

The Voodoo Spiritual Temple:
A Case Study of New Orleans' Spiritual Churches
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation takes the material culture of New Orleans' Spiritual Churches as its point of the construction and application of academic categories in studies of religions of the African diaspora. Because I am interested in what emic explanations reveal about scholarly categories and methods, a dialogic approach in which I consult practitioners' explanations to test the appropriateness of academic categories is central to this work. Thus, this study is grounded in an ethnographic study of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, which was founded and is operated by Priestess Miriam Chamani, a bishop in the Spiritual Churches. The Spiritual Churches first emerged in the early twentieth century under the leadership of Mother Leafy Anderson. Voodoo, Pentecostalism, Spiritualism, and Roman Catholicism have been acknowledged as their primary tributary traditions. This study examines the material culture, such as statues and mojo bags, at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple as it reflects and reveals aspects of Temple attendees' world views. In particular, material culture begins to illuminate attendees' understandings of non-human beings, such as Spirit and spirits of the dead, as they are embodied in a variety of ways. Conceptions of Spirit and spirits are revealed to be interconnected with views on physical and spiritual well-being. Additionally, despite previous scholarly treatments of the Spiritual Churches as geographically, socially, and culturally isolated, the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple reveals them to be embedded in transnational and translocal cultural networks.

To those who came before,
especially my grandmothers.

And to the Blessed Mother
and St. Anthony,

for sending me the right people
and keeping the road open.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	vi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction	1
Literature Review	11
Methodology and Theory	22
Chapter Outline	27
2 MATERIAL CULTURE IN HISTORIOGRAPHY	31
Introduction	31
Material Culture in the Historiography of the African Diaspora in the U.S.	32
Material Culture in the Historiography of New Orleans Voodoo	35
Material Culture in the Historiography of the Spiritual Churches	40
Implications for This Study	46
3 CATHOLIC SAINTS AND HIGH JOHN ROOT:THEORIZING HYBRIDITY ...	49
Theorizing Hybridity in the Spiritual Churches	49
Hybridity and Material Culture at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple	53
For Whom is Hybridity an Issue?	66

CHAPTER	Page
4 SPIRIT AND SPIRITS AT THE VODOO SPIRITUAL TEMPLE	73
The Place of Personhood	73
Spirit	77
Spirits and the Dead	79
The Living Human	86
5 A TRANSNATIONAL TEMPLE, AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT	92
Locating the Spiritual Churches in the Global Diaspora	92
International and Transnational Connections at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple	96
Historicizing the Spiritual Churches in International Movements	105
The African Diaspora: Connections and Comparisons	111
6 END DISCUSSION: CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS	115
Introduction	115
Findings and Theoretical Implications	116
Directions for Future Research	119
REFERENCES	122

PREFACE

As my Acknowledgments indicate, I owe a great deal to my consultants, especially Priestess Miriam, for the development of this dissertation. As I engage with existing scholarship as well as my own historical and ethnographic study, it is important to illuminate my own relationship to the questions and people with whom I'm working. My interest in questions of signification and material culture initially arose out of my own experiences as a Catholic feminist reading scholarship about Catholics, particularly their relationships with saints. At times, I found that this literature resonated with my experiences while at others it failed to do so. Consequently, initially, I intended my dissertation project to investigate people's interactions with saints in New Orleans Catholicism and Voodoo since the two have been closely linked historically. However, I realized this was too large a task for one dissertation. Thus, I focused my inquiries on Voodoo, which Jason Berry claims survives primarily in the Spiritual Churches (1995: 95). Through initial historiographical and archival research, I found that the Spiritual Churches and studies of them provided many opportunities to explore my methodological and historiographical questions.

One of the most significant factors that led me to focus my research on the Spiritual Churches of New Orleans was my introduction to the community with whom I came to conduct my ethnographic study. I discovered that among Mother Anderson's contemporary legacies is the Voodoo Spiritual Temple under the leadership of Priestess Miriam Chamani. Born in Pocahontas, Mississippi, in 1943, Priestess Miriam (née Mary Williams) was reared in a Baptist family. From a young age, she was expected to help pick cotton, but she describes herself as "always a dreamer" who wanted to escape the

harsh conditions of the segregated South. Upon graduating high school, she moved to New York City and then to Chicago. In Chicago, Priestess Miriam attended nursing school. Subsequently, she worked as an operating room technician then a private nurse. Priestess Miriam has identified this work in healthcare as central to her spiritual growth and preparation to be “a servant” at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple.

In Chicago, Priestess Miriam encountered the Spiritual Churches through which she pursued ordination as a bishop.¹ Throughout her life, Priestess Miriam has experienced dreams and encounters that she identifies as signs from ancestors and the Holy Spirit regarding her work as a minister and spiritual counselor. For example, while living in New York City, Priestess Miriam’s deceased grandfather, a minister, visited her to give her the numbers that would turn out to be the street number of the Cultural Center adjacent to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. After receiving ordination, Priestess Miriam founded the Mary Williams Healing Temple.

Priestess Miriam said that this temple did well, but she felt compelled to seek a reading from a woman recommended by her acquaintance Sister Colette. The woman read playing cards and told Priestess Miriam that she “would meet a black man who would make [her] prosperous.” Shortly afterward, Priestess Miriam met Oswan Chamani, a Belizean immigrant and practitioner of Obeah. They married and moved to New Orleans where they established the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. In addition to offering readings and ritualizations, Priest Oswan and Priestess Miriam wanted to offer a botánica

¹ Priestess Miriam explained to me that she took the name Miriam around the time she was ordained because “a voice in the silence” told her that would be the right name for her.

with products made using their knowledge of U.S. and Belizean herbs. Not long after the temple moved to its current location, they opened the Cultural Center, offering incense, oils, sachets, and art from West Africa and New Orleans. Before Priest Oswan “transcended into the arms of the ancestors” in 1995, he told Priestess Miriam she would live much longer and eventually remarry, which she did. In the past two decades, Priestess Miriam has travelled to many countries, learning and sharing her knowledge as well as building on the material culture that forms the starting point of my analysis.

Most significantly, in the course of my fieldwork and continued relationship with the Temple community, I came to understand that although Yelvington’s dialogic method, which I employ throughout this dissertation, is primarily concerned with the historical construction of academic categories, applying this method to ethnography requires dialogue of a deeper sort - between my world view and my consultants’. In my experience, people did not give of themselves without expecting something in return, and friendships evolved organically out of our exchanges. My consultants sometimes were curious about me. As I shared more of my own story with them, they tended to share more of theirs with me. Their willingness to explain their practices to me was also dependent on their feeling that I demonstrated some sort of commitment to the Temple. Several of the women, who spend time either working in the Cultural Center or contributing to the Temple in other ways, only began opening up to me in easy conversation after I spent time minding the Cultural Center’s counter while Priestess Miriam did readings for clients, performed some sewing for the assemblage of dolls and sachets, and helped Priestess Miriam mix herbs for sachets. Three women particularly were impressed that I could help with the sewing for which I owe my mother gratitude as

well.

Some fellow academics have expressed surprise when I describe my share, minimal compared to Priestess Miriam's and that of a few of other women, in the labors at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. I do not claim to be an "insider" per say nor am I denying that I am situated within the power dynamics that characterize researcher-consultant relationships. Recognizing and remaining mindful of those dynamics are central to my methodology in analyzing the relationship between etic and emic categories in studies of the Spiritual Churches. Rather, I understand my contributions to the Temple as important on several levels. Firstly, sewing a doll or mixing herbs myself gives me a more rounded perspective on these practices than I could gain from only listening to descriptions of them. Secondly, I theorize that proving I was useful and invested in the Temple in the long-term soothed concerns that I, like other scholars and journalists before me, would ask some questions and disappear after a brief period of acquaintance. Thirdly and relatedly, I am concerned with what Karen McCarthy Brown describes as justice in the researcher-consultant relationship. Doing justice to one's consultants requires moral and aesthetic judgments to avoid exploitation and misrepresentation (Brown 1999: 353). Consequently, I made the decision that if I were going to benefit from the knowledge the Temple community would provide me for my dissertation, I would try to repay them in some small measure by helping them in the work of the Temple and Cultural Center.

As my friendship with Priestess Miriam grew and other people came to see me as a more regular part of life at the Temple, I introduced Priestess Miriam to the most important people in my life in New Orleans as well as my parents. Whenever my parents visit New Orleans, I take them to sit and talk with Priestess Miriam in the Temple.

Usually, I sit on a small stool listening while my parents and Priestess Miriam sit in the three full-sized chairs around the table where Priestess Miriam does her readings. It is not uncommon for people to bring family members to meet Priestess Miriam. For me, as I suspect for other people, it is a sign of respect towards Priestess Miriam.

By intertwining Priestess Miriam into my life in a more personal way, I continued to gain appreciation for the material culture of the Temple. In addition to advising me on how to make a mojo bag to help my parents sell their house and building my wedding altar, Priestess Miriam counseled me on my struggles with carpal tunnel syndrome. This experience turned out to be one of the most significant in furthering my dialogue with Priestess Miriam and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple community regarding the relationship between the mind and body, which I explore in Chapter 5. Priestess Miriam recommended that I read Catherine Ponder's *The Healing Secrets of the Ages* (1967), which maps out a New Thought philosophy of correspondence between mental states and physical health. At Priestess Miriam's instruction, I used the affirmations in the book during my morning prayers before starting my work. Within a week, the pain nearly ceased.

This was not my first experience with alternative healing; during my fieldwork, I also received treatment from a chiropractor who incorporated light healing and traditional Chinese medicine into his work. However, my experience with treating my carpal tunnel syndrome was the first time a healer explained in detail the way they perceived how energy was affecting me. Priestess Miriam explained that my anxieties about my work were creating negative energy flowing out of my hands since I was working on my laptop for extended periods. This energy got blocked in my wrists and hands, causing the carpal

tunnel syndrome. Saying affirmations and pressing my wrists on certain points helped me create a more positive approach to my work and get the energy flowing.²¹ In addition to helping manage my pain, my experience with this healing changed my research questions. I grew attentive to the Temple community's discussions of the relationship between the inner workings of the human body, physical wellbeing, and spirits, a dynamic which receives little attention in other studies of the Spiritual Churches. After I read Ponder's book, Priestess Miriam told me several stories she had not shared previously of friends and clients who suffered physical ailments caused at least in part by their subconscious feelings of fear or anger.

Likewise, the deeply personal decision to hold my wedding at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple led to new perspectives for my research. The first time Priestess Miriam spoke to me at length about the role of spirits, whom academics typically term orishas or lwas, was during interactions with the candles and other offerings that my partner and I selected for the wedding altar. When Priestess Miriam spoke of the significance of St. Anthony in keeping our path clear and invoked Oshun over the pumpkin we brought, I began to perceive the relationships among other materials in the Temple differently, and this shaped the questions I asked my consultants. At this point, they began to speak more readily about Obatalá and the food they offered Chango. Our exchanges continued to deepen and grow more complex in ways that nuanced my research methods significantly.

My personal relationship with Priestess Miriam and my involvement at the Voodoo

² Notably, this concern with maintaining a positive energy flow through the body is the reason Priestess Miriam does not recommend that people get tattoos, which she says create blockages.

Spiritual Temple brought me many insights that, based on the way I have seen Priestess Miriam and Temple attendees speak with other researchers who stop in at the Temple, I most likely would not have gained otherwise. Throughout my fieldwork, I did my best to remain cognizant of my position as a researcher and the accompanying responsibilities. In the push and pull between “outsider” and “insider,” I found a productive space for exploring my dissertation’s methodological questions as well as a place where I gained important friendships. When reflecting on her research for *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Brown notes that “a true friendship is not over just because a writing project is done” (Brown 1999: 353). Therefore, I expect my relationship with the Voodoo Spiritual Temple to continue to grow as I develop as a scholar.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Spiritual Churches are a religious movement that emerged in the early twentieth century under the influence of a variety of religious traditions including most notably Voodoo³, Pentecostalism, and Roman Catholicism. To date, many aspects of the origin, history, and appeal of these churches and their adherents have yet to be adequately analyzed, particularly from the perspective of contemporary religious studies. In this thesis, I attempt to offer a partial corrective by applying theoretical, methodological, and historiographical insights from the field of religious studies to a critical study of the Spiritual Church movement. In particular, I focus on the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, a New Orleans organization cofounded and operated by Priestess Miriam Chamani. Her leadership at the Temple and ordination as a bishop in the Spiritual Churches illuminate the intersections of a wide variety of religious movements throughout the African diaspora as well as related issues of race, class, and gender in the U.S. South.

I additionally ground this study in the Spiritual Church movement's rich material culture, an often-mentioned but inadequately-explored dimension of the Spiritual Churches. Making such an application provides critical insight into key methodological,

³ I use this spelling of Voodoo to distinguish it from Haitian Vodou. Though they have similar names, Ina Fandrich explains they are better understood as "sister religions." See Fandrich's "Yoruba Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo" in the *Journal of Black Studies* (May 2007).

theoretical, and historiographical issues of broader relevance and interest to contemporary scholars of religious studies.

Recently, the Spiritual Churches have drawn attention from scholars who are particularly interested in its unique combination of European- and African-based religions (Baer 1984; Berry 1995; Estes 1993; Hurston 1997; Jacobs 1989; Jacobs and Kaslow 1991; Smith 1989; Tallant 1946; Wehmeyer 2000). These studies have served to emphasize the extent to which academic study of the Spiritual Churches and their adherents is additionally methodologically and theoretically challenging as scholars often inconsistently appropriate terms and concepts from various related traditions that have shaped the Spiritual Churches movement. For example, scholars and researchers, including Jason Berry, sometimes use terms such as “pantheon” to describe the non-human beings with whom Spiritual people interact (1995:17). However, in this thesis, I posit that scholars’ use of such terms is problematic in the study of Spiritual Churches because it often presupposes the accuracy of their own descriptive and analytic vocabulary while ignoring the vocabulary commonly used by practitioners in their own references to spirits and spirit guides.

