easily align with Haitian ones illustrates more than the occasional rifts in online Vodou groups. It also illustrates an awareness of how a "sexualized" image of Vodou can have far reaching implications for Haiti and Haitians, a complexity that newcomers to the religion may have difficulty grasping, at least initially. His astute observations about the academic currency that may be gained by studying sexuality in the context of Vodou also points to an awareness of how scholarship can mediate Vodou, disseminating an image of the religion that can have very real affects on both Vodou practitioners and the Haitian people. The complex intersection between sexuality, religion, and race—something that has marked US-Haitian relations on both small (interpersonal) and large (institutional) scales—has implications and repercussions for contemporary Vodou communities. The economic conditions and national and international policies that have stigmatized Haiti and Haitians in relation to things like AIDS, have become embedded in the signifiers of Vodou that circulate via media representations and popular culture.

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[115] The work of Paul Farmer on this issue is seminal. See for example, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992]. See also Emily Martin's work in *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture—From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1994].

Although some practitioners are wary of the way in which "queerness" is configured across transnational space, fearing the interpolation of Haitian culture by what they see as North American values and ideals, Browning points out that the interest of newcomers to Vodou is not the only way in which North American queer communities figure in relation to Haitian identity and community. As Browning explains, "in the U.S., racist and xenophobic policies implicating Haitians for the spread of HIV have led to the creation of political coalitions between Haitian immigrants and gay and lesbian activists" (36). Such cultural crossroads are suffused with both danger and possibility (35). The dissolution of cultural specificity is always a risk of intercultural contact, particularly when that intercultural contact is embedded within unequal power relations. Yet, while Vodou is a marginalized and often stigmatized religion, it is not a socially powerless force. The aggregating qualities of Vodou allow Vodou communities to encompass the cultural difference (including, but not limited to, sexual difference) embodied by newcomers to the religion. Jean himself noted that Vodou is a tolerant religion. His issue was less with the potential for inauthentic Vodou practices or discourses perpetuated by newcomers to the religion, and more with the attention issues of sexuality were receiving in relation to online discussions of Vodou. As he explained, there were "more important" things to talk about. Policing how issues such as sexuality are understood in relationship to Vodou is seldom about policing actual Vodou practices, as in who gets to participate in actual Vodou rituals, and is more about policing the virtual image of Vodou that circulates in public venues, such as the internet.

Vodou practitioners monitor the public image of the Vodou religion because they are well aware of the power of media to influence the popularity of the religion, as well as its power to incite negative stereotyping and religious persecution. Media images and events operate as catalyses for newcomers to search out Vodou communities, a search that frequently leads them to online groups. Such was the case with the documentary film *Des Homes et Des Dieux*

(*Of Men and Gods*)[116] produced by anthropologist, Anne Lescot and filmmaker Laurence Magloire in 2002. This film—which shows gay men in Haiti negotiating the stigma associated with their homosexuality in par through their relationship to Vodou—was screened at gay and lesbian film festivals across North America. Reggie, a recent subscriber to the Vodou Magic listserv, is one of several newcomers to Vodou I encountered who cite this documentary as a reason for their newfound interest in the religion. Although the film may instigate an active search for information or religious community, the interest of these individuals in Vodou is usually conceptualized as a component of a spiritual journey. Reggie explains, "when I was watching that film I was drawn to Vodou. I knew that I was a child of Erzulie Freda[117] too. As a Jamaican [living in Philadelphia] I had to hide [being gay] from my family. I brought girls home to meet my aunt and cousins. The girls knew I was gay and they wanted to help me out. I could never tell my family. I always felt bad, because my family was Christian, and sometimes I would hear them talking about homosexuality as immoral. I think Christianity is a very oppressive religion, not just to gays, but to [American] blacks and Jamaicans as well. It is a religion that was imposed on us by the white man. I never felt like a Christian. When I was in my twenties I started to let my hair dread naturally. My family was not happy about it. They thought I was becoming Rasta. But you can't be out in Rasta religion. Not at all. I believed in a lot of what Rastas believe, but I was still searching. Then I saw the film and I just knew that I belonged to Vodou and to Erzulie. I went on [a Vodou] listserv and right away I met a Haitian man who was gay. I sent him a picture of me and he said my dreads were because of the *lwa* Simbi, that I was connected to this water spirit and to Erzulie too. Now I *know* Erzulie Freda is my *mèt tèt*[118] because I had a ceremony in New York to find out my *mèt tèt*. But I knew as soon as I watched that film." Although he was already on a quest for a new religious identity, the

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[116] *Des Hommes et Des Dieux (Of Men and Gods)* [Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2004].

[117] Erzulie Freda, a counterpart to Erzulie Dantor, is often conceptualized as a patron of gay men. She features prominently in the documentary *Des Hommes et Des Dieux*.

[118] *Mèt tèt* translates into master of the head and refers to the particular lwa who acts as guardian to an individual practitioner. The met tèt ceremony involves a ritual head washing.

documentary, *Des Hommes et des Dieux* was clearly a catalyst for a shift in Reggie's religious identity. Reggie's movement away from Christianity was influenced by a black nationalist discourse that sees Christianity as a tool of colonization and the continued oppression of black people. However, his embrace of Rastafarianism was frustrated by the religion's intolerance toward homosexuality. In Vodou, Reggie—who plans to undergo initiation in Haiti in the next couple of years—found a religion that allows him to celebrate both his identity as a gay man and as a black man. Reggie, like other newcomers to Vodou, identifies with aspects of black nationalism. Reggie's spiritual journey was informed, in part, by his belief that his family religion, Christianity, was not "naturally" or "originally" a black religion, but was one that had been imposed upon black people during successive periods of colonialism and slavery. Reggie's movement first toward Rastafarianism and then toward Vodou was also a movement away from Christianity. In both Vodou and Rastafarianism, Reggie saw religions that allowed him to reclaim a (pre-Christian) black heritage. For black nationals, Vodou can be a way of reaching through the Caribbean to an African past in order to overcome the legacy of racism and colonialism through cultural and religious affiliation that eschews whiteness. Repositioning the terms so often used to deride black religions, Robert Elliot Fox explains, "To proclaim oneself a pagan, to practice 'mumbo jumbo', is a strategy of reclamation and reversal" (1995: 27). When absorbed into such discursive reversals, the Vodou tradition becomes a component of "memory", reclamation of a lineage, identity, and culture that have been altered and diminished through the ravages of racism, colonialism and slavery. Such discourses of black nationalism intersect in complex ways with both discourses of Haitian nationalism and the growing public visibility of Vodou.

In both Haiti and the diaspora, Haitian nationalist movements are emerging that are grassroots and populist in nature. Such groups may arise out of organizations seeking improved conditions and wages for workers, an improvement in women's rights, or health care for the poor. Almost all of these

organizations emerge out of frustration with the failure of the Haitian government to provide even basic services for Haitians, anger at the interpolation of Haiti by foreign economic institutions, and fear of the privatization, which has already led to an escalation in the cost of many public services and institutions. Thus the nationalism of these grassroots organizations is closely linked to global concerns. As Schiller and Fouron found in their research for *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home*, there exists "a sector of people among the poor, students, and professionals in Haiti and the diaspora who [have] been involved with political organising and [use] their nationalism directly to challenge the hegemony of global capitalism" (254). In this way, Haitian nationalist movements—many of which involved Haitians living both in Haiti and the diaspora—have forged tangible connections to anti-globalization movements around the globe: "Haitian transnational connections provide links not only between families but to organizations and social movements that build a collective vision of social justice as well" (256). At the same time that these Haitian nationalist movements have been emerging, black nationalism has been moving away from its radical separatist agenda,[119] and also embracing aspects of anti-globalization movements. What has emerged is an intersection between black nationalism and the nationalist projects of many African and Caribbean countries, including Haiti. In the Haitian context, the search for social justice "at home" aligns with a parallel search for social justice for not only black people but also for those disenfranchised by global economic infrastructures in the US and around the globe. The Canada Haiti Action Network and the suborganization, Canada out of Haiti,[120]—grassroots organizations that aim to raise awareness about the interference of Canada and other foreign governments in the politics and economics of Haiti—are examples of the overlap between black nationalist, Haitian nationalist, and anti-globalization movements. This organization, although

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[119] The black power movement in the United States is often associated with black nationalism and the call by some black nationals (such as Malcolm X) to pursue the separatist politics of African American self-determination. See, for example, Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* [with Alex Haley, New York: Grove Press, 1965].

[120] Discussed in "Vodou Located: Navigating Deterritorialized Spaces", chapter 1 of this text. See also http://www.canadahaitiaction.ca/about.php (last accessed July 6th, 2006).

devoted to the specifics of the Haitian situation, forms coalitions with and draws support from diverse black nationalist and anti-globalization organizations. Speaking about their experiences with a conference organized by the Haitian American Community Action Network (a US equivalent of the Canada Haiti Action Network), Glick-Schiller and Fouron observe that Haitians born in the US or having lived the majority of their lives there clearly understood the importance of mobilizing political organizations that were public and that made connections to other organizations. Such individuals have a particular vision of what it means to be Haitian, one that is not so closely bound to notions of geographic location: "Their experience growing up in the United States convinced them that they needed to have a public identity. Public identity meant that they had a label and a culture they could claim as their own. This identity became Haitian, but for them Haitian was not confined to a concern for building a Haitian community in the Unites States" (160). Instead, the public Haitian identity is what Fouron and Glick-Schiller call a "flexible referent", which is something that signifies belonging to multiple places regardless of geographic separation or the duration of such separation from the "homeland". In this way even Haitians born outside of Haiti can come to understand themselves as Haitian. Perhaps more interestingly, an understanding of identity as a "flexible referent" allows individuals to forge allegiances with others who share similar political concerns even if they do not share a national identity.

Conferences devoted to strategies for the improvement of the Haitian condition in Haiti and its diaspora, such as the one referenced by Fouron and Glick-Schiller, are almost always populated by "friends of Haiti",[121] non-Haitians who have a vested interest in and concern for Haiti. These "friends of Haiti" often come to such conferences and organizations because they see the same issues of social justice within grassroots Haitian nationalism movements that they are fighting toward in anti-globalisation rallies and black nationalist organizations. However, when these individuals are categorized as "friends of Haiti," their own

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[121] See "Vodou Located: Navigating Deterritorialized Spaces" in this text for more discussion.

national and ethnic identities are subsumed by their political allegiances with Haiti and Haitians. "Friends of Haiti", much like newcomers to Vodou, may be black or white, American or Canadian, but they are identified solely through their political connections to Haiti. In 2005, groups such as the Canada Haitian Action Network organized an international conference for "Haitian compatriots and friends of Haiti" to strategize political action. The organizers of this conference chose to name it the Bwa Kayiman Congress, a title that references to the Vodou ritual in the Bwa Kayiman (a forest in Haiti) that is said to have marked the start of the successful Haitian Revolution.[122] Although never mentioning Vodou overtly, organizers make the link between the conference and the historical event clear: "Kongrè Bwa Kayiman 2005 was organized in the same spirit that our ancestors organized themselves on August 14, 1791."[123] The Bwa Kayiman ceremony, closely linked not only to the history of Haiti but the history of Vodou, has become a symbol of pride for Haitian nationals. As the first black colony to overthrow a colonial government, Haiti itself has become a powerful symbol for black nationalists. In embracing a public Haitian identity that is linked not only to Haitian nationalism but to broader issues of global social justice and black nationalism, such individuals posit a particular version of Haitianness that embraces a pride in black identity and African heritage. This resurgence of black pride in relation to nationalist projects and African heritage is visible in the Haitian *racine*, or roots Vodou movement (which is closely associated with the Haitian popular music movement, *mizik racine*[124]). Speaking specifically about its manifestation in the diaspora, Elizabeth McAlister explains that the *racine* movement represents a conscious break among Haitians from a national and cultural connection with Frenchness and a conscious (re)connection to notions of Africanness:

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[122] For further discussion of the Bwa Kayimen ceremony see Maya Deren *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953) [NY: Documentext/McPherson, 1983] and Joan Dayan *Haiti, History and the Gods*, [Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1995].

[123] August 14, 1791 is seen as the official start date of the Haitian Revolution, as well as the date of the Bwa Kaiyman Vodou ceremony. See http://www.fondasyonmapou.org/memberspage.html (last accessed July 6th, 2006).

[124] Further discussed in "Vodou Groove: Transnational Tricks of Transmission" in this text.

The Haitian bourgeoisie has cultivated its French Creole national culture and French-based style partly in response to their wish to establish their equality with white people and to distance themselves from the international image of Haiti as a subordinate, primitive culture. *Rasin* movement members, though some are from the bourgeoisie, wish to turn that image on its head and embrace it for its positive wisdom and history. The values of "acting bad" and "acting African", which in Haiti are associated with the "play" values of Rara, with Kreyol, and with the popular classes, are reworked in this second diaspora. African values are enacted in a positive way, where they are validated and privileged. (2002: 192)

In embracing African values as positive, Haitian nationals are "returning" to Vodou with a renewed sense of cultural pride, while black nationals embrace the religion as emblematic of black empowerment. The Haitian Vodou *rasin* movement has multiple influences including, most notably, Rastafarianism.[125] Religions, such as Vodou or Rastafarianism, are understood as birthrights by black nationals, a conceptualisation that renders these religions somewhat transmutable. Reggie's ability to reconceptualize his locked hair from "dreads" (a Rastafarian signifier) to the locked hair associated with the Vodou *lwa* Simbi is an example of how the signifiers of religion become synchronic for many black nationals. These individuals seldom understand themselves as newcomers to Vodou. Instead, they see their newfound interest in the religion as a return. However, the increased publicity Vodou has garnered on the internet, via scholarship such as Karen McCarthy Brown's ethnography (*Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*) and media such as *Des Hommes et des Dieux*, as well as through grassroots political movements such as the *racine* movement, renders these journeys of "return" more possible. Undoubtedly, the increased visibility of Vodou in the public sphere has implications for the religion. As Laënnec Hurbon observes, transmitters such as popular music have literally moved Vodou out of the sacred spaces it once inhabited. Hurbon suggests that the publicity brought Vodou by the publicizing structures of *misik racine* is truly unprecedented:

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[125] As Elizabeth McAlister explains in *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002]: "Haitian *rasin* styles have been developed through a broad cultural conversation with the Jamaican Rastafari movement, which made its way to Haiti through the reggae on the radio and through the interactions between Haitian and Jamaican migrant workers in southern Florida" (192).