This problematic application of terminology is exemplified further in the different terms scholars, particularly David Estes, Hans Baer, and Stephen Wehmeyer, use to describe adherents of the movement. For example, scholars’ references to Spiritual Church members as “Spiritualists” and “Spiritual people” has resulted in historiographical and methodological confusion since use of the term “Spiritualist” commonly has been used in reference to members of the nineteenth-century religious movement commonly designated as Spiritualism. While the Spiritual Churches have been

influenced by Spiritualism, they are not to be confused with the Spiritualist organizations that emerged in the nineteenth century, Furthermore, Spiritual Church members consistently self-identify as “Spiritual people” as opposed to “Spiritualists” (Claude F. Jacobs, e-mail to author, March, 18, 2014).

Scholarly misrepresentation reflects a more pervasive problematic within the discipline of religious studies that has drawn significant attention in recent years. Charles Long defines the problem of misrepresentation as part of a historic process of signification, a process in which conquered and subjugated peoples are named and simultaneously objectified “through categories and concepts of those realities which appear as novel and ‘other’ to the cultures of conquest” (1986:4). As a number of other recent studies attest, the process of signification has a long history within Western academic scholarship focused on non-Western peoples and their cultures. The disciplines of religious studies and anthropology have been particularly susceptible to this tendency (Noel 2009; Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 1996 and 2014).

Moreover, the above studies indicate that scholars often participate in subtler processes of signification through the misapplication not only of the assumptions underlying their historical and ethnographic depictions but also their terminology and descriptive language. For example, while scholars, including Carolyn Morrow Long and Martha Ward, typically refer to non-human beings in African diasporic religions, including Voodoo, as “deities” and “gods,”⁴ Jacobs and Kaslow and Wehmeyer refer to

⁴ These beings share many similarities with the spirits of the Spiritual Churches which suggests some compatibility between Voodoo and the Spiritual Churches if not evidence of a direct influence of the former on the latter.

most non-human beings in the Spiritual Churches as “spirits” or “spirit guides,” terms practitioners themselves actually employ (Long 2006: 93; Ward 2004: xv; Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 127; Wehmeyer 2000: 64). Long and Ward are not necessarily discussing Spiritual people in their work; however, their unclear use of terms such as “deities” and “gods” reflects a problematic in scholarship on New Orleans Voodoo that influenced the development of the Spiritual Churches and studies of them.

It is unclear precisely why emic terms, such as “Spiritual people,” are favored inconsistently within the aforementioned studies; however, I hypothesize that it results from more than simply privileging Western, especially Christian, concepts and terms. Rather it is the result of a broader problematic in religious studies theory that I am interested in investigating in the context of studies of the Spiritual Churches: the difference in privileging etic and emic explanations in academic analyses of research communities and their practices. According to Kenneth Pike, etic classifications are based on prior research and theories applied cross-culturally. Emic categories, on the other hand, “must be discovered, not predicted”; they are particular to each research community (Pike 1999: 28-29). While emic and etic approaches may be understood in strictly dichotomous terms, they need not be necessarily (*Ibid*: 32). In my dissertation, I am interested in how privileging etic terms potentially misrepresents a research community’s relationships with spirits and spirit guides, thereby reinscribing frequently racialized power structures that often have been central to academic presuppositions undergirding anthropology and religious studies. Of related concern is how more scholarly attention to emic categories might help provide solutions to this problematic.

Dissonances between scholars and practitioners imply that scholars of the Spiritual Churches often employ language and concepts and thus project categories that are a legacy of religious studies' cultural, racial, and colonial origins as noted by recent scholars such as Long, Chidester, and Masuzawa (Long 1986; Chidester 1996, 2014; Masuzawa 2005). As suggested by Charles Long, the reciprocity between the constitution of religion's data and the interpreter's methodological procedures "reveals and/or obscures a form of cultural subjectivity" (Long 1986: 12). Since scholars' methods do not always account for their own positionality, processes of signification, such as the application of inadequate or inaccurate etic categories, often go unrecognized by scholars. The process highlighting power dynamics related to notions of race, ethnicity, and culture is often especially evident in historical, comparative, and anthropological studies of religions of the African diaspora (Yelvington 2006: 7; Chidester 1996).

Suggestive of the approach that I use to explore and analyze the multiple issues related to scholarship and practice pertaining to the Spiritual Churches is that proposed by Kevin Yelvington in *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora*. Yelvington's dialogic method examines the historical construction of anthropological categories "simultaneous with an insistence on viewing processes of multiparty interaction in the creation and transformation through history of determined material social relationship and myriad symbolic media." Yelvington's method insists that scholars should interrogate the "anthropological self as much as the nature of the Other." Subjects viewed through the lenses of power inequities, combined with attention to the emergence of behavioral forms and repertoires through contested interactions, allow researchers more

adequately and accurately to begin addressing racialized and gendered categories and theories (Yelvington 2006: 4-5).

Like Long and Yelvington, per the above, David Chidester is also concerned with the racial and colonial origins of academic categories and theories as well as subjugated people's roles in their construction. More broadly, in *Savage Systems* (1996) and, more recently, in *Empire of Religion* (2014), Chidester explores the emergence of comparative religion as an academic discipline in relation to British colonial enterprises in southern Africa. Chidester localizes his research questions in early scholarship on the Zulu and other southern African groups to demonstrate the ways in which colonial methods of data collection, circulation, and knowledge production were simultaneously shaped by Eurocentric assumptions and agendas.

Tomoko Masuzawa, who also illustrates that academic categories arose within the context of colonial dynamics, joins Chidester's discourse on the origins of the field of religious studies. Masuzawa particularly focuses on the construction of the category of "world religions" and its relationship to the ideology of pluralism. She theorizes that nineteenth-century scholars' "very speculative logic that rationalized and legitimized... commonplace characterizations" of different religious groups subject to European imperialism became normalized in the twentieth century (Masuzawa 2005: 256). As a result, pluralism has become a way of avoiding confrontation with Europe's imperial-subject position (Masuzawa 2005: 327).

While Masuzawa and Chidester primarily emphasize studies of cultural groups outside the United States, Long, a historian of religion, and Yelvington, an anthropologist, suggest that research on religions of the Afro-Atlantic similarly has contributed to the

construction and reification of problematic academic categories and theories. In my dissertation, I suggest that the above problematics are evident in the contrast between etic and emic understandings and explanations of Spiritual people's world views and practices. However, my dissertation also illuminates the challenges posed in addressing this methodological and theoretical problematic. Hence, although I engage and sometimes critique academic discourse about the Spiritual Churches, I acknowledge that I simultaneously am performing etic interpretation and analysis. This is inevitable given my positionality relative to my subject matter. My intent within this study is not to dismiss etic analysis but to contribute to the discourse about its scholarly use and implications in a self-conscious and self-critical way thus allowing a deeper interrogation of the process of signification and a more accurate scholarly representation of emic understandings.

While concerned with the wider implications of this methodological and historiographical problematic of accurate representation and vocabulary with religious studies, like Chidester, I am locating my exploration of academic representations and misrepresentations within a particular geographical, cultural, and historical context - that of the Spiritual Churches of New Orleans. Most contemporary studies associate the Spiritual Churches' origins with Mother Leafy Anderson who led the movement in New Orleans in the first three decades of the twentieth century. After moving from Chicago to New Orleans in 1918, Anderson founded Eternal Life Christian Spiritualist Church Number 12, and the Spiritual Churches' popularity grew exponentially during the Great Depression (Berry 1995: 57, 59-60). Although the Spiritual Churches proliferated under Mother Leafy Anderson's leadership, evidence demonstrates that the denomination's

presence, or some form of it, preceded her arrival in New Orleans (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 2).

Priestess Miriam followed a similar path from Chicago to New Orleans. When I first introduced myself to Priestess Miriam in 2013 at her shop located on a busy street on the border of New Orleans' French Quarter and Treme neighborhoods, she was very welcoming. Her ability to be uncompromisingly honest or more subtle in her guidance when appropriate made her an ideal mentor for me. She considers herself as constituting the Voodoo Spiritual Temple as much as the physical building does, and regular attendees appear to agree, making her interpretation of material culture practices at the Temple central to this dissertation.

Through comparative examination of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, its leadership, and attendees, I explore how the categories scholars use to portray Spiritual people's world views and practices have been constructed within and in response to colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial contexts and how the assumptions implicit in those categories affect scholars' understandings of the practices and material culture of the Spiritual Churches. Moreover, my ethnographic study of the temple will demonstrate new directions the Spiritual Church movement has taken since the 1980s when the last extensive study of the churches was conducted. My research suggests that Spiritual people may no longer be as concerned with organizing into associations as they were in the late 1980s, for example, when David Estes conducted his research of the two national associations of Spiritual Churches headquartered in New Orleans (1993). Perhaps partly as a result, although Priestess Miriam is ordained in the Spiritual Churches, the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is not affiliated with any Spiritual Churches in New Orleans. Partly as a

result, Priestess Miriam has been able to reach more diverse and geographically disparate communities.

My historiographical and ethnographic analysis of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple also illuminates its members and leader's roles in the construction and application of categories, such as "Spirit" and "spirit guide." Based on historiographical and ethnographic research, *Spirit*, *spirits*, and *spirit guides* are understood to be the predominant non-human beings with whom Spiritual people interact, and I delineate and elaborate upon these types of beings using historical and ethnographic methodologies. In particular, Spiritual people often refer to the Holy Spirit as *Spirit*. Spiritual people's understandings of Spirit and spirits appear to be rooted in African and Afro-Atlantic traditions. Spiritual people's understandings of spirits, for example, demonstrate similarities to New Orleans Voodoo in which people historically have interacted with various lwas through offerings and rituals of possession (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 85-86).

Similar to early-twentieth-century Holiness-Pentecostal conceptions of the Holy Spirit, Spirit is perceived as and engaged with as omnipresent (Jacobs 1989: 46). In an article in the *Journal of American Folklore*, pioneering black anthropologist and ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston explained Jesus' relationship to Spirit. "Jesus as a man was not important - he was merely the earthly body of a nameless 'Spirit' by which name the deity is always addressed" (1931: 319). Notably my primary consultant, Priestess Miriam Chamani, expressed a similar understanding of Spirit to me. In the context of my research, I will examine these types of parallels in terms of their insight into the world views and practices of attendees of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple and Spiritual people.

My fieldwork and that of other scholars suggest that early Spiritual people's familiarity with Holiness-Pentecostal theology and worship greatly influenced the framework through which Spiritual people continue to perceive and interact with Spirit.

In the 1980s, Claude Jacobs found that some Spiritual people viewed *spirit guides* and *spirits*, terms used more or less synonymously by scholars, as "partial manifestations of the Holy Spirit." Spirits and spirit guides typically are beings who are assumed to have once been living humans, including Biblical figures, deceased relatives, saints, or figures from the history of the Spiritual Churches, and Jacobs' consultants sometimes referred to them as "saints" (1989: 47). Spirit guides may be summoned in rituals, and Anderson presented several of the most popular spirit guides, Black Hawk, White Hawk, Father Jones, and the Virgin Mary, to the public in 1926 (Berry 1995: 61). Such references suggest the varied religious roots of the movement. Moreover, like lwas in Voodoo, spirit guides may possess people. People may form personal relationships with spirits (*Ibid.*: 22). Jacobs suggests that an important difference between spirit guides and spirits lies in spirit guides' abilities to help Spiritual people distinguish between good and evil spirits (1989: 47).

As suggested above, the material culture, the physical objects surrounding and used in Spiritual people's practices, is a critical tool for accessing and clarifying aspects of the world views underlying Spiritual people's terms and practices. In order to gain a clearer understanding of Spiritual people's relationship to material culture, my basic methodological approach is that of a case study, making use of ethnographic and historiographical research focused on New Orleans Priestess Miriam Chamani and attendees of her Voodoo Spiritual Temple. This research includes participant observation

and intensive interaction with Priestess Miriam and members at the Temple. Since how people relate to Spirit, spirits, and spirit guides is central to understanding what these beings are, I examine how practitioners describe their relationships with non-human beings as this compares with historians' and anthropologists' representations. For example, is it possible that when practitioners describe non-human beings as gods or spirits that they mean something different than scholars who use that terminology?

I am aware that as a white Northerner, my research, particularly in its initial stages, has also been susceptible to this emic/etic problematic. In an effort to highlight not only a problem but also a partial corrective, I have carefully employed my increasingly sensitized and informed ethnography in a dialogic method to check my terminology and theorization against that of my consultants, especially Priestess Miriam. Employing Yelvington's dialogic method in this way provides opportunities to remain sensitive to assumptions about race and gender underlying my own and existing theories.

Literature Review

Historians of the Spiritual Churches generally acknowledge the influence of Voodoo on the Spiritual Churches (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991; Baer 1984); therefore, scholarship on Voodoo, including Carolyn Morrow Long's study of nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau (2007) and Karen McCarthy Brown's ethnography of Haitian American Vodou practitioners (1991), provides important insights for studies of the Spiritual Churches. Most studies of New Orleans Voodoo focus on nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau, a figure who looms large in popular imagination (See Long 2007 and Ward 2004).

Berry claims that contemporary New Orleans Voodoo primarily survives in the Spiritual Churches (1995: 95); however, he fails to explain precisely why and how this is so. I hypothesize that Voodoo became intertwined with the development of the Spiritual Churches in part because of compatible understandings of the natures and functions of spirits and the dead. In New Orleans, Priestess Miriam Chamani's Voodoo Spiritual Temple is emblematic of these shared understandings. As was mentioned previously, Priestess Miriam is a bishop of the Spiritual Churches. At her Voodoo Spiritual Temple, she and her community of clients and Temple attendees challenge clear divisions between Voodoo and the Spiritual Churches. Consequently, as Anthony Pinn notes, Priestess Miriam does not concern herself with questions of orthodoxy (1998: 51). She does not see a functional distinction between Voodoo, the Spiritual Churches, and other traditions, such as Santería, and many members of the Temple community share this view.