Many musical *gwoup-rasi-n* ("roots groups") bring aspects of Vodou into public view, such as "trance" and "possession" by the *lwa* (spirits of deities). This situation is absolutely new in Haitian society. Until now, a Haitian Vodouist was supposed to be "possessed" by a *lwa* only within the context of a ceremony taking place in an *ounfo*. Moving that important aspect of Vodou into public view implies a transformation of Vodou's meaning. (2001: 123)

What effect such transformation of meaning will have on the actual practices of Vodou in the long term is difficult to predict. Certainly, the increased public visibility of Vodou has had an impact on the accessibility and popularity of the religion. Not only has it broken away from the *ounfo*, or sacred temples of Haiti, it has also been moved out of the basements of diasporic ritual specialists, and out of the secret and private realm in which it was once predominantly practiced.

It is this displacement that Jacques Derrida speaks about in his work on media and religion,[126] when he suggests that religion must inevitably both conspire with and react against the forces of globalization and mediatization:

Religion today allies itself with tele-technoscience, to which it reacts with all its forces. It is, on the one hand, globalization: it produces, weds, exploits the capital and knowledge of tele-mediatization; neither the trips and global spectacularizing and knowledge of the Pope, nor the interstate dimensions of the "Rushdie affair," nor planetary terrorism would otherwise be possible, at this rhythm—and we could multiply such indications ad infinitum. But, on the other hand, it reacts immediately, simultaneously, declaring war against that which gives it this new power only at the cost of dislodging it from all its proper places, in truth from place itself, from the taking place of its truth (1998:46).

While the place, and thus the displacement, of which Derrida speaks is more about the ideological ground upon which religion stands and makes its claims and less about literal place, it is worth noting that for Vodouists, displacement and dislocation is nothing new. Vodouists are cosmologically connected first to Haiti

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[126]See, for example, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone" (Samuel Weber trans.) [*Religion*, Jacques Derrida and G. Vattimo (eds), Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1998. 1-78] and "Above All, No Journalists!" (Samuel Weber trans.) [*Religion and Media*, Samuel Weber and Hent de Vries (eds), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001. 56-93].

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and then to the mythic world of *Ginen*—a type of 'virtual' Africa that is neither wholly present day Africa, nor Africa of the past but that is nonetheless intrinsically connected to concepts of home, heritage and history while remaining forever intangible. Perhaps it is this originary sense of displacement that allows Vodou to adapt to the dislocation constituted by contemporary forms of globalization and mediatization. The literal and violent separation of people from their homeland that occurred when slaves were brought to the "new world" via the Middle Passage, as well as the reclamation of a home-that-is-not-quite-a-home, as those same slaves took the land of Haiti from the French, are defining aspects of the Vodou religion. While some may have guessed that the influx of new practitioners to Vodou, many of whom can lay no genealogical claim to either of these defining moments, would abstract the practical specificity of the Vodou religion, it seems the opposite holds true. It is to the stories of the Haitian Revolution and its overthrow of slavery embedded within the cosmology of Vodou that new practitioners gravitate. This speaks to the mobile religiosity of Vodou. Vodouists are accustomed, one might even argue, trained to scavenge ground upon which to stand within seemingly hostile (and dislocated) places. Undoubtedly, mediated spaces—forged out of contemporary conditions of globalization and a confluence of media forms and practices—generate new challenges for practitioners of Vodou. A matrix of media, from scholarship, to film, to the internet, has made the formerly secret and relatively inaccessible religion more accessible, drawing new practitioners to the religion. While some may have predicted that the mediatization and commodification of Vodou and the arrival of new practitioners who are not genealogically or geographically related to the religion would diminish both its ritual efficacy and its cultural specificity, this is not how practitioners tend to understand the growth of their religion. Instead, such newcomers—like the "friends of Haiti", who can become identified by their connection to a land that is not their home—reshape the intersubjective relationships that constitute Vodou. The connection of Vodou and new Vodouists to the discourses and movements of black nationalism is one way in which the intersubjective reach of the religion is reconfigured. The increased visibility of

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Vodou in the public sphere—via a matrix of media practices and representations—has reconstructed Vodou into an emblem of both black and Haitian national pride, forging transnational political connections that are also spiritual relationships. This is not to suggest that the influx of new practitioners to Vodou, the increased visibility of the religion via forms of media, or the commodification of the religion has no effect on Vodou. When Vodou is mediated, commodified and globalized, what changes is not so much the veracity, efficacy, or authenticity of its practices and discourses, but the shape of the intersubjective relationships that constitute its religious world.

Virtual Vodou (Part II): Techno-Vodou

> *When the Jewish people lost their home (the land of Israel) and God lost His (the temple), then a new way of being was devised and Jews became people of the book and not people of the temple or the land...That bodily loss is frequently overlooked, but for me it lies at the heart of the Talmud, for all its plenitude. The Internet, which we are continually told binds us all together, nevertheless engenders in me a similar sense of Diaspora, a feeling of being everywhere and nowhere. Where else but in the middle of Diaspora do you need a home page.*
> The Talmud and the Internet—Jonathan Rosen

Vodou, like many religions, has a visible and growing presence on the web. This online visibility is arguably an important factor in the burgeoning growth of Vodou in both North America and around the world, providing newcomers with new portals to the religion in the form of informational and educational websites, listservs, chat rooms and online stores. Of course, not all Vodouists have access to online Vodou. Access, whether to technology or to the Vodou religion itself, is a central concern of this analysis and accounting for the varying social and cultural factors that may either impede or encourage experience of online Vodou is certainly a consideration that has both structured my research and preoccupied online Vodou practitioners. It is equally important, however, to acknowledge the ways in which online Vodou impacts upon the lives, rhetorics and practices of those who do *not* use computer mediated communication technologies on a regular basis. Some scholars speak of a growing "digital divide" between those who have direct access to new media and computer technologies and those who do not due to a variety of social and economic factors. However, like other forms of media, new media and computer mediated communications can have an impact that reaches beyond the direct experience of computer and internet use. If this analysis of Vodou in cyberspace occasionally jumps the "digital divide" it does so not to minimize the social factors that lead to its existence, but in order to tease apart the ways in which online practices affect offline ones, and vice versa. In addition, this discussion is not meant to describe

the varying levels of access among Vodouists, but is instead interested in how a diversity of Vodouists living in many different places negotiate technologies and media in order to communicate, and perform, organize and attain religious services.

Many websites on Vodou are specifically geared toward those unfamiliar with the religion, imparting rudimentary information and dispelling common misconceptions. Websites are used to ply the services and products of countless *houngans* and *mambos* who have found a ready market in cyberspace. Newcomers to Vodou find themselves negotiating a wealth of information on the web as they decide where to cement their religious allegiances, how extensively to participate in offline religious practices, and which Vodou communities to join. For new practitioners to Vodou in particular, online experience is often a means of getting to actual community and ritual practice. The communication and (virtual) mobility made possible by the internet, also affects practitioners' experience of what Anthony Giddens has called "time-space distantiation", or the stretching out of social relationships that were once defined by proximity and are now defined by the connections between presence and absence (1991:64). Haiti— a sacred site and pilgrimage destination for many Vodouists—no longer "feels" very far away (or absent) to the new practitioner who can now book travel, accommodation, "native" tour guides and even ritual initiation online.[127] Similarly, online experiences allow diasporic Haitian practitioners to maintain connections to family, social and political organizations as well as religious community despite separation in both distance and duration. Communication technologies combine with travel and the circulation of goods and cultural signifiers in the maintenance of social, national, and religious connections over vast distances. Since the internet is not alone in (re)shaping time-space distantiation, it is explored here not as a stand-alone entity, but as a medium (or set of media) that intersects with other media, technologies, and modes of

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[127] See, for example, http://www.rootswithoutend.org/emporium/kanzo_regis1.html (last accessed July 6th, 2006).

transport. The ways practitioners enter this circulation of information and artifacts through online spiritual practices, offers a snapshot of how religions such as Vodou accommodate or negotiate issues such as cultural appropriation, popularization and commodification, religious tourism, and increased visibility and accessibility of their religion. Studying online presence and practice in this highly mediated, technologized, and informational world is an important aspect of understanding contemporary Vodou.

Although the term has fallen out of favor with some scholars frustrated with its lack of specificity, cyberspace is a word used frequently by online practitioners of Vodou who amend it to talk about cyberrituals and cyberspiritualities as well as more mundane concepts such as cybertalk and cybermalls. It is in this context of language use that this analysis of Vodou comes to be situated in cyberspace—that liminal place that is at once a signifier and a matrix of technology. Cyberspace, as it is understood in this analysis, is a hybridized terrain that blends virtual and actual times and spaces, making durable links to tangible geographies and histories even as it encourages networks and connections that span vast spaces and multiple temporalities. In the forward to *Prefiguring Cyberculture: An Intellectual History*, N. Katherine Hayles calls for a resuscitation of the term and puts forth a definition that revisions the concept of cyberspace that was prevalent when the term first came into popular use: "The 80's construction of cyberspace as an immaterial space where mind reigned supreme, captured in John Percy Barlow's quip that 'my everything was amputated,' is giving way to what...[some] call 'mixed reality' the seamless mixing of virtual and real spaces" through technologies (xiii). Daren Tofts, in the same volume, explains that virtuality has now come to signify the merging of the virtual and the real or, more specifically, an acknowledgment of the closeness of the two: "Simulation processes, both cultural and digital, have occasioned a new logic of appearances that dismantles the binary opposition anchoring our metaphysics in terms of a difference between reality and the seemliness of things"

(106). It is virtuality or a "mixed reality" that contemporary Vodou practitioners find themselves negotiating.

In the cultural traffic of the internet where everything bumps up against everything and everyone else, where the tiniest icon is a link to another religion, another culture, another interpretation, or another place and time, there is a resonance sounded between the practices of computer-mediated communication and diasporic mystical traditions, between the amorphous borders of transnational spaces and the fluid terrain of cyberspace. As Jonathan Rosen evokes in the quote that opens this chapter, the structures of the internet and computer mediated communication seem to reflect for many the ebb and flow of the diasporic condition. The processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, symbolized by the traffic of (and in) Vodou on (and through) the internet, are reflected in more tangible Vodou practices, sometimes altering aspects of the religion that seem far removed from the realms supposedly delineated by cyberspace. When, for instance, a growing cyberspiritual marketplace allows and encourages individuals to book Vodou initiations online—transporting legions of surfers to *peristyles* in Haiti—the effects of spiritual tourism are felt in places and by people who are offline much (if not all) of the time. The everyday practices of computer mediated communication interface both directly and tangentially with the rituals and cosmologies of Haitian Vodou, elucidating how new media and communication technology crisscross religious practice and identity. Although situated within a growing body of research into online religion (Brasher 2001, Campbell 2005, Hadden and Cowan 2000, Højsgaard and Warburg 2005), this analysis is not limited to online practices. Instead, "Virtual Vodou" explores how online practices and experiences are situated in real spaces and actively forge connections to actual places. Routes to and from Vodou websites need to be scrutinized to understand the interconnection between the growing visibility of Vodou in cyberspace and shifts in ritual practice and religious discourses.

Although the internet has increased the public visibility of Vodou and provided a point of access for interested religious seekers, it has also enabled Vodou practitioners to maintain both religious community and forms of religious practice despite geographic separation. My online research involved participation with three listservs devoted to the religion, all of which had emerged out of "real world" coordinates. The Vodou Magic listserv, for instance, was initiated by the owners of a botanica in the south western US. This botanica was opened in 1998 by Mambo Sandrine (an African American woman who converted to Vodou in the early 1990s) and her Haitian husband, Patrice. From the beginning Mambo Sandrine and Patrice used the small store as a space for ritual purposes. Mambo Sandrine performed readings (divinations) and other forms of spellwork in the back of the store where she also housed her altar spaces. Although large-scale Vodou ceremonies could not be held in the small shop, the place nevertheless became a gathering spot for many Vodou practitioners. By 2002 Mambo Sandrine's services had garnered significant word-of-mouth attention in the Phoenix area and she was seeing more and more clients. Many of these individuals, from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, began to express a wish to become more informed about Haitian Vodou. Mambo Sandrine decided to hold formalized "workshops" on Vodou in her shop. For a nominal fee (which was often waved if practitioners could not afford it), individuals could come to Mambo Sandrine's botanica and learn about the history of Haiti, the complex and extensive pantheon of Vodou gods, and how each different *lwa* should be ritually served. A short time after initiating these workshops Sandrine observed that, because of family or work obligations, many of those who signed up for the duration of the workshop were unable to attend all of the sessions (workshops usually ran for six to eight weeks, with one session per week). Feeling strongly that these individuals should still "get their money's worth," Mambo Sandrine began to search for a solution to this problem.

In 2002 Mambo Sandrine and Patrice launched a small website to advertise some religious products for online purchase. The website was never successful and it soon went offline but Patrice was very proud of the small botanica's online presence, which he wanted to reinstate. In 2002 Sandrine and Patrice also started the Vodou Magic listserv, primarily as a way of giving practitioners who had signed up for workshops access to a form of distance education in lieu of missed classes. After each session Mambo Sandrine would summarize what had been discussed and circulate this summary on the listserv. The listserv also functioned as a way for Mambo Sandrine's clients to keep in touch between workshop sessions and ritual events. "Of course," explains Sandrine, "a lot of people didn't have access to the internet, or didn't have a computer. Some would come here [to the store] whenever they could and use the computer here. Patrice had to switch from dial-up to cable, because we started to get line-ups! We also set up a computer exchange. People would bring in monitors, old computers, hard drives, parts, anything they had. Patrice would go through it all; he was always tinkering with computer parts back then. We got another computer set up from that and then we started to give computers away. Most people just had a dial up, but that was okay for the listserv, I guess." In a way typical of Vodou ritual specialists, Mambo Sandrine sought to look after the practitioners who congregated around her. For Mambo Sandrine, that social responsibility extended to helping her practitioners—many of whom were lower middle class—to maintain their religious education despite hectic work schedules and unpredictable family obligations. Mambo Sandrine's botanica, already a gathering place for Vodou practitioners, became a much needed (and free) internet café for those same practitioners. Not only did the Vodou Magic listserv emerge from a particular and socially situated geographic locale, it also fostered connection to that same locale as practitioners came in to use the computers housed at the botanica.

One of the most often cited passages in literature on cyberspace and virtual reality is Howard Rheingold's definition of virtual communities as "social

aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on...public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (5). This definition assumes that virtual communities emerge from and are sustained primarily by social interaction *on* the internet. In the *Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, Jeff Zaleski suggests that this is seldom the case: "Most virtual communities, especially the successful ones, spiritual or secular, do not spring from the Net fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus. They begin, and generally remain, after some fashion, extensions of or counterparts to real-world communities. Observations show as well that people who meet online often want to meet offline. This is just human nature, which exhibits an irrepressible curiosity about the body" (250). The links between online and offline communities that Zaleski observes are born out in this analysis. Initially, Mambo Sandrine and her practitioners integrated the internet into a socially situated and communal religiosity—making it not only a tool for communication and dissemination, but a part of the exchange networks that are so central to Vodou communities. When Mambo Sandrine and Patrice donated old and salvaged computers to practitioners, those practitioners found ways to reciprocate. Says Mambo Sandrine, "Some would help out in the store, some brought me groceries, one woman minded my kids a couple of times. I never asked, they just did it." Rather than "disembed" practitioners from their social networks and obligations, the internet and computer technology was absorbed into these relationships. However, the Vodou Magic listserv soon grew to encompass practitioners from diverse geographic locales who could not participate in Mambo Sandrine's "real life" social network of Vodouists.

When it first started, the Vodou Magic listserv had less than thirty members. Within 8 months of its instigation its members had swollen to just under one thousand. As of January 2006 the Vodou Magic listserv included close to three thousand members, approximately one quarter of which are active on a daily basis. Although the Vodou Magic listserv maintains a connection to its

original geographic locale (the botanica web page has been reinstated and listserv members often purchase online supplies) and quite a few of the original listserv members are still active on the list (Mambo Sandrine herself serves as moderator), many list members communicate with each other only through the internet. For these members, the Vodou Magic listserv, although seldom their only connection to a Vodou community, is an important aspect of their religious identity. The listserv allows practitioners to exchange information and ideas about Vodou and to share advice about personal problems (many of which are conceptualized in religious terms). The listserv also allows for a type of geographically dispersed religiosity as Mambo Sandrine not only carries on teaching about Vodou on the listserv, but also provides spiritual advice and private divination consultations for practitioners who contact her "off list". Some of these practitioners eventually travel to meet and consult with Mambo Sandrine in person and sometimes to undertake initiation in Haiti under her guidance. Many, however, do not. Practitioners whose contact with Mambo Sandrine is virtual rather than actual are engaged in a form of long-distance Vodou. While the internet seems particularly poised to generate this type of interaction, where individual practitioners are not face-to-face with each other or with the ritual specialists of the religion, the internet is not the only vehicle for geographically dispersed religious practice. In *Migration and Vodou* Karen Richman explores how Haitian migrants who are unable to attend important ritual ceremonies in Haiti become virtual participants through the use of cassette and video recorders:

> When migrants cannot personally attend the services, they participate indirectly by listening to cassette tapes of the rituals. On these tapes the migrants hear not only the sounds of the performance itself—drumming, singing, prayer, and chatter—but also the voices of narrators describing what the listener cannot see: the flow of possessions, offerings, sacrifices, prayers, conversations, etc. (25)

Haitian Vodouists, both in Haiti and in the diaspora, have had to adapt to the distance and duration of separation faced by many Haitian migrants. Despite geographic separation and the difficulty of returning home to Haiti (due to their financial situations or sometimes their illegal status in their host countries) Haitian migrants continue to maintain ties to their home communities through the use of

communication technologies[128] as well as by sending "remittances" to family in Haiti. These remittances often include fees for ritual services and supplies. The use of tape and video recorders allow Haitian migrants to virtually participate in rituals from which they are geographically removed. Such virtual participation inevitably reshapes Vodou practice. As Richman explains, "creative use of cassette tape and, increasingly, video recorders have resulted in a reconfiguration of the boundaries of the ritual performance space, allowing migrants to continue to serve their spirits on the inalienable family land" (25). The internet also reconfigures the boundaries of ritual space when, for example, practitioners and ritual specialists engage in an exchange of spiritual services much as Mambo Sandrine does with members of the Vodou Magic listserv. While the use of audio and video recording described by Richman is employed in an effort to preserve religious continuity and community located in a particular locale, the internet often functions in a more expansive way.

When first introduced to the internet, Houngan Boniface, a ritual specialist living in Port-au-Prince in Haiti, saw it as a way of expanding the permanents of his religious enterprise and practice as well as an opportunity to widen the boundaries of his religious community. Houngan Boniface clearly understands the internet as a tool by which he can extend the scope of his religious practice. "I love my webpage", he told me via email. "It is always there, even when I can't see it, even when the internet is down, even when I am in the countryside, it is there working for me." This *houngan*'s webpage was created for him by a newcomer to Vodou, a young technophile residing in New York who met Boniface in Haiti at the time of his initiation into Vodou in 2002. With minimal effort and cost (thanks to free web-hosting and the young initiate's knowledge), Houngan Boniface was able to advertise himself as a ritual specialist to a much wider audience than he was able to attract locally. Houngan Boniface's website disseminated rudimentary knowledge about Vodou and suggested that those interested in learning more about Vodou, or requiring Vodou services, could

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[128] See "Vodou Located: Navigating Deterritorialized Spaces" in this text.

contact him via email. Thanks to the young initiate who sent the *houngan*'s web address out on many Vodou related listservs, Boniface's webpage got many "hits" almost immediately and many interested Vodouisants from around the world began to correspond with him via the email address provided on the page. "At first," he told me, "it was young people wanting to know about magic. Some of them wanted to know about 'left-hand'[129] work. I told them I don't do this kind of work and many of them stopped email[ing] me." But gradually, Houngan Boniface began to have a more regular correspondence with practitioners who were, as he put it "dedicated" to the mystical practices of Vodou. These practitioners were "from all over, France, [la] Norvège, Canada, New York City." When I asked Houngan Boniface if these individuals were mostly white, he vehemently disagreed: "Not just *blans* come to me. I see people of all colors, Jamaicans, Africans, some [second generation, diasporic] Haitians even, and Chinese, one red Indian even."[130] Some of these individuals traveled all the way to Haiti to meet Houngan Boniface and have services and initiations performed by him. Many, however, did not travel to Haiti, but remained in their homes, behind their computer screens. These individuals had a long-distance relationship with Houngan Boniface. They spoke with him about the practice and rituals of Vodou, and perhaps more interestingly, they struck up a form of long-distance Vodou.

There is not, in my experience, much large-scale online Vodou ritualizing. There has not been, nor does there seem to be an inclination toward the transferring of major Vodou rituals, such as the ceremonies honoring the feast days of particular *lwa*, into a cyberspiritual form. Unlike other religious groups such as neopagans, for instance, Vodouists do not seem to be interested in adapting major rituals to an online form.[131] In fact, most Vodouists (both Haitians

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[129] "Left-hand" work refers largely to dark or negative spellwork in Vodou.

[130] "Red Indian" is a slang term in use predominantly in the Anglophone Caribbean (Houngan Boniface was undoubtedly translating for my benefit) to refer to the indigenous people of the Caribbean (as opposed to Indians descendant from India). In this case the referent was actually an American citizen who identified himself as Cherokee.

[131] See, for example, Alyssa Beall's "There is No Place Like Home.html: Neopaganism on the Internet" in *Religious Innovation in a Global Age: Essays on the Construction of Spirituality* [George Lundskow, (ed.) Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarkabd & Company Inc. 2005. 199-227].

and newcomers to the religion) emphasize the embodied and actual affective aspects of the religion, stressing that there is no substitute for real life rituals. There does exist, however, a lot of small scale interpersonal ritualizing that makes use of the internet as a means by which to connect ritual specialist and practitioner. In the Vodou tradition it is common for ritual specialists to provide services to their congregation (both initiated and uninitiated). This spiritual work most often encompasses divination readings and spell making (or *wanga*) and most often rituals specialists are paid for their work in this area. In Kreyole, this work is called *travay*. In "Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou" Karen McCarthy Brown describes *travay* as "a generic term for the variety of charms or talismans that Vodou healers produce in private transactions with individual clients" (210). There is a growing trade in online Vodou services of this kind. Mambo Sandrine engages in this form of online Vodou, as does Houngan Boniface.

Online practitioners—separated from Houngan Boniface by sometimes vast geographic space—interact with the far-away priest in much the same way that they would interact with a ritual specialist face-to-face; they tell Houngan Boniface their problems and he proposes spiritual solutions to them. After reading their emails and familiarizing himself with the specifics of their particular situation or "condition", Houngan Boniface conducts "readings" (or divinations) for these far-away clients. Although he initially corresponds by email, Houngan Boniface usually conducts actual readings over the phone because, as he explained, "it is easier to read over the phone. I hear the person's voice and the spirits help me to see what they need. By email it is harder; all the words look the same. Voices are all different." Houngan Boniface takes it upon himself to call these individuals, often out of the blue, sometimes weeks after they emailed him with problems or questions. Boniface conceptualizes the difficulties that he encounters with spontaneous long-distance communication in religious terms, feeling that communication barriers are the spirits' way of ensuring that he conducts his spiritual work at efficacious times. He explained his system by

saying, "I would just pick up the phone at my sister's house and call [so and so]. If the phone line was not working then I should not call them that day. If they were not answering, then it was not a good day [for spiritual work]." Once contact is made, the practitioners are always glad to hear from Houngan Boniface and, aware of the instability of tele-communications in Haiti, usually make time to speak with him right away. At the end of the phone call, Houngan Boniface recommends a course of action to help the practitioner with his or her particular problem. Often this involves things the practitioner could do on their own, including, for example, leaving small offerings of food and money at a crossroad or intersection near their homes. Sometimes, however, Boniface needs to intercede more directly in the lives of his practitioners for his spiritual work to be effective. "Usually people need a 'bath' or a 'drink' or a *pakèt* and I can do this for them." Baths, drinks and *pakèt* are all part of Houngan Boniface's repertoire of spiritual work. Usually made from a combination of herbs and other substances these items are meant to be used by practitioners to clear negative energy or to bring good luck. Baths and drinks are, as their names imply, herbal recipes invested with ritually charged items and ingredients, which practitioners must either ingest or apply directly to their bodies. *Pakèt*, for Houngan Boniface, is a generic term for a host of small talismans made by enclosing herbs, soil and other objects in cloth that is then bound tightly with string. After a divination session with one of his long-distance practitioners, Houngan Boniface—who is an accomplished *medsen fey* (or leaf doctor, someone who is knowledgeable about the healing properties of plants)—then prepares a ritual bath or drink or talismans for his far-away practitioners. Later, his sister mails these packages, the baths and drinks often disguised as local shampoos, to practitioners around the world.

In return and in payment, these long distance practitioners send packages back to Houngan Boniface. These packages are often filled with jams and other non-perishable food items, "foreign" cigarettes, expensive perfumes (which he uses for ritual purposes) and often items of clothing (for him and his relatives). Sometimes, "they send money too," Houngan Boniface told me. In this way,

practitioners reimburse Houngan Boniface for his costs (of long distance phone calls and postage) and pay for the ritual services he provided them. Even though Houngan Boniface often spends long periods off-line, away from computers for work or religious reasons, or because he is unable to "connect" due to the sometimes poor internet services in Port-au-Prince, he is still able to sustain long-distance religious relationships, sometimes with practitioners he has never met in person. "Now," Houngan Boniface joked via email, "My house is in Europe, America, Africa, China, the whole world!" In the social networks of Vodou, "house", much like "family", refers to those Vodou practitioners who have been initiated by or who work with the same ritual specialist. In Houngan Boniface's case, his house has a tangible, geographic foundation in his *peristyle* in Port-au-Prince but, as he points out, also reaches far beyond that to include the home bases of those practitioners from "far-away places" that he has initiated and worked with long-distance. Through communication, travel, and the transportation of goods, Houngan Boniface is able to extend the scope of his religious community and arguably the parameters of his ritual practice. For Houngan Boniface and his practitioners, the mediation of Vodou through the internet and other technologies does not disembed Vodou from its cultural specificity and social networks. It does however reshape how cultural specificity and social networks are accessed by practitioners. The stories of Mambo Sandrine's Vodou Magic listserv and Houngan Boniface's long-distance *travay* speak to how online Vodou is closely linked to offline practices and geographic places. In both cases, the internet facilitates not only communication with geographically dispersed practitioners, but also a form of spiritual enterprise. Both Houngan Boniface and Mambo Sandrine have capitalized on the power of the internet to advertise their goods and services to a wide audience. Some may see this as part of the increasing commercialization of religion that leads, inevitably, to the dissolution of cultural specificity, authentic religiosity, and efficacious religious practices. Nevertheless, the work of spiritual entrepreneurs such as Mambo Sandrine and Houngan Boniface is continuous with the practices and discourses of Vodou. While the internet directly affected the social conditions of

Houngan Boniface in Haiti and Mambo Sandrine and her practitioners in Arizona, the practices of long-distance Vodou also affect those at a geographic remove from these places. The internet facilitates a form of virtual social interactivity, but it also facilitates the circulation of goods. When religious goods circulate, in part, because of the internet, then ritual meaning, investment and energy is also put into circulation.