Priestess Miriam's rejection of clear divisions between Voodoo and the Spiritual Churches presents challenges to any assumptions that these religions are bounded and separate from one another. This holistic dynamic present at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is clearly reflected in its name; however, this relationship is not as clearly acknowledged in other Spiritual Churches. Some Spiritual people belonging to other congregations either deny or deemphasize the connections between the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo. To some extent, this tendency appears to be due to pervasive negative stereotypes about Voodoo and Voodoo practitioners within popular culture and the academy. For over a century, popular Western media has portrayed Voodoo as evil superstition. As Joseph M. Murphy explains, this has encouraged perceptions within popular culture and the academy of Voodoo and related traditions as "black magic." It also has allowed "whites

to recognize the consequences of racism and at the same time absolve themselves of responsibility for it” (1990: 333). Consequently, as the Spiritual Churches struggled for status and recognition as a legitimate church within the larger community, members sought to distance themselves from root doctors and Voodoo practitioners derided by mainstream Christians (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 30-31, 37). Apparently, this has not been a major concern of the leadership or adherents of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Thus attention to the genealogy, worldviews, and practices of Temple attendees provides insight into the effects of popular, scholarly, and theological discourse on Spiritual people’s self-understandings.

Before the 1980s, most studies of Spiritual Churches were cursory and ancillary to scholars’ agendas. Early scholars, such as Hurston and Tallant, examined the Spiritual Churches in relationship to the broader religious history and experiences of black Americans primarily in the South. Tallant, for example, included the Spiritual Churches in his study of Voodoo (1946: 162-170) while Hurston provided ethnographic descriptions of a New Orleans congregation in a chapter focused on conjurers and root doctors (2008: 23-29). Hurston and Tallant’s works, produced in the 1930s and 1940s respectively, provide crucial starting points for contemporary research; however, they remain limited and problematic in their analyses. Neither provides in-depth analyses of the Spiritual Churches as a movement.

Although noting Mother Leafy’s opposition to Voodoo (Tallant 1946: 168), Robert Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans*, based on interviews conducted by Federal Writers Project teams of African American and white researchers, describes magical and healing practices that the Spiritual Churches (which he terms “Spiritualist churches”) share in

common with Voodoo practitioners (1946:169), including the use of spirit guides such as Black Hawk.⁵ Though Tallant's work is one of the most widely read on New Orleans Voodoo and the Spiritual Churches, Carolyn Morrow Long has criticized him for distorting and omitting information as well as for failing to credit his researchers adequately (2007: 60, 153, 196). His problematic descriptions will provide a starting point for a discussion of scholarly signification in writings on the Spiritual Churches.

Preceding Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Zora Neale Hurston, a Columbia-trained black woman ethnographer, published *The Sanctified Church*. It presents an ethnographic description of Mother Catherine Seal, an early follower of Mother Leafy and minister in the Spiritual Churches (Hurston 1997: 23-29). At Barnard, Hurston conducted ethnographic research with noted anthropologist Franz Boas of Columbia University. She also worked with Ruth Benedict and fellow anthropology student Margaret Mead. After graduating from Barnard, Hurston spent two years as a graduate student at Columbia University. In her ethnographic work, Hurston adopts a Boasian concern with emic understandings of cultural practices. Critics, such as Darwin Turner, have criticized Hurston's collections of folklore for being unsystematic and inadequately analytical; however, Hurston's ethnographic style presents valuable information in naturalistic contexts, incorporating analysis through her interviewees' words (Dolby-Stahl 1998: 45-

⁵Black Hawk's popularity in the Spiritual Churches is indicative of the influence of Spiritualism as well as the movement's multicultural roots. In New Orleans, black cultural practices reference and appropriate aspects of Native American cultures in various ways. In particular, Mardi Gras Indians utilize Pan-Indian musical expression and costuming combined with West African beading and drumming styles (Turner 2009). Future research may be able to provide further insight into Native American influences (and appropriations of images of Native Americans) in New Orleans culture.

46, 48). Consequently, though Hurston often does not present her interviewees' words verbatim, she does present analyses more concerned with her research communities' self-understandings.

Significantly, Hurston also emphasizes details that Mother Catherine's temple shares more broadly with traditional African imagery and practices (Hurston 1997: 23). Hurston's primary concern is with what she views to be the syncretic nature of the Spiritual Churches, noting that Mother Catherine "has taken from all the religions she knows anything about any feature that pleases her" (1997: 26). Through her descriptions of the magical, African, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal features of Mother Catherine's church, Hurston laid an important foundation for subsequent, more detailed studies of the Spiritual Churches. Her groundbreaking work reiterates the need to understand "how these world views are triangulated between African, Caribbean, and black American diasporas" (Manigault 2014: 8). Like some other scholars of her time, including Melville Herskovits, Hurston was interested in theories of cultural survivals and creolization. This dissertation will explore how such concerns shaped early studies of the Spiritual Churches and the theories resulting from them.

More recent studies, such as Hans Baer's *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism* (1984) and Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow's *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans* (1991), build upon earlier studies but provide more detailed institutional histories of the Spiritual Churches, situating them within the dynamics of racial discrimination and inequities in the United States. Additionally, these works provide valuable ethnographic descriptions of congregational life and practice. They also focus on models of religious authority (Estes 1991), specific motifs within

Spiritual Church rituals (Berry 1995), the role of prophesy and healing (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991), and religious responses to racism (Baer 1984). However, no scholars directly address the issue of constructing and implementing etic categories and frameworks, though Jacobs provides some suggestive insight with his description of spirit possession and spirit guides in the Spiritual Churches as they relate to Voodoo and Roman Catholicism (Jacobs 1989: 47). Notably, even less has been written about the material culture of the Spiritual Churches beyond its use as evidence of syncretism. This dissertation aims to mine the material culture of the Spiritual Churches as a critical point for illuminating Spiritual people's understandings of other-than-human beings.

Baer's approach to the Spiritual Churches is more sociological than previous works. He advances scholarship on the Spiritual Churches by examining not just the presence of what Baer terms "syncretism" (1984: 110-159) but the way in which the churches serve as a religiously-based response to racism. Baer argues that the Spiritual Churches serve compensatory, integrative, manipulative, and psychotherapeutic functions. That is, for poor black Americans facing the challenges accompanying poverty and structural racism, the Spiritual Churches are ameliorative and serve to integrate individuals into a social group that provides dignity and community. On the other hand, the Spiritual Churches encourage adherents "to accept mainstream American values and goals, such as material success and individual achievement." This "unwittingly discourages critical examination of the process of victimization experienced by many Blacks in American society and often results in the objects of this process blaming themselves for their problems" (Baer 1984: 160). Baer explores the Spiritual Churches' relationships to similar movements

such as the Universal Hagar Church and Father Divine's Peace Mission movement.⁶ The connections Baer develops here are an important starting point for understanding the Spiritual Churches within the broader contexts of black American life and religious movements.

More recently, Claude Jacobs' research on the Spiritual Churches makes a significant contribution to the scholarship. In particular, Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow's *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans* provides a history of the movement as well as some explanations of it as a syncretistic combination of Voodoo, Roman Catholicism, and Pentecostalism (Jacobs and Kaslow: 1991: 92). This and other works by Jacobs will provide an important framework for contextualizing my examination of material culture in the broader history and concerns of the Spiritual Churches.

The aforementioned research on Voodoo also helps to provide valuable insight regarding the significance of women's religious leadership within the Spiritual Churches and other Afro-Atlantic traditions. David Estes credits Mother Leafy's success within the

⁶ Unlike the Peace Mission movement, the Spiritual Churches congregations typically do not include many people who are not black or Creole, a complicated category of racial identification in Louisiana. Originally used to distinguish European-descended people born in Caribbean and circum-Caribbean colonies from those born in Europe, the term gained added complexity in the nineteenth century when African-descended New Orleanians used it to distinguish themselves from newly-arrived African Americans. Throughout its history, the term has been contested. In her analysis of reactions to nineteenth-century Americanization efforts, Shirley Thompson observes that "above all, 'being Creole' binds together a group of cultural insiders able to discern a specific meaning from the vagueness of the term and distinguishes them from cultural outsiders who, in having to ask what *Creole* means will never completely understand" (2009: 13-14). Based on my ethnographic research, it seems that this continues to be true. As for Spiritual congregations, in his study of New Orleans' Spiritual Churches, Michael P. Smith only encountered one white congregant in the various churches he visited (1984). In this sense, Priestess Miriam's Voodoo Spiritual Temple presents an exception rather than a rule in terms of the clientele's racial demographics.

Spiritual Church movement in part to this tradition of non-institutionalized women's religious leadership (1993: 156). The Spiritual Churches provide an important lens for understanding the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as well as factors of urbanization, migration, and transnationalism. Of the two associations of Spiritual Churches headquartered in New Orleans, only one ordains women as bishops and archbishops (Estes 1993: 150); however, historically the majority of Spiritual Church leaders and members have been women. Similarly, the majority of Priestess Miriam's clients and Temple attendees are working-class women, though of a wider variety of racial and geographical backgrounds than Spiritual Churches that have been studied previously.

It is important to contextualize the Spiritual Churches and Priestess Miriam's training and work at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple within a broader framework of African-descended women's religious leadership in the United States. The Spiritualist movement, a source of Spiritual Church views on spirit guides and the dead, offered women rare religious authority in the nineteenth-century United States (Albanese 2007). Jacobs and Kaslow's assertion that the Spiritual Churches comprise a "women's movement" suggests that this continued to be an important factor in the formation of the Spiritual churches and its models of leadership (1991: 7). By the 1930s, men leaders dominated, reflecting a broader trend in black American Christian denominations; however, by the 1980s, women in leadership almost equaled men in equivalent positions (*Ibid.*: 184-185). Priestess Miriam suggested that this was important to her when she told me that her own spiritual director during her training for ordination was a woman.

Unlike studies of the Spiritual Churches, scholars historically have focused on the role of gender in New Orleans Voodoo through biographies of nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau (Long 2007). More contemporary studies tend to focus on Haitian Vodou manbos (Brown 1991). The focus on contemporary Haitian populations in North America raises interrelated issues of gender and transnationalism as well (c.f. McAlister 2002; Richman and Rey 2009). A concern with transnationalism also is identifiable in discussions of the effects of Haitian immigration on the historic development of nineteenth-century New Orleans Voodoo (c.f. Long 2002). The historiographies of Marie Laveau and contemporary manbos emphasize migration, transnationalism, and urbanization as causes of women assuming roles of leadership within their communities. A study of Priestess Miriam and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple offers an opportunity to bridge the divides in these bodies of literature.

Estes suggests that Spiritual people are not unaware of these aspects of the Spiritual Churches' development. Ritual feasts, memorial services for Mother Leafy Anderson, and public ordination rituals ground women's authority in a lineage of foremothers as well as a direct connection to the Spirit (Estes 1993: 156). While Estes and Jacobs and Kaslow have pointed to the significance of gender in developing models of leadership as well as attracting a membership of predominantly working-class women within the Spiritual Churches, little has been written on gender's broader relationship to issues of embodiment and material culture. Stephen Wehmeyer's photo essays draw corrective attention to the significance of material culture in understanding the Spiritual churches' connections to African religions (2000; 2010). Jacobs' work on spirit guides also suggests a connection between material culture and gender (1989). Thus far, however, no

studies of the Spiritual Churches and New Orleans Voodoo have taken on the issue of material culture and its relationship to gender directly. This work hopes to contribute to this analysis.

My research builds on the increasing body of literature that asks what it means to take material culture seriously. While previous studies of Voodoo and related Roman Catholic devotional cultures mention material culture, few have used it as a lens through which to explore conceptions of non-human beings. Historically, Protestant cultures have viewed materiality and a focus on the material, and particularly embodiment, as immoral (Keane 2005: 184). This tendency has legacies in religious studies scholarship, especially in dealing with African and African diaspora religions. Thus, as Yelvington points out in outlining his dialogic method, the formation of academic theories have been intertwined with racialization in the African colonial and post-colonial context. In scholarship, the early Portuguese distinctions between African fetishism and Catholic religion evolved into a differentiation between Moderns and those with belief, assumed in this framework to be unsophisticated and backward (Latour 2011: 43, 47). Eighteenth-century Europeans went so far as to consider what they identified as fetishism to be evidence of the absence of religion in Africa. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was considered religion's origin. Whether taken as a sign of religion's absence or origins, material culture was thought to be evidence of unsophisticated culture and proof of Africans' inferiority (Chidester 1996: 13).

Scholars of Roman Catholic devotional culture have explored the social significance of material culture, especially shrine-related objects. In *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in Christianity*, Colleen McDannell demonstrates how international

networks develop through the distribution of shrine-related materials, such as holy water (1995). Like Tweed, McDannell focuses on what these systems of exchange reveal about relationships among human persons. I expect to expand upon these studies by exploring the saints' and other beings' presences through shrine-related objects and their uses in some ritualizations at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. I will explore how this affects people's interactions with non-human beings and, consequently, other humans. At the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, objects belonging to the deceased of the Temple community have prominent places on altars as well. I will explore potential connections to ancestor veneration within African and African diasporic religions as well as concepts of mediumship and communication with the dead in the Spiritual Churches.

Studying Voodoo Spiritual Temple attendees' relationships with saints, lwas, and the dead raises questions about the function of embodiment in conceptions of human and non-human beings. I define embodiment as the manifestation of a being in a physical object, which may include but is not limited to a relic, statue, medal, picture, or human, as a means through which that being communicates with other beings. Embodiment is an etic concept; however, it is useful in exploring my consultants' explanations of their world views and practices. Some groundwork has already been laid in studies of the embodied experiences of human persons. Anne Taves explores how religious experiences are grounded in embodied experiences, cultivating bodily individual and cultural memory (Taves 1999: 353). I explore how this framework relates to persons indexed in objects.

Stephen Wehmeyer's work provides some foundations for my exploration of these issues within the Spiritual Churches. Wehmeyer is interested in demonstrating the Kongolese influence on Spiritual Church aesthetics, especially as they relate to an Indian

figure known as “Kind Uncle.” Kind Uncle’s altars illustrate similarities to Kongo “power figures” known as *minkisi* (Wehmeyer 2000: 63). This attention to aesthetics will inform my analysis of non-human beings via material culture.

Methodology and Theory

My methodologies primarily are shaped by a reflexive approach. As a highly educated white Northerner, I experience the world very differently from many of the people of color, most of whom were women and Southern or recent immigrants, with whom I had frequent contact at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Like many of them, I was raised in a working-class family, but my experience of being working class was qualitatively different due to my race. Moreover, having been raised culturally Protestant without any church affiliation and converted to Roman Catholicism as an adult, I had to learn a new vocabulary of Spirit and spirits to understand with what my consultants at the Temple wanted to explain to me. While I acknowledge that there is a gap between my consultants and me as researcher, I understand us to be equally “enmeshed in the human situation” (McCutcheon 1999: 8). Rather than exclusively concern myself with objectivity or fact, then, I am interested in points of view - as experienced and understood by my consultants and me (*Ibid.*: 10).

As I conducted historiographical and ethnographic research, I encountered world views and practices that were at times very familiar to my own and at others starkly different. For example, although I recognized many similarities between my own altar-making activities and those described in literature on the Spiritual Churches, Spiritual people’s understanding of Spirit is one with which I was unfamiliar. One of the greatest

challenges of this project has been to avoid projecting my own views and concerns onto my consultants. Through a reflexive and dialogic methodology, I hope to represent my consultants' self-understandings as accurately as possible without overstating my ability to understand and explain their experiences as if they were my own. This is key to addressing the faults in the methodologies of previous scholarship, which often privileges scholars' analyses over consultants' self-understandings.

Through ethnographic research, I hope to recover some sense of the terms and conceptual frameworks arising organically in the context of the Spiritual Churches. In this sense, this key phase of my project includes an "anthropology of anthropology" in which I examine how otherness is constructed and negotiated (Pels 2008: 281). As such, this dissertation certainly engages in an academic discourse as I acknowledged previously. Thus, one of my goals is to help nuance this discourse by exploring how academics' methods and cultural contexts affect their theories and conclusions.

My ethnographic studies at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple reveal that people interact with non-human beings in many ways, including blessings, prayer, offerings, weddings, funerals, and making magical objects, such as mojo bags. As my ethnographic research proceeded, I gained more of my consultants' trust, and in degrees, they explained their practices and understandings as they felt I was ready to hear them. Through this process, I was able to adjust my research and closely examine the functions of non-human beings, considering related questions concerning power, relationships of exchange, material culture, gender, and geography. Unstructured interviews as well as participant observation help clarify how practitioners perceive these non-human beings and their roles and functions. In reflecting on my ethnographic data, I especially attend to trends in

consultants' word choices. For example, do they describe spirits and lwas as "symbols"? Alternatively, do they speak of them as literally present through a statue or possessed ritual participant? In my ethnographic research, I observed Priestess Miriam and Temple attendees refer to certain statues as persons, not objects, indicating those statues index presences rather than symbolizing something. Existing ethnographies suggest a similar dynamic present in other Spiritual Churches (Jacobs 1989; Wehmeyer 2000).

My time at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple only served to drive home the significance of Long's theory of signification as well as Yelvington's dialogic method to this project. Priestess Miriam turned out to be a great mentor in my process of refining my research method and approach. In particular, she taught me to do my best to really listen, not just to hear what I expected from my consultants. Once I was helping her mix the incense she sells in her shop, and I asked what all the colors symbolized. She laughed and said, "You academics! Everything has to mean something." It was a gentle and humbling lesson in not making assumptions about what I saw. In some cases, Priestess Miriam and my other consultants placed importance on the colors of their clothes or altar materials, but I learned that their words and actions would draw my attention if it mattered. I then would confer with them to make sure I did not misunderstand them.

Partly as a result of my positionality, I encountered several limitations while conducting my research. As a result of centuries of suspicion and persecution, some Voodoo practitioners choose not to disclose information to outsiders, especially since popular media reflects assumptions that Voodoo is essentially irrational and violent (Murphy 1990: 324). Similarly, I expected that leaders and adherents of Spiritual Churches would have reservations and that I might have limited access to some

information that is deemed private or necessarily confidential. Consequently, I had to be attentive to these dynamics as they affected not only the existing scholarship but also the information that I gathered and the conclusions I may draw from it. Occasionally, people were suspicious of my presence at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple when they first met me. As a white Northerner, I share traits with academics who have profited off communities of color in the past. Perhaps due to New Orleans' status as a popular tourist destination and a rise in national attention to New Orleans culture in the last ten years, New Orleanians are especially sensitive to these dynamics. Humility became an important tool in building relationships with my consultants, and most came to accept me relatively quickly when they saw that Priestess Miriam welcomed me.

Overt as opposed to covert participant observation is a critical method for my research and seems to have been accepted in my encounters with Priestess Miriam and her clients. However, at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, Priestess Miriam established that I would not have access to certain practices and rituals, especially readings. Readings are a combination of divination and counseling in which Priestess Miriam reads bones, talks with her clients, and administers advice and sometimes herbal treatments. Because Priestess Miriam considers these readings to be forms of counseling in which people discuss deeply intimate issues, she keeps them confidential.

Sometimes clients shared aspects of their readings, whether the content of their questions or their impressions of Priestess Miriam, unprompted by anything I said. This happened almost exclusively with women. Additionally, most people who came to sit in the office adjacent to the Temple and Cultural Center and visit with Priestess Miriam were women. Based on the tones of some of these conversations, I inferred that they

spoke more freely around me than they would have if I were a man. Among some women, there seemed to be a sense that all women could be sympathetic to some issues, especially those regarding family and romantic relationships. I will return to issues of gender and race throughout my dissertation to examine my role in the ethnographic process as well as to clarify what attracts people to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple and Priestess Miriam.

My own relationship with Priestess Miriam evolved greatly over the course of researching and writing this dissertation. I met Priestess Miriam a month after both of my grandmothers passed away. Priestess Miriam became something of a surrogate grandmother to me and often refers to me as her grandchild. My growing appreciation of the Temple and its religious beliefs and rituals was also manifest in an additional and very personal way - the decision to hold my marriage at the Temple with Priestess Miriam officiating.

Despite this growing familiarity between my consultants and me, I have made a continual effort never to assume “insider knowledge.” My relationship with Priestess Miriam has eased my introductions with Temple attendees, but I am ever-conscious, as they must be, of my role as researcher. Consequently, my reflexive methodology is critical for my project, especially as I grapple with issues of etic and emic terminology. As my research progressed and my relationship with Priestess Miriam grew more personal, I worried that I might be subject to and accused of bias. Perhaps people will see my helping with the Cultural Center and the day-to-day running of the Temple as preventing me from accurately representing the community of people there. Karen McCarthy Brown points out, though, that careful attention to power dynamics and more

intimate relationships between researchers and subjects “can undercut the colonial mindset of much anthropological writing” (1999: 350). Since this is an issue of central importance to my dissertation, it is fitting to reflect in such a way on my relationship with Priestess Miriam.

Chapter Outline

The chapters of my dissertation will be organized around a series of related research questions.

Chapter Two

In the second chapter, I provide a critical historical overview of the Spiritual Church movement that situates the movement within the context of U.S. religious historiography and Afro-Atlantic religious historiography specifically. Special attention is be paid to material culture as an organizing principle. As I demonstrate, material culture becomes a point of focus for many scholars in colonial Africa as well as in the United States resulting in theories of fetishism that shaped subsequent studies of cultures in the African diaspora among others. Early approaches to African and African diaspora material culture came to shape scholars’ theories and methodologies in studies of the Spiritual Churches as well. By beginning my exploration of the construction of academic theories and categories, this chapter sets the stage for those to follow.

Chapter Three

In the third chapter, I address the issue of hybridity and explore theories of syncretism and hybridity in relation to the Spiritual Churches and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, which serves as my case study throughout the dissertation. I use the term “hybrid” rather than “syncretic” because the concept of “syncretism” implies the existence of pure cultures that mix to form something new, particularly through hegemonic influences (Astor-Aguilera 2011: 62). This cannot account for the nuanced dynamics of cultural change, continuity, and exchange at work in the Spiritual Churches and those religions typically considered their foundational influences. Previous scholars have used material culture as evidence in their arguments about syncretism, and I foreground this in my dissertation.

The conceptions of non-human beings that I encounter in my research are of special focus. In my analysis of hybrid ontologies, I strive for a non-reductive framework, taking Manuel Vásquez’s model of highlighting “complexity, inter-level connectivity, emergence, situated knowledge, and relative indeterminacy and openness against monocausal, unidirectional, and totalizing explanatory schemes” (2011: 5). There can be no one comprehensive explanation of the development of the Spiritual Churches nor of any other religion, though aspects can be clarified. Drawing on Yelvington, I also engage in anthropological analysis of theories of syncretism and hybridity in relationship to the development and origin of African diaspora religions. The issue of etic and emic categories comes into focus in this chapter and remain part of my discussions throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

Chapter Four

In my fourth chapter, I explore several categories of beings important to Spiritual people, particularly Spirit, spirits, and the dead. I attempt, through historiographical and ethnographic work, to distinguish the various categories of non-human beings as reflected in the Spiritual Churches and especially the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. I explore adherents' understandings of these beings and their functions as reflected in various ritual and material dynamics. What types of beings are present? How do Spiritual people communicate with these beings? Material culture, especially statues and altars, are the primary lens through which I explore these questions.

An exploration of Spirit, spirits, and the dead again raises questions about the influence of New Thought. In the past, historians have tended to underestimate its influence among black leaders (Griffith 2004: 141-142). I investigate to what degree New Thought conceptions of the division between mind and matter, as well as the former's power over the latter, are present in Spiritual people's understandings of Spirit, spirits, and spirit guides.

In this chapter, I also consider how material culture, such as statues and offerings asserts presence rather than representations of Spirit, spirits, and spirit guides. Activities, such as making offerings, suggest that at least some of the statues and images in the Spiritual Churches are not just representations of beings with whom practitioners interact.

My study includes a consideration of place and geography as integral to understanding material culture. Where are objects physically located in churches? How do objects gain meaning through their relationships to one another and practitioners? Yelvington's dialogic model helps illuminate how these factors influenced the formation of academic categories in studies of the Spiritual Churches.

Chapter Five

In the fifth chapter, I explore transnational and translocal aspects of the Spiritual Churches. The Voodoo Spiritual Temple again serves as a case study for investigating these issues. At this point, I consider the significance of exploring the Spiritual Churches from a transnational and Afro-Atlantic diaspora perspective, which scholars have not done extensively up to this point. Through a brief comparative analysis of other Afro-Atlantic religious traditions and their studies, the Spiritual Churches' significance in U.S. religious history and historiography becomes clearer. A transnational understanding proves especially significant in the case of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple because Priestess Miriam has worked with religious specialists in Central America, the Caribbean, and Europe.

Chapter Six

In my concluding discussion, I return to my original research problem regarding the formation and implementation of academic categories as they differ from emic understandings. Through a summary of my findings, I suggest how a study of material culture in the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo in New Orleans can shed light on these issues and provide a sounder methodology for future research. I also outline several directions for future research on the Spiritual Churches and material culture.

CHAPTER 2: MATERIAL CULTURE IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a critical historiography of the scholarship on the Spiritual Churches, which I frame with a discussion of scholarship of the African diaspora in the United States and New Orleans Voodoo. Historian Sylvia Frey outlines several broad trends in the study of the African diaspora, especially as it pertains to religious studies. According to Frey, studies of the African diaspora can be organized according to three major methodological themes - survivals, creolization, and revisionism. Studies of survivals, also called “Africanisms,” sought to identify aspects of African diasporic cultures that could be linked to correlates in African cultures (Holloway 1990: ix). Creolization, on the other hand, brought more attention to the “process by which people, flora and fauna, ideas, and institutions with roots in the Old World are born in the New” where they continue to develop (Price 2010: 56). Revisionists call for “a more complex, historically specific approach” to survivals and creolization. Rather than a single model to explain all of African diasporan religious experiences, theorists such as John Thornton and Paul Lovejoy call for an understanding of African diasporan communities’ experiences as historically continuous (Frey 2008: 89). These approaches - survivals, creolization, and revisionism - form the basic framework for this chapter which aims to provide a critical historiography of the African diaspora in the Americas, New Orleans Voodoo, and the Spiritual Churches, highlighting material culture as an integral, though sometimes inadequately explored aspect, of these studies.

Material Culture in the Historiography of the African Diaspora in the United States

Although material culture has become an explicit focus of scholars of the African diaspora relatively recently, Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983) being a notable exception, it has been a point of interest in Western academic discourse since early European efforts to colonize the African continent. Indeed many anthropological theories and frameworks used in early studies of African American material cultures developed in the context of interpretations of world views and rituals of colonial and pre-colonial Africa. As Bruno Latour points out, the idea of the African fetish took hold in the eighteenth century when Portuguese accused Africans on the Gold Coast of worshipping idols, or fetishes (2011: 43).⁷ From that early period, European understandings of African and African diaspora world views were arrived at in part via examinations of material cultures. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, material culture was typically considered definitive evidence of pre-Enlightenment superstition and psychological and social immaturity (Pietz 1993: 138-139).

For Europeans, so-called fetishism signified first the absence of religion then, eventually, its origins (Chidester 1996: 13, 244). In either point of view, Africans and people of African descent occupied a lower position in teleological conceptions of religious evolution. Studies of cultural practices in Africa and the African diaspora, then, form the basis for theories of religion and religious studies beyond these contexts. Moreover, "Modernity for Africans entailed being defined as material objects rather than

⁷ Latour points out the Portuguese explorers' hypocrisy in not recognizing their own amulets as having the same characteristics as the so-called fetishes (2011:44-45).

as subjects” (Noel 2009: 53). When viewed as objects - by slave traders or colonial academics - Africans themselves became flash points in debates over who constituted subjects as opposed to objects.

As material culture served as a tool for the formation of racialized theories of religion, it also became integral to the feminization of African and African diasporic cultural practices. Christian, especially Protestant, theologians rooting their ideas in Platonic philosophies of the spiritual as disconnected from the material have greatly influenced popular and academic approaches to material culture in religion. Material culture became associated with supposedly weaker faith as well as femininity, and Enlightenment critics associated Catholic material culture with feminine sensuality (McDannell 1995: 8-9, 187). Such feminization of material culture continued in academic and popular discourse through the twentieth century. Religious studies scholar Colleen McDannell observes that twentieth-century critics seeking to devalue Christian kitsch, for example, discredited it by feminizing it and associating it with moral and spiritual weakness (*Ibid.*: 188, 193-194). The charges were leveled at African-descended people at various points throughout the nineteenth century by both abolitionists and apologists of slavery. At the same time, those claiming that blacks excelled in religion and the arts, considered “feminine” virtues, implied that they were deficient in reason, a “masculine” virtue (Evans 2008: 6).