Unlike other religions, where money is seen as a corruptible and tainting presence, economic exchange has always been part of the Vodou tradition. *Houngans* and *mambos* are paid for their ritual work, or *travay*, and they, in turn, pay (or feed) the *lwa* who make this work possible. As is the case with Houngan Boniface, payment is not always made through money, but may take the form of an exchange of goods and services. On a deeper level, the economic exchange that structures the give-and-take between practitioners and between practitioners and their spirits is representative of good luck, spiritual power and the favor or blessings of the spirits of Vodou. In Vodou, material success is representative of spiritual success and power. Speaking of *bendiciones*, the spiritual power of Puerto Rican *burjería*, Raquel Romberg in *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico* explains how this form of spiritualized materialism becomes a motivating factor for religious practitioners: "If achieved, material success becomes a marker of one's *bendiciones*, or spiritual powers; and if it is yet to be achieved, it becomes an endless motivational force that guides social and personal choices" (12). Most priests and priestesses in Vodou will tell you that they never get rich doing·what they do. On the contrary, their social obligations to their ever growing family of practitioners and initiates often turn them into money lenders, their homes into temporary hostels. Nonetheless, seeking out more clients is a way for *houngans* and *mambos* to ensure both financial well-being and spiritual success. This search takes them, via technology such as the internet, into the spiritual marketplace. Speaking about *burjería*, Romberg explains: "Witches, like traders, prosper best not in the bush but in centers of commerce where the surplus of productive

energies can be exchanged between people and the spirits" (12). While the internet may not be the center of commerce for the spiritual marketplace, it is certainly an important crossroad of economic and spiritual exchange, something that is hardly lost on contemporary Vodouists who harness the internet for their own benefit. In the same way that Vodou is not easily subsumed by commercialism, it is not easily dispersed by long-distance technologies. Instead, Vodou maintains a social situatedness despite the pulls of technological change, consumerism and globalization. Romberg notes that religions such as Vodou and "burjería cannot be characterized by the 'disembedding' of social relations and a disregard for social responsibility. Intimately associated with being blessed by the spirits, consumerism fits rather into a morally grounded personal and civil local ethos" (13). Similarly, while the internet is charged with disembedding[132] social relationships, the online practices of Vodouists tend to be socially situated, embedded in social networks and linked to geographic locales.

Recent scholarship has challenged the idea that internet use necessarily disembeds social relationships. In *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* Daniel Miller and Don Slater—whose research explores internet use as a component of Caribbean, and specifically Trinidadian, culture and identity—challenges Anthony Giddens' notion of disembedding by situating the internet in social space. Miller and Slater argue that the internet and Trinidadian identity constitute interdependent and symbiotic ontological practices; one does not usurp or transplant the other. Their ethnographic research found that, "'being Trini' is integral to understanding what the Internet is in this particular place; and that using the Internet is becoming integral to 'being Trini'" (1). By looking at identity and the internet in this symbiotic and socially situated way, Miller and Slater avoid becoming mired in a discussion of the "effects" of the internet (as a medium) on social relations and cultural identity. Instead they are able to explore how "members of a specific culture attempt to make themselves a(t) home in a

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[132] Anthony Giddens uses the term "disembedding" in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991].

transforming communicative environment, how they can find themselves in this environment and at the same time try to mould it in their own image" (1). Certainly, practitioners such as Mambo Sandrine and Houngan Boniface seem more than at home on the internet. These individuals use the internet to communicate and to advertise, to maintain religious community and to garner new spiritual clients, but they never use the internet exclusively for these things. Instead, the internet is relegated to a useful component of a religiosity that employs multiple communication and ritual technologies. Marshalling a host of technological and cultural resources, these practitioners have carved out long-distance religious practices that are commensurate with locally and culturally specific Vodou practices. Vodou is a flexible religious system. When Houngan Boniface creates ritually charged objects for his clients or Mambo Sandrine insists on the maintenance of community and social networks, they are engaging in activities that have always been part of the Vodou tradition. What has changed with the advent of new media and communication technologies is not religious practice, but the reach of that religious practice and the ease with which practitioners can access it. As the reach of Vodou expands so does the demographic of Vodou practitioners. Maintaining cultural continuity over space and time requires religious innovation. Always a fluid religious system, contemporary Vodou generates innovative ritual practices that are founded on some of the defining and most "traditional" aspects of the religion.

Road Maps for the Gods: Haiti Goes Global

While Vodou is literally and cosmologically connected to Haiti, it seems that Haiti does its own fair share of traveling too in contemporary Vodou practice. In "Staying Grounded in a High-Rise Building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou" Karen McCarthy Brown notes that one of the things ferried between Haiti and points in the diaspora is Haitian soil, "secreted in travelers' suitcases and carried to North America: a pinch of earth from in front of the family home, a pinch from the center of the market, or a pinch from the Port-

au-Prince cemetery" (84). The spiritual significance of (specifically Haitian) earth in Vodou has much to do with the cosmographic space of *Ginen*—an Africa that is not quite Africa, but a mythological place home to both spirits and ancestors. As McCarthy Brown explains, during the transatlantic slave trade, "Africa was 'spiritualized' and transposed to the New World, where it became an invisible but directly accessible parallel world lying beneath the feet of displaced Africans" (82). It is from Ginen that the *lwa* are called to interact with practitioners. In the spiritual economy of Vodou the *lwa* must always be reimbursed for the help and protection they offer practitioners. This occurs during the rituals of possession, when the *lwa* are literally provided with food, gifts and sometimes money. It also occurs when practitioners pour libations on the earth. As Maya Deren explains in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, "to address oneself to the earth, then, to rap upon it in ceremonies, to pour libations upon it, to dig into it and there to deposit offerings, to kneel and touch lips or forehead to it—these are gestures addressed not to the earth itself, but to the cosmos which is contained within it" (36). Ginen represents a virtual rather than a literal or actual connection to an ancestral African homeland. The earth of Haiti acts as a portal, providing access to this virtual world. When performing his *travay*, Houngan Boniface often adds a few pinches of soil to the *pakèt* he sends his long distance practitioners. He does this so that the "*lwa* know where they are." Far-away practitioners commission ritual work that, when it arrives, contains charged bits of Haitian soil that hold within them a road map for the *lwa* of Vodou. These grains of Haitian soil— contained within objects contracted through an exchange that crisscrosses the circuits of cyberspace, phone lines and international mail service—literally connect practitioners who have never been to Haiti to the land itself. Bits of Haiti are traveling around the world so that geographically dispersed practitioners may be connected to the virtual, cosmic Africa contained within the grains of soil. Clearly, virtuality is nothing new for Vodou, or for Vodou practitioners. But how can this central and defining (although virtual) connection to Africa as a place of origin and ancestry within the Vodou religion, be understood in relationship to practitioners who have no genealogical connection to either Haiti or Africa?

Maya Deren, in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, describes Ginen as "Africa, the legendary place of racial origin" (36) and it is clear that there is a spiritual power associated with this place that is the starting point of the Middle Passage that brought African slaves and their gods to the New World. However, like all else in the complex discourses of Vodou, relationships to Africa, burdened as they always are with the legacy of slavery, are sometimes highly ambiguous. In *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess In Brooklyn*, Karen McCarthy Brown speaks of one of Mama Lola's ancestors, Joseph Binbin Mauvant, who is called *franginen* (true African) and *franginen net* (completely African, as in born in Africa). Brown's description of Mauvant's heritage and his relation to Africa shows the complex ways in which kinship and racial identity intertwine with spiritual power and ritual efficacy as drawn from notions of African-ness. As Brown explains, although light-skinned, Mauvant had been born in Africa: "He was a real African, which to these mountain people brought him as close to the spirits as a living being could get" (29). Mauvant was revered by those around him for his ability as a healer and because his ability to do spiritual work was clearly connected to his "African" heritage. As Deren suggests, *Ginen* is undoubtedly linked to concepts of racial origin and therefore African or, more specifically, black identity. However, the obvious correlation between a mythic Africa and black identity are often complicated in the narratives of Vodou. As Brown is careful to point out, Mauvant's African heritage was not conceived of as the legacy of slavery so often assumed to be the root idea behind the cosmographic space of *Ginen*. Instead, Mauvant was the son of a Frenchman. In addition, Mauvant's mother was, herself, not African by birth: "The identity of Mauvant's mother is unclear. Some say she was a North American black; others say she was Haitian. Wherever she came from, she traveled to Africa in the early nineteenth century, where she met and married her Frenchman. There, in Africa, Joseph Binbin Mauvant was born" (30). Mauvant's spiritual power, his proximity to the "spirits" or *lwa* of Vodou, and his ability as a healer were all clearly linked to an Africa heritage that he acquired in a rather strange story of transnational

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travel and interracial marriage in the early part of the 19th century. But despite the strangeness of it, it is precisely the transnationalism embedded in Mauvant's African heritage that imbues him with spiritual authority. Brown explains that "the unlikely combination of being a *blan* from Africa ensured his authority wherever he went" (30). In Vodou, Africa does not necessarily signify connection to blackness, but connection to the land itself.

In "Telling a Life Through Haitian Vodou: An Essay Concerning Race, Gender, Memory, and Historical Consciousness", an article written some time after *Mama Lola*, McCarthy Brown revisits the complex issues of kinship and heritage and how these come to be understood in relationship to racial origin in the lives of Vodouists such as Mama Lola. As McCarthy Brown explains, "It is not unusual for people from the Caribbean to locate their identity entirely in the colonial part of their heritage" (30). In the praxis of remembering the narratives of the past, what is not told (or, what is not made visible) is as important as that which is told: "Transatlantic slavery is to history as black holes are to the reaches of space: we know their presence only by the warping effect they have on what surrounds them" (31). So, the strange tale of Joseph Binbin Mauvant's African heritage, which speaks of the travel of a Haitian (or African American) women to Africa where she wed a Frenchman, may well be understood as a distortion around another story—the dislocating narratives of slavery and the horrific race relations that ensued from this legacy. However, it would be far too simplistic to suggest that this practice of reconfiguring memory and history, a characteristic aspect of the Vodou religion, is an attempt to avoid or deny that history. Instead, Vodou presents a conceptualization of identity as contingent and constituted, although unlike similar theories of postmodernity, there is a clearer notion of agency embedded in the epistemologies of Vodou; while identity is something made, forged in social conditions and by history, it is also strategic. If the heritage of Joseph Binbin Mauvant is at all revisionist (which I not suggesting it necessarily is) it revises a narrative that does not so much avoid the conditions left by slavery and colonialism but disavows them, positing instead a hybridized

identity that is of no-place (constituted by vectors of travel and mobility) even as it makes durable connections to many places, including Africa, Europe and Haiti. This is part of the process of strategic identity, the practice of disavowing static and reified identity categories for an understanding of the processes of identification and the social power embedded in an association with certain identities. This fluid conceptualization of identity as not rooted to particular place allows Vodou to assimilate newcomers from diverse backgrounds into what is, strictly speaking, a Haitian religion. Even in the context of religious innovation, Vodou maintains a cultural connection to Haiti (through, for example, pilgrimage to Haiti, the use of Creole in religious ritual, and the retelling of the narratives of Haitian history) but it maintains this connection to place within the context of a particular ontological understanding of Haitian-ness. In the same way that Joseph Binbin Mauvant was connected to Africa as a place rather than a heritage, newcomers to Vodou can be connected to Haiti through the practices of Vodou even if they do not share the genealogical connections to Haiti that Haitian Vodouists do.

The fluid understanding of identity evident in the narratives and practices of Vodou seems also to align with the precepts of much postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking that posits a radical subjectivism in which identity is entirely socially constructed. Speaking of the multiple *lwa* that regularly possess Mama Lola, Karen McCarthy Brown notes how the plurality of identity embodied within the pantheon of Vodou spirits align with the identity of Vodou practitioners in postmodern ways. Mama Lola's "spirits are male and female, black and white, privileged and poor. They are interactive, differently empowered dimensions of her character while being simultaneously aspects of the larger social and natural worlds. Mama Lola acts out of a fluid, open-ended subjectivity. The gender and race pluralism in her character support Euro-American theories about the socially constructed nature of gender and race" (37). Inherent in suggesting that either Haitian or Vodou identity is contingent, constituted, and fluctuating is the risk that the very "real" differences that structure practitioner's

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lives will be erased. Yet, as Stewart Hall explains, difference can be understood as an aspect of an ontological process that unfolds over time rather than an essential marker of identity. Speaking of Caribbean "identity" Hall explains that;

> As well as many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute "what we really are": or rather—since history has intervened—"what we have become." We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about "one experience, one identity," without acknowledging its other side—the differences and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's "uniqueness." Cultural identity...is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (1989: 70)

It is a conscious positioning and repositioning of selves within the narratives of the past, and in relation to a possible future, that is a constitutive element of the Vodou religion. Although the ontological processes that shape identification with Vodou make room for newcomers to the religion who are non-Haitian, difference is not erased in this context but is assimilated and re-ascribed religious meaning. When the *lwa* Ogoun, visiting in possession, tells the white scholar Karen McCarthy Brown that she must have "an African root" in her that accounts for her interest in Vodou, Ogoun is recasting not only McCarthy Brown's identity from outsider to insider, but is also transfiguring the shape of the religious community to allow practitioners *like* McCarthy Brown to belong to a religion that is cosmologically connected first to Haiti and then to Africa (or *Ginen*). Within Vodou, these connections are not to essential racial, ethnic, or national identities but to places like Africa and Haiti that are at once actual and mythic, "real" locations and virtual ones.