Many scholars extended their ambivalence toward material culture beyond studies of “traditional African religions” to studies of origins and survivals. Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier brought “survivals” to the forefront of scholarship on diaspora communities in the Americas through their debate over the existence and relevance of survivals among African Americans. While Herskovits argued that survivals could be

traced from the Americas to Africa, Frazier claimed that the trauma of the Atlantic slave trade destroyed any trace of African culture among diasporan communities. Ultimately, Herkovits' argument appealed to more historians and anthropologists. Resultant studies of survivals include analyses social structures and secret societies (Wilder 2001), ritual structure (Raboteau 2004), and divination (Palmié 2002) among other topics.

As popular academic paradigms shifted from survivals to creolization, scholars came to use material culture as evidence of syncretism as well as the raw materials upon which these theories were built. Frey describes the creolization thesis developed by Price and Mintz as “a new model of culture-change based on the creative adaptation of linguistic and religious differences to create new pidgin and later creole languages and new religions” (2008: 87). For many scholars, this meant Africans and their descendants interpreted Christianity through their own lenses and articulated traditional African world views in new ways. In studies of Santería (Murphy 1988), Brazilian Candomblé (Daniel 2005), and Haitian Vodou (Fernández-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003), the use of images of saints is typically cited as evidence of the creolization of West African spirits, especially Yoruba orishas, with Roman Catholicism. Although creolization scholars typically do not use material culture as their primary methodological framework, it often forms a good deal of their data.

Revisionist scholars seek to understand creolization in more specific terms. In their 2010 edited volume *The African Diaspora and the Disciplines*, James Sweet and Tejumola Olaniyan argue that studies of the African diaspora must be anchored in Africa as their intellectual starting point (4). This position aligns with the group of scholars Frey identifies as revisionists. Like creolization scholars, revisionists seek to understand how

Africans and their descendants articulate African cultures in new contexts. Having been influenced by demographic studies, though, revisionists aim to connect diaspora experiences to specific African cultural groups. John Thornton, for example, finds that the Kongolese Antonian movement of the early eighteenth century rejected white supremacy on religious grounds, and ultimately, its adherents were instrumental in the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina (1998). Other scholars have approached diasporic connections through an examination of divination practices. Martin Holbraad traces the origins of Ifá, a Cuban divination practice involving cowrie shells, to correlates among the Dahomey and Yoruba in West Africa. Through this practice and its associated material culture, Holbraad demonstrates similar understandings of spiritual authority and truth operating among Cuban and Yoruba practitioners (2012: 3-9). J. Lorand Matory's research on Brazilian Candomblé further demonstrates the effects of translocal and transnational exchanges on contemporary religious life in the African diaspora as well as the past (2011).

Material Culture in the Historiography of New Orleans Voodoo

The role of Voodoo in the Spiritual Churches' development has been a subject of contention among Spiritual people as well as among scholars. Priestess Miriam's rejection of clear divisions between Voodoo and the Spiritual Churches presents challenges to any assumptions that these religions are bounded and separate from one another. This holistic dynamic present at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple and manifest in its rituals and material culture is clearly reflected in its name; however, this relationship is not as clearly acknowledged in other Spiritual Churches. Some Spiritual people

belonging to other congregations either deny or deemphasize the connections between the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo, calling the latter “the devil’s work” (Estes 1993:155). Some measure of this appears to be due to pervasive negative stereotypes about Voodoo and Voodoo practitioners within the academy and wider culture. For over a century, popular Western media has portrayed Voodoo as evil superstition. As Joseph M. Murphy explains, this has allowed “whites to recognize the consequences of racism and at the same time absolve themselves of responsibility for it” (1990: 333). As the Spiritual Churches struggled for status and recognition as a legitimate church within the larger community, members sought to distance themselves from root doctors and Voodoo practitioners derided by mainstream Christians (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 30-31, 37). Apparently, this has not been a major concern of the leadership or adherents of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Moreover, in the early twentieth century, the first studies of the Spiritual Churches presented the movement as an aspect of New Orleans Voodoo. Thus, attention to the history and historiography of New Orleans Voodoo is necessary for contextualizing the practices at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple.

Many studies of New Orleans Voodoo utilize the survivals and creolization theories and methodologies. Jessie Gaston Mulira’s “The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans” exemplifies the application of the survivals model to New Orleans Voodoo. According to Mulira, New Orleans Voodoo features survivals, including “beliefs, activities, cults, deities, and rituals that can be traced directly back to Africa” (1990: 34). Mulira’s account suggests that Voodoo transferred more or less unchanging from West Africa where it is “a functional religious system.” Although African-descended slaves reinterpreted Western cultural practices via their African world views, “African religious

retentions” were identifiable (*ibid.*: 35, 42). Mulira takes Haitian examples as representative of New Orleans Voodoo (*ibid.*: 48). Such generalizations, revisionists would say, elide significant historical, cultural, and sociological differences.

Mulira’s reliance on a survivals framework can be accounted for in part because she draws heavily and uncritically from Robert Tallant’s work despite its intentional omissions and inaccuracies. Tallant takes it for granted that African slaves brought Voodoo unchanged to the West Indies and then New Orleans (1946: 11). Eventually, according to Tallant, Voodoo rituals incorporated elements of Roman Catholicism into “the primitive African rites” (*Ibid.*: 29). As Anthony Pinn points out, “much of what Tallant presents is the racist and religious paranoia of white Americans concerning [Voodoo]” (1998: 205). For Tallant, material culture serves as a tool for constructing and reinforcing racial and religious otherness. He describes alleged fetishes made from human bones and animal hair as well as violent rituals of human sacrifice (Tallant 1946: 14-15). Tallant takes such objects, or rumors of them, to be indicative of superstition that has the potential to lead to terrible violence. In doing so, Tallant follows the framework of European colonizers who viewed so-called African fetishes as “a sign of a disembodied mentality, a primitive psychology incapable of logical induction and, accordingly, not anchored in the real world” (Chidester 1996: 250).

Most historical and anthropological explorations of New Orleans Voodoo utilize a creolization model. Pinn describes the creolization of Catholicism and African cultures as providing “the best working resolution” for those enslaved under the Code Noir⁸ (1998:

⁸ The Code Noir was a set of ordinances regulating slaves’ behavior as well as their treatment in French colonial Louisiana. Significantly, it required masters to educate

17). The use of this model is apparent in the majority of scholarship on New Orleans Voodoo focused on the nineteenth century. Martha Ward and Carolyn Morrow Long provide historical information on New Orleans Voodoo primarily as context for their biographies of nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau (circa 1801-1881). A business woman and free woman of color, Laveau was an ardent Catholic, successful business woman, and supposed popular purveyor of magical objects and spells. In part because she was illiterate and left no writings behind, Long notes that Laveau became “a blank slate, a receptacle for our prejudices, our fantasies, and our desires” (2007: xx). Like New Orleans Voodoo more broadly, it is sometimes difficult to untangle legends about Laveau from provable historical fact.

In her exploration of the legend and biography of Marie Laveau, Long provides the most extensive effort to distinguish what she calls the “Laveau Legend” from verifiable fact. Following a creolization model, Long describes Voodoo as a “synthesis of African traditional beliefs with Roman Catholicism, creating new and vibrant forms of worship” (2007: 93). Similarly, Ward describes “Voodoo, Southern Hoodoo, and their sister religions” as “the intense fusions that happened when people of the African diaspora met Catholics and colonists in the New World” (2004: xv). Ward considers Voodoo to be influenced by West Africa broadly speaking. In a move toward a revisionist framework, Long demonstrates specific African and European influences on nineteenth-century New Orleans Voodoo.⁹ Material culture, particularly magical amulets, form one means by

slaves in Roman Catholicism and exempted slaves from labor on Sundays. These provisions, however, were unevenly enforced (Long 2007: 6).

⁹ Long uses the spelling “Voudou” to maintain consistency with the majority of her nineteenth-century sources.

which Long traces tributaries of New Orleans Voodoo. She notes that gris-gris¹⁰ is derived from the Senegambian practice of carrying *gregries* as well as Fon, Yoruba, and Kongo objects assembled from plants, animals, and minerals (2007: 94-95).

Although a few scholars address Voodoo in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (c.f. Turner 2009), many either take nineteenth-century accounts as representative of contemporary practices or posit Voodoo's disappearance. Roger Bastide's analysis provides some insight as to why most scholars treat New Orleans Voodoo as a relic of the past and focus so heavily on the biography of Marie Laveau. According to Bastide, "Voodooism as an institution disappeared after 1895" (1972: 147). The magical and healing practices that survived have been "bastardized and corrupted by progressive distancing from its original roots" (*Ibid.*: 148). Bastide does not elaborate explicitly on these "original roots," but he does claim that Dahomean and Bantu snake cults and divinities were central to late eighteenth-century Voodoo practice.¹¹ He also suggests that the distance occurred as a result of African American migration northward (*Ibid.*). In *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism*, Hans Baer expresses a similar conviction that "Voodoo degenerated from a religious system to a strictly magical system" (1984: 153). The histories provided by Bastide and Baer imply

¹⁰ Long accurately notes that "in New Orleans, gris-gris has come to mean any assemblage of magical substances employed by believers to attain control over others, success, protection, revenge, or luck" (2007: 94). In my fieldwork, I found that promoting health and attracting love are also common aims of using gris-gris, which my consultants usually referred to as sachets or mojo bags.

¹¹ Some of Bastide's claims regarding Voodoo rituals may seem questionable to contemporary readers. He makes various claims about animal sacrifice and violent activities without citing any sources from which he gathered this information (c.f. Bastide 1972).

that they see the Great Migration and the northward movement of Southern African American vernacular practices to be the cause of this supposed degeneration. Contrary to Bastide, though, Baer claims this “diluted form” allows Voodoo to thrive (1984: 153).

Neither Bastide nor Baer makes a clear distinction between religion and magic, but their diction implies a hierarchy in which magic is less sophisticated and respectable than religion. Although Bastide’s model of creolization accounts for initial changes in African diasporan practices, he fails to consider creolization or other forms of cultural change as ongoing processes that are equally significant and valid as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments.¹² Paul Christopher Johnson sheds light on a potential reason as to why Bastide adopts this attitude. Johnson critiques scholarship on the African diaspora that “recapitulates the old fetishism of purity and bounded cultural units in the study of religion” (2007: 11). Thus, in doing so, Bastide views changes to Voodoo as deficiency rather than recognizing creolization as a continuing process.

Material Culture in the Historiography of the Spiritual Churches

Although Spiritual Churches founder Mother Anderson allegedly disapproved of Voodoo (Tallant 1946: 168), scholars writing about the Spiritual Churches before the 1970s wrote about the movement as a sort of sect of Voodoo in New Orleans. The

¹² Here Bastide’s position is similar to that of Victor Turner bemoaning the changes that the Second Vatican Council brought to the Roman Catholic Church. According to Turner, the post-conciliar Church shortsightedly sacrificed history and spirituality for the sake of what seemed functional and contemporary (Turner 1976: 522). Catherine Bell points out that, in addition to abandoning scholarly distance, Turner finds the changes to Catholic ritual dissatisfying because they challenge theoretical models that fail to account for historical changes to rituals and their functions (Bell 1989: 34).

earliest scholar to research the Spiritual Church movement, Zora Neale Hurston, approached the early movement without explicit reference to either survivals or creolization, though her focus on the many tributaries of her consultants' practice at least foreshadow a concept of creolization. Hurston conducted her fieldwork at Mother Catherine Seals' Lower Ninth Ward temple, then called the Manger, in the 1930s as part of her work for the Federal Writers Project. The brief ethnography was published posthumously as part of the collection *The Sanctified Church*.

Seals utilized material culture from many traditions. Hurston especially emphasizes African elements, such as snake designs on wall panels (1997: 23). There is also “a catholic flavor about the place, but it is certainly not catholic” (*Ibid.*: 25-26). Hurston also describes Seals' temple as a large tent reminiscent of a revival meeting in some senses. Her followers gather to share in coffee and blessed bread during services as well as to receive healing through the laying on of hands. In these senses, Seals' community share elements of Pentecostalism except that Seals “does things and arranges her dwelling as no occidental would” (1997: 24).¹³ Material culture leads Hurston to identify Mother Catherine's temple as African, Catholic, and Pentecostal, but it also sets the Manger apart from all of those traditions for Hurston.

¹³ According to Hurston's essay, she was able to photograph the Manger. *The Sanctified Church* was published posthumously, however, and those photographs were not published. In 2002, *New Orleans Magazine* published a photograph of Mother Catherine in a brief article about her connections to some of New Orleans' musical families, such as the Harrisons. Mother Catherine's robe, which features the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is reminiscent of a Mardi Gras Indian suit. Given her acquaintance with some late members of the Guardians of the Golden Flame, the relationship between the Spiritual Churches and Mardi Gras Indian culture would likely prove a fruitful avenue of study. See Jason Berry's “Jazz and the Spirit: the Legacy of Mother Catherine Seals” in *New Orleans Magazine* 36:6 (2002): 30-31.

Writing nearly five decades after Hurston, Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow published one of the first substantive works on the Spiritual Churches. Originally conducted for the National Park Service, theirs was the first to give an overview of the history, world views, and practices of the Spiritual people of New Orleans. Jacobs and Kaslow's interpretation of the Spiritual Churches fit neatly into Frey's category of creolization, describing the movement as a syncretism of Roman Catholicism, Voodoo, and Pentecostalism.¹⁴ In Jacobs and Kaslow's analysis, material culture serves as evidence of syncretism. Particularly in the early Spiritual Churches, leaders wore accessories, such as blue cords, resembling those worn by Voodoo practitioners (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 86). Additionally, the food, beverages, and other offerings on altars echo practices in nineteenth-century Voodoo (*Ibid.*: 87). Popular saints, such as St. Jude and St. Patrick, demonstrate Roman Catholicism's presence as well (*Ibid.*: 201).

Material culture that provides evidence of syncretism also comes into focus in discussions of Spiritual people's conceptions of spirits and spirit guides. Often Jacobs and Kaslow describe statues of spirits and spirit guides placed on altars as symbolic of a particular power or value, such as protection or justice (1991: 143, 198). As I will argue in later chapters, the ways in which my consultants interact with such images suggests that they are more than mere symbols and either index spirits' presences or facilitate communication with them. Jacobs' article "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches" (1989) also suggests a connection between material

¹⁴ Of all the scholars to have published on the Spiritual Churches, Jacobs and Kaslow offer the most nuanced definition of syncretism as "a complex acculturation process that has to account for both the desires of individuals and the fact that individuals are members of groups" (1991: 7).

culture and gender. Jacobs argues that by including statues of Queen Esther, a spirit guide introduced by Leafy Anderson, on church altars, women are able to affirm the significance of their roles in the church. This is especially important for Spiritual women who left denominations dominated exclusively by male ministers (Jacobs 1989: 50). Thus far, however, no studies of the Spiritual Churches and New Orleans Voodoo have taken on the issue of material culture and its relationship to gender directly.

Unlike Jacobs and Kaslow's focus on New Orleans, Hans Baer primarily is concerned with the Spiritual Churches' sociological functions in the black community on a national level, particularly as they provide Spiritual people with tools for responding to institutional racism in the United States. As such, he is less concerned with material culture than other scholars writing about the Spiritual Churches. Baer does dedicate a chapter of his book to "religious syncretism." He describes the Spiritual Churches as "one of the more likely places in which scholars might find success in their search for African survivals in Black American culture" (1984: 151). At the same time, "they have created an essentially new and unique religious tradition" (*Ibid.*: 150). Material culture becomes relevant at this point in Baer's argument as evidence of the incorporation of Roman Catholicism and Voodoo through images of saints and bibliomancy¹⁵ (*Ibid.*: 132-133).

In addition to his sociological approach, Baer may be less concerned with material culture because he surveys Spiritual Churches across the United States. Outside of New Orleans, Baer claims, some practices, such as the invocation of spirit guides, are far less

¹⁵ Baer defines bibliomancy as "the practice of reading various scriptural passages for the purpose of solving personal problems" (1984: 133). This practice, as well as the magical use of psalms, is still common at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, especially in making sachets and mojo bags, which I will discuss later.

common. Baer considers this yet another example of the lessening of Voodoo's influence in the Spiritual Churches as a result of their decontextualization from the South (1984: 154), and he is not the only scholar to note differences between the Spiritual Churches in New Orleans and those elsewhere. David Estes argues that the Spiritual Churches of New Orleans have been more strongly influenced by Roman Catholicism than those in other cities due to Catholicism's pervasiveness in southeastern Louisiana (1993: 152). It is possible that a heavier Roman Catholic influence in the New Orleans Spiritual Churches resulted to more explicit use of material culture in the invocation of spirits reminiscent of Catholic devotions to saints.

Like Baer, Estes understands the Spiritual Churches to be syncretic. In addition to identifying Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Spiritualist, and Afro-Caribbean influences, Estes identifies black Baptist traditions as significant in shaping the structure of worship services (Estes 1993: 152). With his focus on women's leadership in the Spiritual Churches, Estes is particularly interested in material culture as it is used to validate clergywomen's authority. During rituals, Spiritual people construct altars for spirits of women, such as the Blessed Virgin Mary and Esther, similar to those for St. Joseph, St. Michael, and Black Hawk (*Ibid.*: 160). Even food, which is prepared mostly by women, "symbolizes female spiritual power, which is at the core of the celebration" (*Ibid.*: 161). Moreover, during ordination rituals, women candidates commonly wear white gowns to symbolize their commitment to Christ and their responsibilities as clergywomen¹⁶ (*Ibid.*:

¹⁶ At her ordination, Priestess Miriam chose to wear purple and gold, not just white. Although some people criticized her choice, she informed me that it was important to her to have the power that the colors afforded her. Colors can be significant in the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, as I will discuss in later chapters.

168). The altars, food, and clothing Estes details demonstrate the complexities of negotiating gender and power within church leadership. They also suggest the multifaceted ways in which Spiritual people's relationships with Spirit and spirits may be shaped in part by gender and reflected in material culture.

Journalist Jason Berry's *The Spirit of Black Hawk: A Mystery of Africans and Indians* does not focus much on gender; however, his analysis of the figure of Black Hawk, a popular spirit guide in many Spiritual Churches, suggests that Black Hawk's masculinity makes him a valuable protective spirit (1995: 109). Berry is not concerned with questions of embodiment explicitly; however, his descriptions of Black Hawk services suggest that Spiritual people sometimes dress like Black Hawk to embody him during certain rituals (*Ibid.*: 4). Since popularization of Anderson's rituals in the early twentieth century, Spiritual people have presented offerings to spirits and invoked them to intervene in conventional matters (*Ibid.*: 62). Although Berry's ethnographic and historical descriptions frequently point to the relevance and complexity of material culture in the Spiritual Churches, he sometimes assumes that practices related to material culture, especially with the aim of increasing financial gain, are somehow problematic. When one reverend explained that he has enjoyed monetary success since he started selling Black Hawk statues, Berry considered this "problematic" and "ironic" (*Ibid.*: 17). In my fieldwork, such relationships between business and spirituality were considered common sense, not problematic or insincere, among my consultants. To some extent, Berry's approach reflects attitudes that consider earthly concerns as separate from spiritual ones contrary to my consultants' views and, it would seem, those of the Spiritual people he interviewed.

Although the above scholars concern themselves primarily with a broad creolization framework linking the Spiritual Churches to Africa but not specific cultural groups, folklorist Stephen Wehmeyer explicitly connects the material culture of the Spiritual Churches to the Kongo of central Africa, which forms “only one thematic layer (albeit a very deep and rich one) of a hybrid complex within a system that is itself hybridized and highly accretive” (Wehmeyer 2000: 63). In particular, Wehmeyer focuses on the Kongo aesthetics evident in altars erected for a Native American spirit known as “Uncle.” Uncle and Black Hawk both share characteristics with Kongo “power figures” known as *minkisi* (*Ibid.*). Wehmeyer’s essay draws attention to an important point that cross-cultural connections, such as that between Uncle and *minkisi*, that seemingly are evident in Spiritual Churches’ material culture may not interest Spiritual people in the way it does scholars. For example, Wehmeyer’s primary consultant seemed both unsurprised and uninterested in his theories, explaining that Spirit is universal (*Ibid.*: 69). I will return to this idea in later chapters in relationship to my fieldwork at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple where Priestess Miriam expressed similar ideas.

Implications for this Study

Through this historiography, I hoped to demonstrate the significance of several themes that recur throughout this dissertation. First and foremost, I am interested in what can be learned about Spiritual people and the scholars who write about them when material culture is taken seriously as a focal point of interpretation. Material culture has been present, whether in the background or foreground, of every study of the Spiritual Churches, and these studies often suggest a significant connection between material

culture and Spiritual people's conceptions of Spirit and spirits. Scholars, such as Stephen Wehmeyer, taking a revisionist approach tend to highlight material culture in tracing the historical origins of Spiritual Church practices. I build on this work by considering how material culture reveals transnational connections at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Such analysis clarifies precedence and contexts significant in relating my consultants' understandings of their material culture practices.

Wehmeyer's study also raises an important question about the differences that sometimes exist between scholars' and practitioners' concerns, a critical consideration of this dissertation. Studies of survivals often focus on the Africanness of diasporic practices, but most of my consultants are interested in material culture in terms of its present use in their lives.¹⁷ This is reflective of Richard Price's call for the anthropology for the African diaspora "to go beyond debates about cultural memory and forgetting to explore the complex politics of self-representation and identity through time" (2010: 68). As I will demonstrate through ethnographic examples, attention to Voodoo Spiritual Temple attendees' explanations of what scholars might term syncretic or hybrid practices can significantly nuance etic analysis. Despite the current interest of the academic community in exploring and understanding the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple must be understood in diaspora and transnational contexts consistent with my own methodological commitments. I must give space for my consultants' interests to shape my inquiries.

¹⁷ Some black American visitors to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are interested in Voodoo as a means of connecting to a pan-African identity, but most regular visitors and clients express more interest in day-to-day preoccupations such as relationships, family, and finances.

The divergence between Spiritual people's explanations of their world views and scholars' analyses is perhaps most evident regarding non-human beings. Previous scholars' historical analyses of the tributaries of the Spiritual Churches provide important frameworks for interpreting contemporary practices. As I will demonstrate, however, my consultants' explanations of their practices indicate that they understand the saints and spirits on the altars of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple to be more than symbols as Jacobs and Kaslow describe them. For my consultants, material culture is often a means of making spirits literally present. This has implications for my theory and methodology as I will explain in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3: CATHOLIC SAINTS AND HIGH JOHN ROOT: THEORIZING HYBRIDITY

Theorizing Hybridity in the Spiritual Churches

The Spiritual Churches serve as a location for continuing debates over the nature and function of syncretism among African Americans. Hans Baer argues that although most religious systems are syncretistic in some way, “this pattern is much easier to detect in the Spiritual movement than in many other religious traditions because of the movement’s relative newness” (1984: 110). Furthermore, the Spiritual Churches allow for flexibility in doctrine and practice between and among congregations (*Ibid.*: 110-111). Consequently, certain aspects of Spiritual people’s world views and practices may be highly localized. The Voodoo Spiritual Temple is an excellent example of this since its members incorporate aspects of Catholicism, Voodoo, the Spiritual Churches, and other traditions of the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, including Obeah.

In many ways, the concept of syncretism lies at the heart of creolization and revisionist scholarship. Scholars rely on some idea of two or more cultures encountering one another and changing as a result. The exact nature of this change, however, has been heavily debated, and syncretism has become a controversial term. In the nineteenth century, scholars incorporated syncretism into an evolutionary scheme of culture. Consequently, it “became an ‘othering’ term applied to historically distant as well as geographically distant societies, in line with Tylolean evolutionist thinking” (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 4-5). In his pioneering work *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Melville Herskovits tried to give syncretism more positive connotations. Rather than using it to

demonstrate cultural inferiority, Herskovits argued that acculturation proved that black Americans did have a culture and history. Scholars have since critiqued Herskovits' concept of acculturation as unable to account for the significance of social actors' choices (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 6). As opposed to the passive process acculturation implies, Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw argue that such cultural change "involves some kind of transformation, some kind of destruction and reconstruction which converts them to people's own meanings and projects" (*Ibid.* 20). Thus, it is more accurately understood as a series of dynamic and variable processes. Beyond this critique of passive models of syncretism, it is important to point out the concept assumes that religions and cultures are separable into distinct, bound units. Moreover, religions that get labeled "syncretic" tend to be those marginalized by hegemonic social and religious powers (Astor-Aguilera 2011: 62).

Contemporary scholars also emphasize that no religion or culture is completely separate from others, and the argument may be made that all cultures are, in fact, syncretic. As Paul Christopher Johnson observes, "fixity is always in flux, always being negotiated" (2007: 11). Even religions, such as *Condomblé*, the practitioners of which emphasize its ancientness and unchanging character, have been shown as constantly being redefined and renegotiated (c.f. Matory 2011). Cultural processes that are labeled "syncretism" are ongoing, and, especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts, their meanings are sources of contention. Instead of referring to these processes as "syncretism," I sometimes use the term "hybridity" to describe the transformations and retentions that occur within the context of the Spiritual Churches and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple specifically. When discussing other scholars' theories, though, I use the

terms they employ in their work to maintain consistency with their interpretive frameworks.

The two most substantive publications on the Spiritual Churches, Hans Baer's *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism* (1984) and Claude F. Jacobs and Andrew J. Kaslow's *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans: Origins, Beliefs, and Rituals of an African American Religion* (1991), address the issue of syncretism in varying ways. Hans Baer does not explicitly define syncretism, implying that it is a blending and reinterpreting of various religious movements, including Catholicism, Spiritualism, Black Protestantism, hoodoo, and Voodoo (1991: 9-10, 120). Drawing on the work of Robert Redfield (1956) in his discussion of Haitian Vodou, Baer describes Roman Catholicism as the "Great Tradition imposed upon the society by a small ruling stratum," whereas Vodun is "the Little Religion" which addresses people's day-to-day concerns (1984: 128). In doing so, Baer subscribes to a concept of syncretism that "recapitulates the old fetishism of purity and bounded cultural units in the study of religion" (Johnson 2007: 11) at the risk of obscuring the complexities of cultural interactions.

Baer does allow for variation and continued change, though, in his emphasis on differences between geographically distant congregations. Baer identifies increased heterogeneity between congregations as being due to varying degrees of association with esoteric systems, such as astrology and New Thought (1984: 113). The Spiritual Churches also demonstrate the influence of black Protestant groups in ritual structure as well as their politico-religious organizations (*Ibid.* 134). Although much of this is similar across regions, Spiritual people tend to incorporate saints with more local recognizability.

For example, in New Orleans, St. John the Conqueror, sometimes also known as Dr. John, appears to be a combination of two figures: St. John the Baptist and the legendary nineteenth-century root worker Dr. John. St. John the Conqueror often is incorporated into Spiritual Church altars and rituals, illustrating the legacy of Voodoo in the movement (*Ibid.* 132-133). I encountered consultants using both John the Conqueror candles and High John roots¹⁸ in rituals and the construction of mojo bags. New Orleans stands apart from Spiritual Churches elsewhere in other ways as well. The practice of spirit possession in the North and Midwest appears to be restricted to the Holy Spirit as opposed to the spirit guides of New Orleans' congregations (Baer 154). Awareness and appreciation of this diversity of understandings and practices is significant for my case study of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple because it shows that rather than being far outside the mainstream of Spiritual Church congregations, the Temple is just one of many variations.