Theories, which posit the subject as socially constructed, have played out in interesting ways in the work of cybercultural critics who, using the seemingly bodiless realm of cyberspace as a starting point, discuss both reality and identity as social constructs and explore how cyber-identities manifest social interrelation. It is tempting to draw parallels between the strategies of identification that play out in the rituals and narratives of Vodou and the identity play that often occurs in the seemingly anonymous realms of cyberspace. Much has been made of the ways in which identities can be adopted and discarded in the virtual realities of chat rooms, listservs and online gaming. Sherry Turkle's seminal book on identity play and experimentation on the internet, *Life on the Screen* (1995), firmly situated the fluid identity practices of the internet as an expression (or, at least, a reflection) of postmodern theories of the self as deconstructed and fragmented. Turkle's work, like much of the early work on identity and the internet (or cyberspace), aligns with Anthony Giddens' exploration of identity in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* and particularly with his theory of "disembedding" in which social relations are "lifted out" of their specific (local and culturally specific) contexts. The internet, like media in general, contributes to this "disembedding" by allowing social relations to become dispersed across time and space, removed from the immediacy of locality. Giddens argues that this conditions a process of identification based not on social interrelations but cobbled together from media images and consumer culture. Such processes of identification "give form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (81), but are disembedded from social relationships and responsibilities. These are identities based, according to Giddens, on attachment rather than belonging. The seemingly disembedded and disembodied nature of cyberspace has led scholars to question how social relations are maintained and how (if at all) belonging can be constituted in virtual space. Often this line of questioning centers on identity or, more specifically, the "realness" of identity in cyberspace. In the anonymous realms of cyberspace how can we know people are really who they say they are? Allucquère Rosanne Stone's still often cited essay "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories and Virtual Cultures" (1994), explores the ways in

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which bodies are reconstituted in cyberspace through "descriptive codes" that re-embody the "expectations of appearance" associated with identity categories such as gender and race. In this way people online can "pose" as something other than they "are" by manipulating the descriptive codes associated with certain identities. Gender, class, race, and ethnicity are hard to "see" online. But what about religious identity? What are the descriptive codes associated with Vodou? How can one pass as a Vodouist online when one is not a Vodouist offline? As has been suggested earlier, online Vodouists are identified and evaluated by their knowledge of Vodou (and the efficacy of that knowledge when ritually applied), rather than (visual) identity codes. This makes it difficult to pass in online forums devoted to Vodou. Of course, as many theorists[133] have pointed out passing (as, for instance, a gender other than the one that is culturally associated with one's biologically assigned sex) is hardly limited to online practices or the advent of digital technologies. What complicates the fluidity of identity in cyberspace, perhaps, is not the ability to adopt multiple or successive identities, or to represent oneself as embodying identities that are incongruent with how the self is perceived in the "real world", but a perceived lack of social accountability or consequence for the processes and practices of identification on the internet.

However, when the internet is understood as socially situated, identification becomes rooted in social place rather than in the non-place of cyberspace. The internet itself does not *inevitably* generate rootless communities of transitory attachment inherently disembedded from society. The internet does not *necessarily* spawn a place where individuals can represent themselves in anyway they please, form and break attachments, all without social consequence. If the internet is assumed to perpetuate a disembedded, rootless, virtual cyberculture without social consequence, this may be because of what types of internet use are the primary focus of study. As Daniel Miller and Don Slater

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[133] For a discussion of gender as culturally contingent, see Judith Butler's classic *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [NY: Routledge, 1990]. For a discussion of passing in relation to religion and race as well as sexuality see the edited volume, *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, [María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (eds), NY: New York University Press, 2001].

explain, an ethnographic exploration of internet use in the Trinidadian context revealed that research participants did not set the internet apart from their everyday experiences and interactions, but rather sought to integrate it into already existing social relations. Miller and Slater observe that participants made little or no differentiation between "e-commerce and other commerce, playground chat and ICQ chat, religious instruction face-to-face or by email" (6). Instead, there exists an "attempt to assimilate yet another medium into various practices (email complements telephone for family contact, websites supplement TV for religious evangelism, etc.) (6). What Slater and Miller argue is that the internet is not a "particularly virtual phenomenon when studied in relation to Trinidad" (6), although virtual-ness may be an important component of the internet in other contexts. Instead, the internet, for some, can reinforce connection to place and specific identity. Miller and Slater found that "Trinidadians took to the new media in ways that connected to core dimensions, and contradictions, of their history and society," (3) and in so doing, "entered into the transcultural networks of the Internet from somewhere, as people who felt themselves encountering it from a place, as Trinidadians" (7).

Arguably, identity can be reinforced in conjunction with internet. Practitioners such as Mambo Sandrine and Houngan Boniface undoubtedly encounter the internet from particular places and particular identities. However, unlike the work of Miller and Slater, which is focused on national identity and internet use, religious identity is not easily tied to place. Clearly, not all Vodouists encounter the internet from the same place, nor do all Vodouists share a national identity that roots them to a particular place. Even a culturally specific religion like Vodou conceptualizes "home" in multivalent ways. As has been discussed, the "homeland" signified by the cosmographic space *Ginen* is virtual and the identities that reach back to this distant home and heritage carry some of that virtuality forward into the present. The internet may generate virtual spaces for Vodou practitioners, but it is hardly the only technology (ritual or digital) to do so. Vodou practitioners may not encounter online Vodou from a single, clearly

defined place, but practitioners who encounter Vodou online nonetheless do turn connections to "real" places and tangible geographies into an intrinsic part of their spiritual lives.

A Question of Practice: Doing Vodou Online

Almost all online Vodou practitioners speak of the internet as a tool that allows them to "virtually" participate in geographically dispersed religious communities. Many see this participation, however, as a poor substitute for actual ritual and communal experience. As one woman from Boston explained to me via email, online Vodou operates as a temporary stop-gap in her regular communal religious practices: "I can't always get to my *mambo*'s house, it is more than an hour by car and sometimes my husband has the car. [My *mambo*] always seems happy to hear from me by phone, but I feel as if I am bothering her when she has other clients [or practitioners] with her. When we are all together it is easy, we all take turns telling our problems, help with her services. Over the phone I feel as if it is just me, me, me. So then I go on the Vodou Magic listserv a lot. I like to read all the posts and then think about [other listserv members'] problems and how I can help. I get to use a lot of what [my *mambo*] has taught me there. But it is much more fun in her house." The listserv (where posts appear almost constantly throughout most of the day) is an interactive environment that allows this practitioner to engage in a give-and-take form of communication with multiple people as opposed to the phone, which she sees as limiting because it only allows her to connect with one other person at a time. For this practitioner, there is no real substitute for the communal experience of "hanging out" in her *mambo*'s house, but the active Vodou Magic listserv provides her with an opportunity to connect to other Vodou practitioners and to share her growing knowledge of Vodou. Similarly, another practitioner from Philadelphia expresses the opinion that, no matter how difficult, she has to make the effort to get to the services held almost every month for the *lwa* at her *houngan*'s house: "I love the [listserv]

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because I am very busy and I can check it at work, although I have to be careful not to ever laugh out loud so that people at work wonder what I am doing. I love everybody on that listserv, they are all so nice and it is so nice to be able to talk with people about Vodou. I can never do that at work, or with [my neighbors]. But no matter how busy I am I make sure I go to [my *houngan*'s] feasts so that I can dance! I need to visit with my *houngan* and everyone else. And I need to offer my presents to the *lwa* or they will be mad with me, lol! My husband knows nothing can interfere with this. I don't even ask him. He knows he has to look after the children and feed them and put them to bed. And I get home late!" For this practitioner, online Vodou gives her a place to discuss her religion in a climate where Vodou is still socially stigmatized. Despite her obvious connection to her online friends, she does not view these individuals as part of her immediate religious community (one that focuses on "real life" ritualizing) but as part of an extended family of like-minded people. Although some may think that online religious practice would become popular as an "easy" substitute for the "real life" demands of religious practice, this busy career woman makes sure to carve out actual time for ritual purposes. The ease of communication provided by the internet is not, for these practitioners of Vodou, a surrogate for the interpersonal relationships they forge within actual religious communities, nor does the internet function as an alternative for the sometimes arduous and time consuming practices of Vodou. Instead, they understand their internet use as a useful— although perhaps less meaningful—addition to their actual religious practices.

Some practitioners, however, understand the internet as part and parcel of the ritual toolbox employed by Vodouists. One *mambo* who sells her spiritual services online speaks of how her hands become possessed (in a form of partial possession) by different *lwa* as she types messages to other Vodouists. Ritual specialists often become possessed when engaging in one-on-one interpersonal *travay* or spiritual work with even when they are on the phone with clients. For this *mambo*, the internet operates much as her phone line operates, as a means for clients to communicate "directly" with her. She sees no substantive difference

between the two media. Like Mambo Sandrine and Houngan Boniface, this *mambo* sees the internet as a vehicle for her own spiritual work and practices which are, as for all ritual specialists, guided by the *lwa*. By conducting divination online this *mambo* extends the parameters of her spiritual and ritual work through her use of the internet. She credits her ability to do this particular form of long-distance Vodou to the "blessing" of the *lwa*, who signal their approval of her practice by manifesting through possession. In this way the internet is transfigured from a secular tool used for maintaining community to an instrument used for ritual purpose. That the *lwa* of Vodou come to use this instrument to connect to and communicate with their practitioners (doubly mediated through the ritual specialists of Vodou *and* the internet) imbues the internet with religious meaning and signifies a symbiosis between religious practices and the practices of computer mediated communication. It is as if the *lwa* themselves, by blessing the ritualized interactions of *travay* that take place online, are awakening to the possibilities of long-distance Vodou offered by the internet. In *Vodou and Migration*, Karen Richman suggests that the *lwa* of Vodou are, in fact, able to adapt to and assimilate new technology into the ritual practices of Vodou. Speaking of the use of cassette and video recorders as a way of allowing transmigrant Vodouists to virtually participate in ceremonies from which they are geographically removed, Richman observes that "spirits possessing the bodies of ritual actors are not only aware of the recording devices, they often move to the recorder in order to personally address the absent migrant or migrants" (Richman 25). In this way technologies, such as recording devices or the technologies of the internet and computer mediated communications, are transfigured into modes of communication for the *lwa* themselves.

For still other practitioners the internet operates as a vehicle for the mystical impulses of Vodou. As one practitioner explains, and many have suggested, the *lwa* of Vodou—long accustom to the rigors of mobility—have moved along with their practitioners into the conduits of cyberspace: "this is why so many people are finding Vodou, because the *lwa* are everywhere, they infect

the internet like a virus." This idea of Vodou as a viral force—popular with many new practitioners—has its roots in black national discourse and made an early appearance in Ishmael Reed's brilliant novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*. Within the discourses of black nationalism a healthy suspicion of "official" history has led to a valorizing of popular cultural forms, such as fiction, that can provide a "corrective" to a history that erases black contribution to North American culture and perpetuates racism and neo-colonialism. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed's narrative illustrates a conscious reversal of the subordination/domination paradigm (that so often positions blackness and Vodou as marginal and as disenfranchised cultural identities and systems) when Western society is faced with an uncontrollable outbreak of "mumbo jumbo" or "voodoo" dancing. This fictional outbreak of Vodou has jumped from the pages of Reed's novel to the circuits of cyberspace, carried, in part, by practitioners who see the growth of Vodou on (and off) the internet as evidence of the power of the religion. The discourses of black nationalism, which reposition Vodou as a powerful social and cultural force, also infuse seemingly secular practices and institutions (such as the internet) with mystical or magical properties. Robert Elliot Fox has termed this investment of the mundane with the sacred in black national discourse a "semiotics of neo-hoodoo",[134] which he defines as having been "adapted from the African-American occult/folkloric tradition and essentially describing a return to the magical possibilities of word and object, likewise work toward a 'rupture of plane', in the sense of exploding ridged linear patterns of thought and creativity" (1995:51). Exploding the dividing line between the sacred and the secular, between political activism and religious ethos, recognizable elements of Vodou (as well as other Afro-Caribbean and Africa spiritual practices) are drawn into the discourses of black nationalism in a conscious effort to "awaken" the memory of those who have been spiritually, historically, and culturally separated from their "roots".

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[134] Although for some it represents a separate signifying system, hoodoo is often used interchangeably with Vodou or "voodoo". As Fox explains; "the word hoodoo as a synonym for voodoo entered the English language at an undetermined moment, for although the supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary quotes an example from 1875 as the earliest-known literary use in the United States, one assumes that the term was current in the spoken vernacular for some time prior to this date" (Fox, 1995:58).

Practitioners who see Vodou as a viral element embed their affiliation with Vodou in a process of identification with blackness as subversive and powerful. For these practitioners, Vodou in cyberspace is both an extension of the magical elements of the religion into the virtual domain and a subversion of any presumed secularity of the internet.