Jacobs and Kaslow's definition of syncretism is more explicit than Baer's. They draw their ideas largely from Roger Bastide who, contrary to his treatment of Louisiana Voodoo, identifies syncretism as a dynamic and continuous process in his study of Brazil (1978). Jacobs and Kaslow nuance their definition with an acknowledgment that individuals play roles in syncretism as well as entire communities. Syncretism is a "complex acculturation process that has to account for both the desires of individuals and the fact that individuals are members of groups" (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 7). Here Jacobs and Kaslow modify Herksovits' theory of acculturation to account for individual

¹⁸ High John the Conqueror is a flowering plant. The roots are used in sachets and mojo bags as well as in making anointing oils. All of these tools are used to attract luck in gambling, money, or power depending on the exact use to which a person puts the root (Cunningham 1985: 138).

agency. For Jacobs and Kaslow's study, this is significant in regards to the Spiritual Churches because it affected the dynamics in forming associations of churches (*Ibid.* 188-191). Since the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is not formally associated with any Spiritual Churches, individual agency can affect the community in tangible ways, as is particularly apparent in the material culture present at the Temple.

Although Jacobs and Kaslow and Baer's works are the most substantive publications on the Spiritual Churches, Stephen Wehmeyer's more recent essay addressing the Spiritual Churches, "Feathered Footsteps: Mythologizing and Ritualizing Black Indian Processions in New Orleans" (2010), only mentions the concept of syncretism in passing. This leads readers to question whether syncretism is the most useful framework for studying contemporary Spiritual Church practices. When Wehmeyer does address the concept of syncretism directly, he does so in order to illuminate the connections between images of Native Americans, the Spiritual Churches' interest in Native American spirit guides, and the tradition of "masking Indian" among New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indian tribes (2010: 427). This draws attention to the dynamics of race and ethnicity in identifying and interacting with spirit guides. St. Joseph, for example, is ethnically marked as an Italian saint, and the celebration of his feast day demonstrates the early influence of Italian Americans on the practice of the Spiritual Churches (*Ibid.* 437).

Hybridity and Material Culture at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple

As with other studies of the Spiritual Churches, the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple reflects a number of influences shaping the world views and practices of Temple attendees. Hybridity in the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple may

be approached in many ways. Most scholars organize their discussions of hybridity in the Spiritual Churches according to their tributary religions, such as Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and Voodoo. My attention to material culture suggests that these boundaries are often ambiguous and sometimes contradict what my consultants tell me. Consequently, instead I focus on the altars in the Temple, the products Priestess Miriam provides for her clients, and the ritualizations¹⁹ that take place at the Temple.

The Temple is adjacent to the Cultural Center through which visitors enter, and it consists of a hall leading to two rooms between which two archways have been opened to form one larger space. The hallway is lined by bookshelves on one side. These are overflowing with books about healthcare and medicine, world religions, psychology, divination, astrology, psychic abilities, magic, and theology among other topics. They range in size from textbooks to small pamphlets. Priestess Miriam told me that Priest Oswan believed every house ought to have books, and she values hers. Some have come to her through friends, including a Roman Catholic breviary bequeathed to Priestess Miriam by a nun in Chicago and books of ritual magic published by an acquaintance in California. Although Priestess Miriam told me she has not yet had time to read every book on her shelf, they indicate the profound diversity of influences on her world view

¹⁹ The practices at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are best understood through Catherine Bell's theory of ritualization, which she defines as "a way of doing certain activities that differentiates those activities from other, more conventional ones" (1989: 34). Priestess Miriam rarely follows a strict set of steps when performing blessings or other ritualizations, explaining that this can stifle spiritual energies and creativity. Rites, such as funerals, may have commonalities in most instances, but they are always adapted according to the people involved. Priestess Miriam explained to me that "following a script," as she phrases it, can prevent people from experiencing and understanding what the Spirit is trying to convey.

and those of Temple attendees. Many, for example, are quite interested in astrology and reference popular writers such as Sybil Leek and Linda Goodman. On the cloth on which Priestess Miriam does her card and bone readings, Priest Oswan painted the signs of the zodiac, and people's sun and moon signs are periodically a topic of conversation.

Likewise in the hallway are several altars for St. Joseph, Chicken Man, and deceased musicians. Chicken Man, a New Orleans entertainer and Voodoo priest, was a friend of Priestess Miriam. He lived in the building the Voodoo Spiritual Temple now occupies, and Priestess Miriam speaks warmly of him. After he died in 1999, Priestess Miriam built an altar for him using the box containing his ashes. She draped his faux fur coat on top of it along with a small alligator head, a poster from one of Chicken Man's shows, and a human skull with sunglasses and a top hat to whom Priestess Miriam refers as Gede. Gede's role as the lwa in charge of spirits of the dead provides an early clue as to the significance of Voodoo in the Temple's material culture. Since Chicken Man was a prominent public figure in late-twentieth century New Orleans Voodoo, his altar also embeds the city's history in the material culture of the Temple. This reflects the opinion several consultants have expressed that the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is an important part of New Orleans' cultural heritage. This feeling is reiterated by a portrait of Marie Laveau hanging above an altar featuring the Blessed Mother.

The main rooms of the Temple are crowded with altars and large areas of floor before them on which objects, including offerings, are arranged with care. The sheer volume of the Temple's contents surprises many first-time visitors. Priestess Miriam has incorporated statues from her travels to Russia, Central America, Europe, and the Caribbean. Various masks and statues from Benin, Senegal, and other West African

countries are interspersed throughout along with a small statue of Black Hawk. Some altars are dedicated to deceased friends and family, including Priest Oswan. The many altars and offerings are colorful with bright wall hangings demarcating the separate space of each altar.

Throughout the Temple, people have left offerings of photographs, petitions written on scraps of paper, keys, liquor, makeup, and money. Rolled and folded dollar bills are tucked into masks, under statues, and in baskets on and around every altar. When pulling books off the shelf in the hallway, I also found folded bills tucked between books on magic, Haitian history, and psychology. Priestess Miriam has commented that some people come with specific offerings while others leave whatever they have in their pockets. It is worth noting that members of the Temple community offer compatible interpretations of some offerings and divergent explanations of others. Generally, they concur on the use of food, especially fruit, to “feed the spirits.” For example, they periodically bring fresh pomegranates to Chango whose altar is located beside the door leading in from the hallway.

Other offerings, though, receive differing interpretations. In particular, I have heard visitors ask Temple attendees about the money on the altars on multiple occasions. Marie²⁰, whom I discuss further later in this chapter, said that she would not pick up the money because, in doing so, one would also pick up the burdens people laid down with it. Priestess Miriam, on the other hand, refers to the money as the Temple’s “rainy day fund” and says she will deposit it in the bank when the Temple needs it. There are likely

²⁰ To maintain anonymity, I have changed all my consultants’ names excepting Priestess Miriam’s.

several reasons why members of the Temple community agree on the interpretations of some offerings and diverge on others. For example, pomegranates are common offerings for Chango in Santería. The offering of money is documented in a wider array of African diasporic and European cultures, though, and Temple attendees may explain this practice according to their own cultural backgrounds. Further ethnography may clarify the reasons for varying interpretations.

In the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, most visitors notice the Catholic saints rather than the photographs and altars personalized with the belongings of the deceased. Although some visitors automatically assume the saints present are simply stand-ins for orishas or lwas, Priestess Miriam rarely discusses these beings directly. She has told me that mostly people born in the 1970s and afterward are concerned with the lwas. They have read books that lead them to believe that Voodoo is all about lwas, and they fail to see that lwas, like other spirits, should be part of a holistic practice of bringing order to one's universe. As a consequence, in keeping with this interpretation, Priestess Miriam does not often speak about the lwas even though many of the Temple's altars include statues of Catholic saints who are identified with lwas, including St. Lazarus and Our Lady of Czestochwa.

I did not hear Priestess Miriam speak extensively about lwas until, two years after I began my fieldwork at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, Priestess Miriam officiated my wedding. In preparation, she instructed my partner and me to bring anything we wanted included on an altar. We brought large bouquets of orange and gold flowers, a rock we collected during our travels, a small pumpkin, and candle sticks in green, blue, yellow, white, red, and purple. We also brought a St. Anthony novena candle since we consider

him the special patron of our relationship. We selected a red one because it was the color we considered most appropriate for a wedding, and the owner of our botánica approved the choice. During the ceremony, Priestess Miriam drew attention to the novena candle. St. Anthony would help us find each other if we got lost, she said, and he would keep the road open for us. The latter function refers to the role of Legba, the Voodoo lwa who opens roads for devotees (Long 2007: 115). When Priestess Miriam picked up the small pumpkin we had brought with us, she also invoked Oshun, usually considered a Santería orisha, and Erzulie, a Voodoo lwa, both of whom are associated with love, beauty, and fertility. Unbeknownst to me beforehand, pumpkins are a common offering for both spirits, making ours a fitting addition to the wedding altar in Priestess Miriam's view.

After the ceremony, Priestess instructed me to light a white novena candle and place it before a statue of Our Lady of Mercy. Priestess Miriam referred to her as Obatalá, a Santería orisha associated with purity, wisdom, and justice (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003: 44-45). Since then, I have heard Priestess Miriam refer to this altar as Obatalá's but never as Our Lady's. Placed on a shelf over the archway between the rooms, everything on the altar is white or metal. Obatalá's statue wears a white dress and stands on a large swath of sparkling white fabric. A white novena candle always burns before her. Around her are several objects including covered urns, a model ship, and a wine glass from which the contents have evaporated. On the left side of the altar sits a small white replica of the *Pieta* along with a brass bell. The block of whites and neutrals presents a striking contrast to the rest of the Temple which is as colorful as the wedding altar.

The objects on the wedding altar and Obatalá's altar provide insight into the spirits present in practice at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Several traditions that share roots in West Africa are present. Scholars have traced tributaries of Voodoo, Santería, and Obeah, which Priest Oswan practiced, to various groups, especially Yoruba-speaking communities, in Nigeria, Benin, and Dahomey. As such, the material culture of the altars demonstrate influences similar to other Spiritual Churches; however, unlike most Spiritual people, who address saints by their Catholic names, Priestess Miriam overtly embraces some of the language and concepts of Voodoo and other influences and incorporates them into her discourse. Perhaps the most significant point that these examples illustrate, though, is that Priestess Miriam does not see a need to categorize some spirits as "Voodoo lwas" or "Santería orishas." They are all part of a holistic practice in which such divisions are unnecessary.

The vévés throughout the Temple are illustrative of this lack of divisions. Vévés are patterns that Voodoo practitioners use to invoke different lwas. A vève for Gede is painted on canvas and hangs beside the vève for Ayizan, lwa of the marketplace. Damballah and Aida Wedo likewise appear as serpents throughout the images of the Temple, including the sign out front. Priestess Miriam's snake Aida also lives at the Temple and is occasionally brought out during ritualizations. Two crossed crutches, symbols of Legba, rest against one side of her cage. Priest Oswan painted the vève of Azaka, lwa of agriculture, on a cow skull that sits near Priestess Miriam's reading table. Priestess Miriam has explained to me that agriculture was important to Priest Oswan's family in Belize because his father taught the subject through a government program.

While Priestess Miriam performs readings and a variety of other services in the Temple, the intersection of religion, material culture, and economics is visible in the Cultural Center where she sells bath salts, incense, house blessing kits, oils, and sachets that she makes in her workroom in addition to a variety of candles, incense, books, and jewelry manufactured elsewhere. Each of the items that Priestess Miriam sells in the Cultural Center demonstrates the variety of influences in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple including the Spiritual Churches. Priestess Miriam blends four types of incense for sale in the shop. The most popular, which she calls the Temple Blend, is a multifunctional tool that Priestess Miriam recommends for harmonizing energies in a space. The dark, multicolored powder may be burned in a fireproof dish. The sweetly-scented Evil Away and Prosperity incense blends, likewise powders, serve more specific purposes. The Prosperity incense smell strongly of cinnamon and cloves, spices considered useful for attracting money (c.f. Cunningham 1985). Priestess Miriam makes another blend out of coarser pieces of dried herbs, such as garlic skins. This savory-smelling blend is included in the house blessing kit that Priestess Miriam produces for sale in the Cultural Center, but I have also seen her burn it to help induce coughing in a client who need to clear congestion from her lungs. The use of incense and resins, such as benzoin and myrrh, may be likened to the Roman Catholic use of incense in censers on Holy Days of Obligation, including Christmas, for purification and sanctification. Members of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, however, use a wider variety of incense for a multitude of magical²¹ purposes.

²¹ In referring to these practices as magical, I do not wish to distinguish them from the religious. By “magic,” I refer to activities through which people aim to make a material

The use of incense is well documented as part of Spiritual Churches practice as well. Jacobs and Kaslow describe a ritual of purification in which Spiritual people run their feet through smoke emitted from a censer (1991: 140). Often Spiritual people incorporated this into Black Hawk ceremonies and services for other spirit guides (*Ibid.*, 139). Sometimes ministers also include incense and oils in healing work (*Ibid.*, 206). Again this sets New Orleans' Spiritual Churches apart from Spiritual Churches in other regions which have adopted "a Protestant distrust of the senses" (*Ibid.*, 212). Further similarities exist to vernacular Catholic practices of using incense to purify spaces.

Similarly to New Orleans' Spiritual Churches, Priestess Miriam incorporates oils into her practices at the Temple. The oils she manufactures may be worn as perfume, used to anoint someone, or incorporated into candle magic. Priestess Miriam sells three blends: Prosperity, Healing, and Love. Each combines oils, herbs, and some previously-manufactured oils, such as Come to Me Oil, common in most botánicas. Priestess Miriam also add some coloring to each - green for Prosperity, yellow for Healing, and pink for Love. Sometimes Priestess Miriam adds mustard seeds to the Prosperity oil and dried rose petals to the Love oil as well. As a Catholic, I immediately drew a connection between the Healing oil and the sacrament of anointing the sick in which gravely ill people are anointed and receive the laying on of hands by a priest or bishop. I came to

change in the world, whether it be the purification of a home, reversing negative energy, or attracting good luck. In this usage, magical practices may be considered part of broader religious systems. Some scholars have striven to disassociate African diasporic practices from magic given its history within racialized evolutionary theories of religion; however, I employ it because many of my consultants describe their practices or events they have experienced as "magic" or "magical" in a way that does not exclude them from also being religious.

learn that the Temple's practice of using Healing oil is more akin to the vernacular Catholic practice of anointing people with oils from the shrines of beloved saints. Moreover, more in line with common understandings in the Spiritual Churches, the oils affect psychic energies in addition to one's physical state.