This ideological positioning of Vodou as part of a reclaimed African past can be destabilizing for Vodou communities that must increasingly negotiate an influx of new practitioners who, although not genealogically or geographically connected to Haitian Vodou, nonetheless claim the authority of a racialized legacy. Karen McCarthy Brown explains how such a legacy is carried on cultural "memories" that circulate outside of the lived experience of individuals:

> The separation between those who have active memories of Haiti and those who do not at times feels like a fault line running deep and dangerous beneath the united surface of New York Vodou families, threatening to divide them. The majority of participants have lived in Haiti, and they come to ceremonies to activate former parts of themselves. And yet, I remind myself, they are also activating memories carried only in the "genetic" structure of their culture, memories of Africa passed on through many generations of people who had no lived experience of that place. I remind myself of this when I start to think that Vodou in New York might disappear when the responsibilities of leadership pass on to the generations born in this country. (2001: 282)

It is precisely the "genetic" memory of which Brown speaks that black nationalism seeks to awaken through the reclamation of "African" cultural and religious practices. Vodouists online find belonging in the processes of *becoming* Vodouists, although that belonging is not always conceptualized in identical ways. A black nationalist who comes to Vodou as part of a rediscovery of black cultural roots that have been denied them by the systems of racism and neocolonialism does not conceive of belonging to Vodou in the same way as a mother who feels called to the pragmatic and healing practices of Vodou, nor does a Haitian national have the same understanding of belonging to Vodou when they "return" to a religion from which they were kept apart for political and economic reasons. What unifies these disparate practitioners is not their identity in relation

to Vodou, but their identity as practitioners, as people who "serve the spirits", and this identity is affirmed and reaffirmed (or "refreshed" to use a term from Vodou discourse) by the ways in which they *practice* the religion. In Vodou, identity is practice, not essence.

As has been suggested earlier, the online Vodouists I spoke with do not express much concern about the authenticity or the "reality" of the identity of the people they encounter on the internet. For them, online forums about Vodou are very much focused on religious concerns. They are interested in learning more about Vodou or in dispelling stereotypes about the religion to others, they are concerned with finding "offline" Vodou communities or with maintaining such communities in the times between large gatherings, and they share their problems with others online in order to find concrete and practical solutions to these problems. When I questioned one online practitioner, asking her how she felt taking ritual advice from someone she didn't know, someone who "could be anybody", she explained that, for her, Vodou had a built in failsafe to the problem of misrepresenting oneself on the internet: "I asked [on the listserv] if anybody had a little spell I could do because my [husband] had this new woman at work and I didn't want him to cheat on me! But I didn't want to do something like bind[135] him. I knew he loved me and wanted to be with me, I just wanted to make sure, you know? Make a *garanti*.[136] So I asked and I got some ideas, some good, some bad. I tried a couple of different things and I could tell [that one of the things I tried] worked because he stopped talking about this woman at work. Some people say they are an expert in this or that, in love spells, in luck, in herbs that can cure anything. But either it works or it doesn't work. Then you can tell who is for real." For this practitioner, the issue of the identity of other online practitioners is subsumed by practical religious concerns. If the practical spells

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[135] Binding is an important part of *travay* in Vodou. Ritual objects are often bound with rope, cloth or thread. A person who is "bound" in the way that this practitioner is referring to has had his or her will tampered with.

[136] *Garanti* is a Creole term which Karen Richman describes as "meaning to both 'ensure' and to 'yield a return'" (192) *Migration and Vodou* [Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005]. This practitioner is playing on the idea of "return" in terms of both "returning" the focus of her partner to her and in terms of finding a spell that provided a "return".

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and advice proposed online seems to work or is efficacious, then online practitioners can assume that the giver of advice is "for real", in that they have authentic knowledge of Vodou. Time and time again I encountered online practitioners who expressed disinterest in whether or not listserv members were representing themselves "truthfully". Instead, online Vodouists encountering each other in the relatively anonymous realms of cyberspace configure their interaction with each other in terms of their "knowledgeability" about Vodou or the efficacy of their proposed spells. Who online participants are or who they say they are seems to be far less important than how they display their familiarity with the narratives and practices of Vodou. Like those who see the internet as a stop-gap in the times between their actual religious practices and rituals, and those who see the internet as a space colonized by the *lwa* of Vodou, practitioners who understand the internet as a tool for the extension of ritual space understand the internet (and therefore their identity on the internet) as a component of Vodou practice (both ritual or communal). Whether being a Vodouist means engaging in embodied ritual practice, synchronizing religious identity and the political activism of black nationalism, or performing spiritual work "blessed" by the *lwa* of Vodou, the internet functions as a component of what it means to be a Vodouist in a particular time and place. For these practitioners, virtual Vodou is what Miller and Slater call a "social accomplishment" constituted and achieved through intersubjective relationships—occurring both on and offline (5)—that exist between practitioners and between practitioners and their gods.

"You Don't Have To Use a Thing for What it is Meant For": Technology Transfigured

Scholars have explored how access to the internet and the personal computer is often restricted for those who come from systemically and institutionally disenfranchised social positions, both economically and in terms of

race and gender. Indeed, the term "digital divide" has been coined to speak to the ways in which in America, for instance, African Americans and Latino's have (statistically) less access to and less practical experience with computer mediated communication practices. In "Beyond Access: Race, Technology, Community", Logan Hill explains that "the digital divide isn't just about personal computers; it's about training, access, education, content, telecommunications infrastructure, and more" (15). The digital divide is an attempt to acknowledge the multifarious social and cultural conditions that shape access to technology. As the editors of *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life* point out, the notion of a digital divide, while an important tool in developing strategies to improve access to technology, always risks turning into a self fulfilling prophecy. Perhaps even more importantly, the digital divide asks us to focus exclusively on how technologies are used, rather than striving to appreciate the ways in which technologies and media and the discourses around them generate vectors of influence that extend beyond the subject position of the end user (or, in the case of media, the audience member). As the editors of *Technicolor* point out, "contests around technology are always linked to larger struggles for economic mobility, political maneuvering, and community building" (5). Vodouists come from both sides of the digital divide. Contemporary Vodou communities are filled with both those who have easy access to the internet and computers and those who do not. When these two groups of Vodouists (online and offline, as it were) encounter each other within the smaller, subdivided communities (or "houses") that make up Vodou religiosity, the social responsibilities that structure intersubjective relationships within Vodou can lead to a (sometimes partial) bridging of the divide.

When Mambo Sandrine and her husband Patrice (discussed above) set up what amounted to an internet café and computer exchange program in their botanica, they altered how technology was encountered by the members of their religious community—a group that they described as lower-middle class and largely of black or Latino background. Instead of simply "going online"

themselves, they went online together with approximately 30 practitioners, who formerly had little or no access to the internet and its associated technologies. Through education and material provision (of computers), Mambo Sandrine and her husband bridged the chasm of the digital divide. They also, however, reconfigured internet use and access to computers as part of the social networking intrinsic to Vodou community. Similarly, when Houngan Boniface met a new American initiate in Port-Au-Prince who helped him set up his own website, the new initiate was engaging in the type of interpersonal exchange common in Vodou communities. Like others who conduct a form of long-distance Vodou, Houngan Boniface reconfigured the internet, subsuming it into a larger matrix comprised of both ritual and communication technologies. These processes of transfiguration are part of the ways in which seemingly global forces, such as the cultural dissemination (some would say imperialism) of a technological ubiquity and promise of technological progress (or technoculture) are reconfigured in cultural and specifically religious ways. In the introduction to *Technoculture*, editors Constance Penely and Andrew Ross speak of this refashioning: "Western technoculture, even the most propagandistic and militaristic, is always being reread and reinterpreted in ways that make sense of local cultures and that intersect with local politics, with all sorts of results that go against the grain and the intentions of Western producers and sponsors" (xi). By adapting technology to serve religious purpose, these Vodouists negotiate and strategize against the disparities and inequities that render certain technologies inaccessible. Such individuals are acutely aware of the complex issues of access to technology because they live them everyday. As Vodou casts an ever-larger social net, new practitioners who have access to technology and the internet have become instrumental in bringing Vodou online. In so doing they have also brought online a group of practitioners who straddle the digital divide. These individuals, like Houngan Boniface and Mambo Sandrine's practitioners, have access to technology even though it may not be the level of access to which many in the West are accustomed. These individuals do not see themselves as divided or held away from technology but they don't always use technology in the same ways as

do those individuals for whom access is easy, instant, and unremarkable. Technologies, such as the internet and the computer, are both situated in a locatable social network and are incorporated into a matrix of other technologies and ritual practices. Many of the individuals I spoke with for this project are not always online—their access is undoubtedly circumscribed by things like proximity to computers or stable internet connections—but they are not wholly offline either. The ways in which such individuals use computers and the internet as part of their ritual and communal religious practice intersects in interesting ways with notions culled from Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism encompasses a range of artistic and technological black cultural production, from the work of science-fiction writers such as Walter Mosely and Octavia Butler to the musical productions of Detroit's techno scene and groups such as the Underground Resistance.[137] Like black nationalism, Afrofuturism also posits a resistive politics that recasts the potentially self-fulfilling prophecy of the digital divide by re-visioning black cultural and technological production as subversive. Articulated by Mark Dery in "Black to the Future: Afrofuturism 1.0", Afrofuturist philosophy maintains that "African-American culture is Afrofuturist at its heart, literalizing Gibson's cyberpunk axiom, 'The street finds its own uses for things.' With trickster élan, it retrofits, refunctions, and willfully misuses the technocommodities and science fictions generated by a dominant culture that has always been not only white but a wielder, as well, of instrumental technologies."[138] This "trickster" tendency to reconfigure technology for purposes other than what it is intended is visible in the practices of Vodou practitioners who (re)situate the internet as part of social networks and ritual technologies, but it is also visible in the image of Vodou as a powerful, viral, and cybernetic force.

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[137] See, for example, "Black Secret Technology: Detroit Techno and the Information Age" in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* [Alondra Nelson et al (eds), NY: New York University Press, 2001. 154-176].

[138] From http://www.levity.com/markdery/black.html (last accessed July 6th, 2006).

Samuel, a Haitian man in his late twenties who immigrated to Canada in his very early teens, examines the assumptions that are bound up in notions of the digital divide and the unbinding of these assumptions embedded in black technological and cultural production. Some years ago, Samuel taught me how to install and partition a new hard drive with which I was outfitting my own archaic and temperamental pc. At that time he explained that hackers don't keep their CPU's covered and locked up, but leave the panels of the machine open, leaving space for the wires and circuits to spill out, the guts of the machine always accessible. He has always seemed to me to be a computer genius, entirely self taught. He gets angry at the suggestion that he, as a black man and a Haitian, bucks the trends of the digital divide: "Sure," he says, "I had access to computers in school. My parents bought me a computer so I could do my homework, like everyone else in my cégep.[139] But there are computers in Haiti, you know. There is internet and everything." "Yes, sure. But not everyone in Haiti has access to computer technology," I argue. "Not everyone has access to it here," he retorts angrily. "But...," I start. "I know what you are going to say," he interrupts, "that more people have access here. That's true. But what I hate is the idea that if we [Haitians] get to a computer, we won't know what to do with it, we'll just stand there and stare at it, or dance around it, sacrifice a chicken to it, or something." I laugh in spite of myself and in spite of his obvious frustration at what he rightly perceives as a pervasive assumption that Haitians and blacks in general are inherently less capable of understanding computer technology than other races. "Haitians get computers," he continues, "really get them, they know how to use, use them, how to build them, not just sit and stare at them, like television. They take them apart, put them back together. Most of the hackers in the world are Haitian," he ends abruptly. "What?" I ask, startled. "They are?" "Yup. Hackers are Haitian, internet scams all come from Nigeria, all black people running the world." "How do you know?" I ask disbelievingly. "I just know," he said.

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[139] Cégep is a term used predominantly in Quebec (Canada). It is derived from the acronym CEGEP which stands for Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (College of General and Vocational education). Cégep is a level of post-secondary education in Quebec undertaken by students after grade 11 of high school. Programs range from 2 to 3 years in length and are considered preparatory for either university or for entry into the job market.

"Haitians in the US run the hacker underground, a lot of them work from Haiti too." "Really?" I respond doubtfully. "Yup. 'Cause black people, especially Haitians, know you don't have to use a thing for what it is meant for, you don't have to do what The Man tells you to do. Not like white people, not like you even, never open a computer in your life!" he teases. "I have!" I exclaimed indignantly. "Hardly," he retorts. And for a time our conversation degenerates into easy insults and banter. Samuel does not overtly identify as Vodouist, although he clearly embraces many of the tenants of Vodou. He is fiercely proud of his Haitian heritage and, unlike some of the diasporic Haitian elite, sees Vodou as intrinsic to what it means to be Haitian. Samuel once told me (after some admittedly insistent questioning on my part) that he was, if anything, a "cultural Vodouist". What he means by this is that he embraces the ideologies and concepts of Vodou—the notion of reclamation, the practices of cultural memory and oral history, the encoding of multiple meanings into single signs or signifiers—without admitting to a *belief* in the religion. This partial and somewhat tentative relationship to the religion is not wholly unusual among Haitians. Many Haitians have an ambiguous relationship to Vodou. Many define themselves as Catholic or Protestant even while practicing Vodou, never laying claim to the religion itself. But Samuel's attitude toward Vodou—informed at least partially with his own (sometimes occasional) interest in Black Nationalism—takes on a distinctive tonality as he links it to his own understanding of the role new media and technology play in his life and society in general. His half-joking, half-serious insistence that Haitians run a hacker underground points to a larger belief in the subversive nature of black culture in general and Vodou in particular. Also imbedded in Samuel's imaging of the "Haitian hacker" is an image of cyberspace as interpolated by Haitian-ness. The hacker is perhaps the most visible contemporary symbol of technology use transfigured for purposes other than it is intended. Samuel's Haitian hackers who know that they "don't have to use a thing for what it is for," align with Afrofuturist ideals. Speaking about Henry Louis Gates's discussion of "metaphorical literacy" as a defining aspect of black culture, Mark Dery explains that, "Here at the end of the 20th century, there's another name for the survival

skill Gates argues is quintessentially black. What he describes as a deconstructionist ability to crack complex cultural codes goes by a better-known name, these days. They call it hacking."[140] Images of Samuel's Haitian hackers predate our conversation. These hackers can also be found in the fiction world of cyberpunk science fiction writer William Gibson.

When William Gibson first coined the term "cyberspace" in *Neuromancer*, he also implicated the *lwa* of Vodou and the mystical impulses of the religion in a cybernetic universe. While Gibson's work arguably presents a problematic and exotified image of Vodou (or "voodoo"), his influential text has, nonetheless, encoded signifiers of the religion within the discourses of cyberspace, embedding the fraught historicity of representations of Vodou in the conduits of cybernetic information flows. These circulating signifiers of Vodou are, as always, implicated in the ways in which race, gender, sexuality and nationality are also configured in the discourses of (and about) cyberspace (and Vodou). As has already been explored,[141] even problematic representations of voodoo intersect with the Vodou religion, providing points of access for newcomers and occasioning moments of debate as practitioners police and negotiate images of their religion. Unlike the Vodou embedded in the rather concrete signifiers of popular culture artifacts, Vodou in cyberspace appears more amorphous, often running into a heady mix of "technomystical" impulses (Davis 1998). As this analysis explores, representations of Vodou that intersect with definitions of cyberspace lend themselves to a politics of reclamation, as practitioners embrace seemingly powerful and empowering images of Vodou as a subversive force and a viral agent that undermines systems of domination and oppression. Newcomers to Vodou who reach the religion, in part, via the discourses of black nationalism and Afrofuturism, as well as Haitian Vodouists who are "returning" to a religious heritage forsaken by many of the Haitian elite, often conceptualize Vodou as part of the reclamation of a cultural and racial heritage that has been "lost" or damaged

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[140] From http://www.levity.com/markdery/black.html (last accessed July 6th, 2006).
[141] See "Visible Vodou: Examining the Ephemera" in this text.

under the historical forces of colonialism, slavery, and contemporary conditions of racism and neo-colonialism. Definitions that merge Vodou with cyberspace are both co-opted and created by those with a vested interest in promoting black production in digital culture. By infusing conceptualizations of technologies such as the internet with mystical meaning, and particularly with an "African" mystical meaning, some practitioners consciously seek to promulgate a subversive image of Vodou as commensurate with the seemingly powerful forces of technological progress.

I hold up a copy of Gibson's *Count Zero* to Samuel as a way of opening the discussion. "You ever read it?" I ask. "Yeah, I read it," he replies and I cannot read his tone. "So," I probe, "what did you think." "S'Okay," he replies still inscrutable, "not my favorite." "Not your favorite Gibson?" "Not my favorite sci-fi," he replies. "Oh. Why?" "I don't know," he said. "I haven't read it for a while. I remember having a hard time keeping the characters straight in my head...." "Oh, yeah," I agree absently. "But what about all the Vodou in it?" I ask impatiently, "I woulda thought you'd have lots to say about that." He grinned. "It's cool, that he talks about Vodou. I wasn't so much into that when I read Gibson, but it is all over the 'net," he says, more forthcoming. "What's all over the net?" I asked, confused. "You know, voodoo, cyberspace, type those two words in [to a search engine] and you get a million references to Gibson. He made it popular." "What? Vodou?" I clarify. "Vodou in cyberspace," he connects the dots for me. "Every cyber geek knows about Vodou now," he says, grinning. "But doesn't that kinda bother you?" I ask. "Why?" he asks back. "Well, 'cause, maybe Gibson sort of just..." I flounder, not wanting to put words in his mouth, "he kinda culturally appropriated Vodou, didn't he?" I continue. "Made it work for his idea of cyberspace. You know, same old, same old, romanticizing of black culture...plus, isn't Vodou kinda...viral in the books?" "Is it?" he asks. "I don't remember." "Well" I backtrack, "I don't know, gods infecting the net, that kinda thing. Maybe not viral, exactly. But it's implied," I finish lamely. "Huh, I guess," he is quiet for a while and then says, "About that, though, Haiti and Vodou are

inseparable, so if you promote Vodou, you are promoting Haiti and Haitians." "So that makes [Gibson's work] okay?" I ask. "Sometimes, it depends. If I remember Gibson right, he makes Vodou cool, powerful so Haiti is cool too." "By extension." I expand on his words, "But isn't Vodou exotified in Gibson's novels?" I ask, leading the conversation somewhat. "Maybe, probably," he agrees. "I don't really remember. But that's just it, probably nobody remembers exactly what Gibson said about Vodou, not the whole thing, the way it is in the novel, not exactly. But he linked it with cyberspace, and now it is linked. You can't change that. And computer guys everywhere think Vodou is this cool culture that 'gets' cyberspace, how it works, how it really works, like computers [are] something you do, not something you watch [...] something powerful, that you can manipulate, not just all surfing and downloading music." "So," I clarify slowly, "that's what Gibson did? Linked Vodou with the power of cyberspace?" "Yup," he agreed cheerfully. "And," I continued, "that link exists in people's minds, even if they never read Gibson?" "For sure," he agrees.

I don't know if Vodou is actually as closely linked to discourses of and about cyberspace as Samuel suggested. But Samuel is right about the impact of Gibson's world, mapped out in *Neuromancer*, on the collective consciousness of those people deeply involved in the developing digitalized and networked world of new media technologies. As Allucquère Rosanne Stone explains:

> *Neuromancer* reached the hackers who had been radicalized by George Lucas's powerful cinematic evocation of humanity and technology infinitely extended, and it reached the technologically literate and socially disaffected who were searching for social forms that could transform the fragmented anomie that characterized life in Silicon Valley and all electronic industrial ghettos. In a single stroke, Gibson's powerful vision provided for them the imaginal public sphere and refigured discursive community that established the grounding for the possibility of a new kind of social interaction [....] *Neuromancer* [...] is a massive intertextual presence not only in other literary productions of the 1980s, but in technical publications, conference topics, hardware design, and scientific and technological discourses in the large. (1991:108)

Along with the "massive intertextual presence" of Neuromancer go the signifiers of Vodou. Part of the influential *Neuromancer* trilogy, *Count Zero* is the novel that most clearly introduces the *lwa* of Haitian Vodou into his cyberpunk world. Gibson is generally credited with coining the word cyberspace, although for Gibson, cyberspace was never limited to the realm of the internet. In his novels, where the organic form is fused with a plugged in technology, cyberspace has not been limited to either technology or an experience of technology, nor is it confined by geography (real or virtual). Instead cyberspace is, for Gibson, a way of understanding the entire world, the entire condition of being wired, networked, fused with and addicted to a technologizing reality. It is into this highly influential understanding of cyberspace that Gibson introduces the characters and concepts of Vodou. But what effect does this linking of cyberspace and Vodou have on practitioners of the religion? What has the popularity of Gibson's work done to the visibility of Vodou? In "Space for Rent in the Last Suburb", Scott McQuire explores Gibson's work in terms of the "itineraries of desire it cathected" (167). McQuire reads "the popular success and critical influence" of Gibson's work as "symptomatic of a complex of social changes and cultural anxieties which is still far from exhausted" (167). When exploring Gibson's work in conjunction with cybernetic representations of Vodou, as well as in the context of a growing influx of newcomers to the religion, the "itineraries of desire" in Gibson's work take on a particular tenor.

In *Count Zero* the reader meets a cybernetic form of the *lwa* Erzulie who appears to the main character, hacker Bobby Newmark, while he is "plugged in." Not understanding or recognizing what he had encountered (he likens Erzulie to a form of AI or artificial intelligence), Bobby asks Beauvoir,[142] a member of a Vodou "cybersect", to explain it all to him. In his explanation, Beauvoir suggests

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[142] In *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture*, [NY: Routledge, 1998], Barbara Browning suggests that Gibson's Beauvoir is modeled on the *houngan* Max Beauvoir who guided Wade Davis throughout *The Serpent and the Rainbow"* (124), a popular book on Vodou which was later made into a movie.

that Bobby has to shift his understanding of religion in order to understand why

Vodou is so applicable to their cool, harsh, technologized world:

> "Voodoo" isn't concerned with notions of salvation and
> transcendence. What it's about is getting things done. You follow
> me? In our system, there are many gods, spirits. Part of one big
> family, with all the virtues, all the vices...Voodoo says there's God,
> sure, Gran Met, but he's big, too big, and too far away to worry
> himself if your ass is poor, or you can't get laid... Voodoo's like the
> street. Some duster chops out your sister, so you don't camp out on
> the Yakuza's doorstep, do you? No way. You go to somebody who
> can get the thing done. Right? (67)

In this often cited quote, it is the propensity of Vodou to "get things done" that seems to have

captured the attention of many. A quote from a website on "magic and the occult" illustrates how

Gibson's depiction of Vodou as a practical religion (one which, as we have seen, aligns with the

precepts of Vodou itself) has sparked the interest of readers:

> How did I come to find out about Voodoo? Well, it's very silly. To
> this day, I still find it silly and even ridiculous. However, it's how I
> came to be interested in Voodoo. It happened when I was reading
> William Gibson's "Sprawl" series of novels—specifically *Count*
> *Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Gibson makes heavy use of Voodoo
> in both books, and in *Count Zero*, there is this dialog, where Bobby
> (*Count Zero*) is talking to Beauvoir about Voodoo, and Bobby
> doesn't understand why anyone would be into Voodoo..."It isn't
> concerned with notions of salvation and transcendence. What it's
> about is getting things done." So anyway, I became very interested in
> Voodoo after reading this, because I too am interested in getting
> things done. I didn't figure Gibson made any of it up...It just didn't
> sound made up. But information on Voodoo is quite hard to find, due
> to the fact that most people have a very serious misunderstanding of
> what it's all about.[143]

It is interesting to note that Gibson's novel acts as a starting point for a search for

"information on Voodoo" because his depiction of the religion reads as "real" or

authentic, not "made-up". Certainly, much of Gibson's voodoo/Vodou subplot

resonates with the precepts of the religion. Vodou is a practical religion. Erzulie is

a Vodou goddess. And, arguably, the discourses of Vodou seem to align with

those of cyberspace and virtual reality in ways that make it a probable religion for

Gibson's futuristic underworld. But all this veracity does not render Gibson's

work unproblematic.

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[143] From http://www.sentence-ov-desire.net/Pazuzu/voodoo.html (last accessed on July 6th, 2006).

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Cyberpunk in general, and Gibson's work in particular, depicts an image of a transnational world represented, in part, by the hybridized being of the cyborg. As Emily Apter explains in *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects*, "the cyborg's transracial, transnational body conjures forth an identity no longer split between First and Third World, between metropole and native home, but rather, a body so fragmented that its morphology is a diaspora" (217). While this image is futuristic, it also can, when combined with gendered images of the cyborg, encode "postcolonial conceptions of nation and race as part of the politically charged relationship between the diaspora and transnationalism, pigmentation and desire, and, most controversially, hybridity and miscegenation" (216). Voodoo/Vodou has long been encoded in colonial discourse as a contaminant, and the visceral fear often associated with the religion has functioned as a warning against miscegenation, or the dilution of the purity of the colonial race. Scholars such as Apter and Barbara Browning explore how this coding of Voodoo/Vodou is carried forward through the works of fiction. Gibson's fictional world is populated with literal cyborgs that explicitly encode the fragmented morphology of race and technology that Apter explores. More subtle, perhaps, is how gender, race and technology collide with the signifiers of Vodou in Gibson's cyberdized street tech depiction of the Vodou ritual of possession. Lucas, one of Gibson's characters, describes the possession of another character named Jackie:

> "Think of Jackie as a deck, Bobby, a cyberspace deck, a very pretty one with nice ankles." Lucas grinned and Bobby blushed. "Think of Danbala, who some people call the snake, as a program. Say as an icebreaker. Danbala slots into Jackie's deck, Jackie cuts ice. That's all." (114)

This clearly sexualized text is more than a simple explanation of possession; it is also a metaphor for interaction in Gibson's cyberspace, where human is always potentially penetrated by technology. As Apter observes, "cyberculture has the unnerving habit of transcoding technology into another race that breeds with other human races and ethnicities" (217). Barbara Browning reminds us in *Infectious Rhythms: Metaphors of Contagion as the Spread of African Culture* that such

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sexualized imagery inevitably recalls not only a fear of miscegenation, but also a fear of the viral spread of both racial impurity and literal viruses. The translation of a fear of viral contamination into the technologized, cybernetic world of science fiction perpetuates, Browning argues, colonialist conceptions of race and religion. As Browning explains, images such as Gibson's provide a node in a "figural strand" (not only confined to fiction) that links "voodoo, sex, and viruses" (124). Such imagery is problematic in that it renders Vodouists (like Gibson's character, Jackie) at risk of dissolution and even death in a technologized and viral environment where everyone is "at risk" of hybridization and contamination. But these are textual interpretations of Gibson's work. Even *if* new practitioners who come to Vodou via an initial interest in Gibson's representations carry all these problematic notions of exotification and sexual desire forward with them in their spiritual search, what happens when they actually *get* to Vodou? Can newcomers who access Vodou via the conduits of popular culture remain unchanged and unchallenged by the discourses and practices of the religion? Just exactly who is infecting whom? Samuel, like other practitioners, would say that Vodou has the ability and the power to transform these spiritual seekers in much the same way that Vodou (practice and discourse) transfigures technology to serve a religious purpose.

While Gibson's images of Vodou are perhaps, when carefully deconstructed, not as empowering or even as subversive as they initially appear, Gibson's text, like many popular representations of the religion,[144] does not function for new practitioners so much as a direct transmitter of Vodou as a catalyst that sends them on a journey for more information. Such popular representations are often policed by these practitioners as problematic or stereotypical images of the religion. However, Gibson's work seems to occupy an ambiguous place in the minds of many practitioners, particularly those who come to the religion from Afrofuturism or black nationalism. The way in which Gibson's influential work has, as Samuel has suggested, "linked" Vodou and

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[144] See, for example, "Visible Vodou: Examining the Ephemera" in this text.

cyberspace means that a cybernetic image of Vodou continues to spin out from Gibson's work, past the reaches of the Vodou religion. What can the implications of such a connection be? In part, a practitioner's investment of the technological discourses of cyberspace with the religious symbolism of Vodou is a strategy of visibility employed to position Vodou as a culturally powerful force through its association with the social power of communication technologies. Although those with a political interest in re-visioning black culture and black cultural production may consciously disseminate a conceptualization of Vodou and cyberspace as symbiotic forces, this strategic vision does not necessarily devalue the precepts of Vodou itself. The epistemological practices of Vodou lend themselves to an understanding of identity as strategic and contingent. For Samuel, Vodou, like Haitian-ness, is particularly suited to "getting" or understanding the potential social power that can be harnessed from the constellation of technologies that make up cyberspace. The cultural ethos of Haitian Vodou "gets" cyberspace not in the way, perhaps, that it was intended to be understood, but in a way that imbues users with a self-reliant ability to work around the system. Samuel, who always criticizes my own lack of familiarity with the inside of my computer, knows full well that most people for whom access to technology is easy are lost without it. Although a *jaspora*, living in Montreal with most of his family now back in Haiti, Samuel is never lost because he is never (allowed to be) fully reliant on the dominant system. Like a hacker, he hooks into and out of cultural systems, decoding and recoding as he goes. Vodou allows people to do this. It is, as I have suggested before, a mobile religious system with no clear home base (neither Haiti nor Africa clearly functioning as such) but with the ability to allow people to make a home in sometimes hostile places. When, as Karen Richman describes in her research, the *lwa* of Vodou (manifest in possession) move to cassette and video recorders to address migrant practitioners, or when, as my research has shown, the *lwa* of Vodou (also manifest in possession) type emails or speak with practitioners via the phone, then what becomes evident is that within diasporic religious traditions such as Vodou there exists a template for religious experience that is mediated, technologized and globalized.

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Samuel takes me back to *Ginen* again, that virtual homeland so intrinsic to the Vodou religion. "It's mumbo jumbo, man!" he shouts (referencing Ishmael Reed's novel which we had been discussing earlier). "Gibson got bit! Hack the system, man! Hack the world!" he yells, improvising a mock "African" dance in the living room. I dissolve into laughter. Like others who share it, Samuel's self-conscious rhetoric of Vodou-as-viral, as subversive, is exciting. It induces the euphoria of a hoped-for-world. It is, to use the metaphor rigorously explored by Barbara Browning, infectious. Throughout my research I have encountered practitioners who posit an image of Vodou as a powerful social force that is not subsumed by the technologized, mediatized, globalized world, but instead appropriating technology, media and commodities in its own bid for world domination. This image "works", it carries resonance for practitioners, because of the way Vodou works. Arguably, since the Middle Passage and their removal from *Ginen*/Africa, Vodouists have practiced a type of long-distance religion. The tools they have used for navigating distance and dislocation have long made use of the rhythms of extrasomatic memory, the transmission of narrative, and the technologies of ritual. While it is tempting to think of technology, media and cultural commodities as things apart from religion, in Vodou these are religious things, made to do religious work, experienced in religious ways. It is a subtle distinction, perhaps, but one that reveals a lot about how and why Vodou seems to thrive despite the forces of globalization, commodity culture and mass mediation. For Vodouists, the trick is not to fight these forces, but to get inside them, ride them, possess them, hack them.

Conclusion

X Marks the Spot

     I am not sure when my own interest in the Vodou religion surfaced, but I can definitely pinpoint the moment when I became interested in Vodou as a mediated religion. It was in the hours and the days after the airing of an episode of the now iconic X-Files television series. The episode, originally aired on February 3rd, 1993, was called "Fresh Bones" and had the show's protagonists (Dana Scully and Fox Mulder) investigating the mysterious death of a marine stationed at a processing centre filled with Haitian refugees waiting for asylum in the US. It was, ostensibly, an episode on Vodou. Mysterious deaths were occurring among the marines and, gradually, these deaths were attributed to Vodou "worked" by some of the Haitian detainees. The show was filled with references to Vodou, including *vèvès*, *wanga* and of course zombies. Although it made use of stereotypical images of zombies and graveyards, the Vodou being "worked" against the marines was portrayed as a result of the maltreatment of the Haitian refugees. Embedded in the episode was a clear critique of US immigration and refugee policies. At one point, a character explains to agent Mulder why the Haitian refugees seem destined to be detained indefinitely, unable to apply for US citizenship; "In case you haven't noticed, Agent Mulder, the Statue of Liberty is on vacation. The new mandate says if you're not a citizen you'd better keep out." In the hours and days after the episode aired, it became a hot topic of discussion, particularly among the younger members of the Montréal Haitian Vodou community with whom I was familiar. Discussions about the authenticity of the portrayal of Haitian Vodou in the show abounded in Montréal. Videotape copies of the episode were mailed to relatives who had missed the show. It was the topic of long-distance phone calls. I anticipated that the episode would draw criticism from those I knew and, certainly, many expressed concern that the representations

of Vodou contained in "Fresh Bones" were simply a rehashing and a repackaging of old stereotypes of Vodou as a purveyor of dark magic, curses and zombies. But this was not, at least among those I knew, the prevalent opinion. Many felt that the representations of Haitian Vodou in the episode were, on the whole, positive. I remember watching the episode myself. It was in a way exciting to see Vodou represented in such a mainstream venue without being portrayed in a simplistically negative way. It was encouraging to see subtle criticism of US policies toward Haitian refugees being voiced by the fictional characters of the show. Discussions of this particular X-File episode still occasionally surface more than ten years later in both on and off line Vodou communities. Indeed, some of the newcomers to Vodou that I spoke with as part of my research for this text cite this particular "media event" as the catalyst which prompted them to actively seek out affiliation with Vodou.[145]

"Fresh Bones" and the response it elicited opened my eyes to the complexities of media representations of Vodou. I began to understand how practitioners interacted with such representations, simultaneously critiquing them and embracing them as affirming of Vodou as a subversive and powerful religion. It would be some time before I understood how such media representations could function as portals to Vodou for newcomers, but I could sense that many were not content to continue to let Vodou function as an invisible and underground religion. Although part of popular culture, "Fresh Bones" was being co-opted as a vehicle for the promotion of a public Vodou. Throughout this text I have argued that the ritual innovation that occurs within Vodou, whereby commercialized events, cultural commodities, media representations and technologies are integrated into religious practice, is not particularly new to the religion. Vodou has always engaged in a form of cultural mimesis that allows it to integrate seemingly foreign elements into the ethos of the religion. What is new, perhaps, is the speed with which ritual innovation occurs, and the ways in which a matrix of commodification and mediation have combined with a new readiness to

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[145] See, for example, "Visible Vodou: Examining the Ephemera" in this text.

incorporate Vodou into the public sphere. While in Haiti Vodou is becoming an officially recognized and sanctioned religion,[146] Vodou is also becoming more visible in North America as practitioners begin to actively demand religious tolerance for this long persecuted religion. Laënnec Hurbon suggests that the new visibility of Vodou in the public sphere "offers a way to use religion as a cultural force...a way of affirming an identity" (2001:124). Grassroots Haitian nationalist movements both in Haiti and in the diaspora are increasingly utilizing the signifiers of Vodou to affirm pride in Haitian identity. The musical movement *misik racine* has been instrumental in moving Vodou into the public sphere, merging the sacred elements of traditional Vodou songs, drum rhythms, and even moments of possession with popular music performance (123). But as I explored in "Vodou Groove", once *misik racine* became part of the structures of Haitian popular music, it was no longer confined to Haiti. Through the circulation of World Beat music, of which *misik racine* groups such as Boukman Eksperyans became a part, the sacred elements of Vodou were transmitted to a global audience. The *misik racine* movement in Haiti and its transnational circulation via World Beat music can perhaps be seen as a starting point (although one that had been building for some time) for a shift in how Vodou was perceived in North America. In the last couple of decades Vodou has been reconfigured from a religion almost entirely cloaked in secrecy and invisibility (particularly in North America) to a religion that is a visible (and viable) part of a global spiritual marketplace.

The spiritual marketplace, along with the growing visibility of the religion, has created new avenues of access to Vodou. The growth of commercialized forms of Vodou along with the presence of the religion on the internet has made it easier for those seeking affiliation with Vodou to find information on the religion and to contact religious communities. As I have suggested throughout this text, it is important to understand the intersection of Vodou, media and commodity structures as congruent with the ethos of Vodou. New technologies become

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[146] Vodou was recognized as an official religion in Haiti by presidential decree on April 4th, 2003.

incorporated into ritual practices, allowing for a type of long-distance Vodou that is structured, at least in part, on notions of Vodou as mobile and translocal. The scope of the spiritual marketplace, along with an array of communication technologies, has provided new avenues for the ritual specialists of Vodou to advertise services that have always been part of the spiritual enterprise of Vodou. Vodou does not simply adapt *to* contemporary conditions of cultural commodification, technological innovation, mediation and globalization, it adapts aspects of them to serve religious purpose. The influx of new practitioners who have no genealogical or geographic ties to Haitian Vodou is undoubtedly due to the increased visibility of the religion. Yet those who come to the religion from outside it ultimately find their own ways to align with the cultural specificity of Vodou. When new practitioners who identify as black nationals come to identify with Vodou not as a "new" religious identity but as a reclaimed one, they link their own racial lineage to the history of Vodou as an African based religion. Similarly, newcomers come to see themselves in the narratives of the *lwa* of Vodou who represent multiple subject positions. Still other newcomers authorize their identification with Vodou through a narrative of discovery where their journeys to the religion are filled with signposts left by the *lwa* themselves. Whether newcomers to Vodou are "reclaiming" a religious identity or are called to one, identification with Vodou requires transformation. Vodou is not so much changed by the arrival of newcomers to the religion as these individuals are changed by the religion. When newcomers come to Vodou, more than their religious identities change. New practitioners may (indeed, often do) become Kreyole speakers. They inevitably become versed in the history of Haiti and most likely become versed in the history of Haitian-American relations. They may also become "friends of Haiti", their identities reconfigured by their connection to a land to which they cannot claim heritage. African-Americans who come to the religion may find themselves, in the Haitian context, becoming *blans*. Vodou demands this kind of paradigm shift.

This is how Vodou negotiates commodity culture, media and technology. Vodou does not change the systems and structures it encounters, instead it changes how these systems and structures are perceived and experienced. When initiates in Vodou enter the *djevo* (or initiatory temple) for their first initiation as *kanzo* they are taught, among other things, how to physically handle heat. Initiatory rites in Vodou are secrets that cannot be passed on to the uninitiated, but in "Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou", Karen McCarthy Brown explains how she, as an initiate, was taught never to say something was "hot" again, but to instead say that something was "strong" (216). Initiates in Vodou no longer experience heat as heat, as something that burns or harms, but instead experience it as something strong and powerful; "We had not learned how to change the world, but we had been shown how to change the way we experienced it" (216). Given this epistemological approach to the world, it is unsurprising that Vodouists are adept at transfiguring media representations, technologies and cultural commodities, wresting them from the domains of cultural appropriation and an encroaching global hegemony, and transforming them into vehicles for the *lwa* of Vodou.

Glossary

asogwe – initiation as a Vodou priest or priestess

Ayibobo – a term often used in the call-and-response of Vodou rituals

blan – white; in Haitian Kreyole the term indicates foreign or foreigner

bokor – sorcerer

bosal –wild; non-initiate

chwal – horse; the body of the practitioner that is possessed or ridden by a lwa

dechokaj – uprooting

deyo – outside; diaspora

Dizyem Departman-an - Tenth Department of Haiti (i.e. the diaspora)

Erzulie Dantor – lwa of Vodou known for characteristics of motherhood and nurturing;
    considered to be part of the *Pètwo* nation of spirits

Ezulie Freda – lwa of Vodou known for characteristics of sensuality or love

Garanti – to guarantee; a guarantee

Gedeuh – a lwa of Vodou associated with death

gro bon ange – "big good angel"; soul or consciousness

Haitian Kreyole – Haitian Creole; the language spoken by Haitians

hoodoo – an American term for African-American vernacular spirituality; usually thought
    to combine African-American, Native-American, and European folk magic

houngan – priest

hounsi kanzo – Vodou initiate at level of *kanzo*

jaspora – diaspora

Jean-Jacques Dessalines – first leader of Haiti after the Revolution; credited with
    creation of Haitian flag; lwa of Vodou known as Ogoun Dessalines or Sen Jak
    (Saint Jacques)

kanzo – lowest level of initiation in Vodou

kanaval – Carnival

Legba – a lwa of Vodou said to preside of the domain of the crossroads; the first lwa
    called at most Vodou ceremonies

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lwa – gods of the Vodou pantheon

mambo – priestess

maryaj lwa – marriage of practitioner and *lwa*

medsen fey – leaf doctor; someone knowledgeable about the healing properties of plants

mèt tèt – master of the head; refers to the *lwa* who acts as guardian to an individual practitioner.

misik racine – roots music

Nouyok – New York

ounfo – or sacred temples of Haiti,

Pakèt – talisman produced by ritual specialist of Vodou;

peristyles – temples

Petwo – a "nation" or pantheon of Vodou spirits; spirits in the Petwo nation are said to be "hot"

pwen – point; fist

rasin – root

seremoni – ceremony; large scale Vodou ritual

ti bon ange – a person's consciousness (soul)

travay – work; usually refers to ritual work conducted by Vodou priests or priestesses in private transactions with individual clients

vivan-yo – the living

wanga – spell; talisman

vèvè – ritual symbol drawn to consecrate space

voye pwen – send a point

zobop –sorcerer

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