In the Cultural Center, many of the pre-made products Priestess Miriam sells, especially the incense, candles, oils and books, overlap with those sold in most botánicas. Her sachets, though, are unique among the products typically found in New Orleans' botánicas. The sachets are small bags made from squares of fabric and yarn. They are filled with herbs, fragrance oils, and small squares of parchment with seals drawn on them. The colors of the bags as well as the herbs and oils within them correspond with the general purposes of the bags, which include love, healing, money, and protection. Although Priestess Miriam mixes the herbs and oils from memory, she keeps a copy of Scott Cunningham's *Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* (1985) handy in her workroom. For several decades, this book has been a popular reference among Wiccans and Contemporary Pagans, and it is commonly sold in botánicas.

In addition to the herbs and oils, each sachet contains a seal. When I asked Priestess Miriam about the seals, she directed me to read *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses and the Magical Uses of the Psalms*.²² Baer describes this book as “a type of hoodoo Bible” (1984: 130). This characterization is somewhat misleading, though. As early as the 1920's, newspapers reported the use of this book among Voodoo practitioners in New

²² Priestess Miriam was not my only consultant to recommend that I read a book rather than answer my questions directly. When I asked a Jamaican woman about an orisha whom she mentioned, she told me I should read some of the books in the Cultural Center because it was best for me to learn for myself.

Orleans (“Voodoo Doctor’s Equipment”). As an occult text, it likely would have been popular among Spiritualists as well as African Americans interested in esotericism at the time of the Spiritual Churches’ founding. Until recently, scholars of African American religions have tended to mention occult manuals only in passing without clear explanations of their usage (Polk 1999: 116).

First appearing in print in late-eighteenth-century Germany, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* purports to be an addendum to the Pentateuch (i.e. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The book contains seals and talismans along with descriptions of their magical uses. The DeLaurence Company of Chicago, the most popular English-language publisher of the text, sold the book throughout Africa and the Caribbean over the first half of the twentieth century (Polk 1999: 120). Available scholarship and my own fieldwork suggest that rather than replacing the Christian Bible, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* serves as a supplementary tool to aid people in a variety of traditions in making use of scripture via amulets and the magical use of the Psalms. To attempt to attribute my consultants’ use of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* to a particular tradition, such as the Spiritual Churches or Voodoo, would be to miss the point that these categories sometimes obscure the dynamic interchange between vernacular practices. Furthermore, my focus on material culture practices suggests that such distinctions sometimes matter far more to academics than to practitioners.

Priestess Miriam makes use of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses and the Magical Uses of the Psalms* in making what she calls mojo bags as well as sachets. While the sachets are sold to the general public in the Cultural Center, Priestess Miriam makes mojo bags, which are constructed out of similar materials, custom for her clients.

Priestess Miriam takes many aspects of a client's circumstances into consideration when designing a bag. Typically, she sews them by hand using a blanket stitch around the edges of the bags, but the outer appearance may vary in other respects. Sometimes she sews beads onto them. In at least one instance during my fieldwork, Priestess Miriam sewed a mojo bag onto a Roman Catholic scapula so that her client, an inmate in a state penitentiary, would be able to carry it even without pockets. Being palm-sized, mojo bags are easily concealable in pockets and purses, and I have heard clients express a concern for discretion. Generally, there is a sense that mojo bags are private so that their owners are unlikely to show them to others. I have been unable to determine precisely why this is so, but it bears resemblance to concerns in conjure and other vernacular traditions with giving another person power over oneself. Among my consultants, Southern women of color especially have spoken of grandparents who would drink only from their own flasks or warn against letting a neighbor cut their hair. Yvonne Chireau notes that the use of hair in conjuring practices "has remained remarkably consistent" over the centuries of its documentation (2003: 48).

In addition to seals, the mojo bags may include Psalms written out on parchment paper. Most editions of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* now also include *The Magical Uses of the Psalms*, which purports to be a Kabbalistic text. Along with the names of god and the angels, it lists the uses to which people may put the psalms, ranging from the safe delivery of an infant to protection from storms. At the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, as well as the Spiritual Churches with which Priestess Miriam was associated in Chicago, these psalms are copied onto parchment paper for use in mojo bags. For example, in order to help my parents sell their house, Priestess Miriam directed me to

write out Psalm 73 with the name of their realtor and the house's street address. I was to put it in a blue bag along with some of her Prosperity incense and soil from the property.

The colors of sachets, mojo bags, and candles are significant. Each signifies a purpose and draws particular energies to a person. Dark colors, such as purple, are typically associated with protection, green with money, yellow with psychic energy and awareness, red with love and power, and blue with healing. Baer observes that candle magic in the Spiritual Churches most likely has its origins in European practices. Many of his consultants, for example, referenced a manual on Euro-American candle magic for dressing candles and addressing problems by burning them. Candles' colors, Baer notes, are significant both in vernacular Catholic practices and more explicitly African and African diasporic traditions (1984: 124). The Cultural Center often stocks books on candle magic as well.

The candles and other products Priestess Miriam makes for her clients cannot be fully understood apart from the actions that she prescribes to be performed with them. Sachets are accompanied by affirmations and instructions for reciting them. As such, the sachets serve as tools for meditation and putting one's mind and energies in order as much as the sachets act independently of these actions. More complicated instructions often accompany mojo bags. In addition to carrying their house-selling mojo bag in a purse or pocket, Priestess Miriam instructed my parents to read Psalm 73 daily and burn a white or green St. Joseph candle. Candle burning magic of this kind is common across Roman Catholic, Voodoo, and Spiritual Church communities, and many Catholics pray to St. Joseph specifically to help them sell their homes. When my parents told Priestess Miriam that many of their Roman Catholic friends had instructed them to bury St. Joseph upside

down in their yard, Priestess Miriam shook her head. She said that did not sound comfortable for St. Joseph and urged them to use the mojo bag and candle.

For Whom is Hybridity an Issue?

Scholars focus on hybridity, or syncretism, for several reasons. First and foremost, it illuminates the means by which cultures change over time. Some scholars also highlight hybridity as a way of acknowledging agency among religious and racial others as participants of cultural change, not just victims of it (c.f. Raboteau 2004). However, the significance of hybridity to Spiritual people and others outside of academia is a complex issue that brings attention to the divide that sometimes exists between academics and their subjects. Although hybridity is an area of interest for academics studying the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo, whether hybridity matters at all is a question sometimes contested among the clients and visitors of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple as well as Priestess Miriam.

When I first began my fieldwork at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, I was eager to hear how Priestess Miriam explained and justified the hybrid nature of the material culture and rituals at the temple. It initially surprised and then humbled me to realize that most people in the Temple community, including Priestess Miriam, did not see it as a problem to be solved or dwelled upon. On one hand, Priestess Miriam did understand Voodoo as a joining of African and Christian traditions. According to her, the trauma of enslavement left people in need of resources for spiritual and physical survival. Consequently, they relied on what they had at hand - their world views and practices as well as knowledge of herbs that they brought from Africa. They used this in combination with the forms of

Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, that they encountered in the Americas and Caribbean. Jesus rose up from the crucifixion to live again, Priestess Miriam explained, so that enslaved people could too.

For the most part, though, when visitors to the Temple ask Priestess Miriam about the process by which Voodoo arose, she considers this question as missing other important points of more immediate concern. Firstly, Priestess Miriam is clear that she and Priest Oswan did not build the Voodoo Spiritual Temple to align with anyone else's vision of Voodoo. For example, a Trinidadian man came in and said he recognized certain objects on the walls of the Cultural Center, particularly the many-colored kerchiefs. Priestess Miriam was somewhat dismissive of this observation because she wants people to take the time to understand the meaning such objects gain from their context, not what they mean or have meant in distant times and places.

Sometimes visitors, like many scholars of the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo, point to statues of Roman Catholic saints and comment on the role Catholicism played in the development of Voodoo. Priestess Miriam, however, includes material culture associated with Roman Catholicism in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple for practical, not explicitly historical or doctrinal, reasons. They include specific personal experiences she has had in which she has interacted in some way with a saint or spirit, especially during her time living in Chicago. There she knew Spiritual ministers who had saints because they bring strength and security. She explained to me that the saints help reduce chaotic energies and create an ordered, disciplined understanding.

Two saints for whom Priestess Miriam provides special altars in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are St. Joseph and St. Theresa of Lisieux. St. Joseph's altar is in the hall near

Priestess Miriam's books. On a shelf above Chicken Man's altar, it includes a statue of St. Joseph as well as pictures of Roman Catholic popes, novena candles, and prayer cards. This altar typically holds many offerings, such as photographs and handwritten petitions, in addition to money. Additionally, Priestess Miriam keeps a St. Joseph novena candle in her office on a plate with a few of the Italian cookies popular at New Orleans St. Joseph Day celebrations.

In the main rooms of the Temple, St. Theresa is present in the form of a four-foot plaster statue. She stands beside a statue of Pope John not far from Priest Oswan's altar. After the Federal Floods of 2005, two Temple attendees found the state of St. Theresa outside a Spiritual Church ruined in the flooding. One of the women, Marie, is a black New Orleans Catholic from the 7th Ward. She regularly attends mass at her parish church and prays the rosary. Unaware of Priestess Miriam's devotions to St. Theresa and assuming the statue to be an image of the Holy Mother, Marie brought her to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Priestess Miriam laughed when she recounted this case of mistaken identity.

St. Joseph has historical ties to New Orleans' black communities, and his feast day remains popular today among both Italian American Catholics and black Americans, whether or not they identify as Catholic.²³ Priestess Miriam's own understanding of St.

²³ In Louisiana, St. Joseph's Day is commonly understood as an Italian American celebration, since Sicilians brought their altar-building and feasting traditions to Louisiana in the late nineteenth century. St. Joseph's Night, March 19, is also an important day for Mardi Gras Indians who mask and parade in their neighborhoods. Mardi Gras Indian tribes consider St. Joseph's Night an important part of the annual cycle of parades, which includes Mardi Gras Day, St. Joseph's Night, and Super Sunday following St. Joseph's Night. In the past, these performances have been a lightning rod for drawing attention to police harassment of Mardi Gras Indian tribes, especially after a

Joseph's role at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is contrary to, or at least seemingly unconcerned with, this popular understanding of St. Joseph in New Orleans Voodoo. Interviews with Priestess Miriam reveal that while living in Chicago, Priestess Miriam worked at a convent on the North Side. The religious order, the Divine Lord Ministry, established Catholic schools for black children in Mississippi. At the convent, she encountered St. Theresa and St. Joseph. While working as an at-home nurse, also in the Chicago area, Priestess Miriam stayed with a family who kept a family bible in her room. When Priestess Miriam stood near the bible, she smelled a floral scent so strong she almost fell over. The family gave her the bible, which she continues to use. In the meantime, she started writing to a convent in Lisieux with offerings and petitions for her church. Not far from the convent in France was a shrine for St. Joseph, so Priestess Miriam sent petitions there as well. The money came to help her congregation, and she has been praying to St. Joseph and St. Theresa ever since.

Priestess Miriam observes St. Joseph's feast day and maintains altars for St. Theresa and him because they answered her prayers in the past. She explained that her inclusion of them in her practice grew out of relationships she developed with them in a time of need, not out of a sense of what Spiritual Churches or Voodoo ought to look like. In some senses, this and other highly individualized narratives demonstrate the historical roots of Priestess Miriam's world view and practices in the Spiritual Churches and Roman Catholicism, but it also challenges monolithic understandings of hybridity in those

notorious clash on St. Joseph's Night in 2005 (Turner 2009: 91). Since then, the New Orleans Police Department has included Mardi Gras Indian chiefs in police academy training in efforts toward cultural sensitivity (Troeh 2015).

contexts. In this case, hybridity is an ongoing process. Priestess Miriam's past experiences may have set the stage for her to understand saints as potentially interactive and useful, but she includes these specific saints in her practice for practical reasons, not because they are traditionally linked to the Spiritual Churches, Roman Catholicism, or Voodoo.

Some visitors to the Temple are interested in Voodoo as a means of accessing an authentic Afrocentric identity. Often they are black American men²⁴ vacationing in New Orleans from other cities, including St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. Sometimes they wear orisha beads or red, yellow, and green tam hats, material culture serving as their self-conscious markers of identity. They frequently employ a normative discourse of authenticity ("real Voodoo," "real priestess") in their enquiries about the Temple. Such men sometimes express commitments to Santería, and they are eager to meet Priestess Miriam, who responds to their enthusiasm in a variety of ways depending on her perception of their willingness to listen to her. As with other people, Priestess Miriam is not as concerned with the religious affiliation they assert as she is with their capacity for humility and understanding. In the past, she has expressed exasperation with people who want to tell her all about their practice of African-based religions, saying that if they were secure in their religious identities, they would not need to tell everyone about them.

In some respects, the men who express an interest in the authentic "Africanness" of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple fit into a trend of an increasing number of African Americans seeking out and engaging in African-based religions. According to Sylvester

²⁴ Women who share these interests may visit the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, but during the course of my fieldwork, men were more vocal about their concern with Afrocentrism.

Johnson, African Americans have more frequently embraced religions such as Santería and Voodoo since the 1960s, especially in urban areas affected by the Black Power movement (Oduah 2011). The American Yoruba Movement aims to “re-Africanize” Santería by removing its Catholic and Spanish elements (Palmié 2008). At the same time, more African Americans are traveling to Nigeria and neighboring countries in hopes of experiencing indigenous African practices (Oludah 2011). Whether they approve of or want to undo hybridity, participants of these movements seek to construct authentic identities (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 9). The Voodoo Spiritual Temple, then, often appears to serve as a focal point for Afrocentric-minded tourists to explore their roots and identities.

Although these tourists find their way to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, they are not representative of visitors and clients who come to the Temple more frequently. At first glance, this suggests there may not be as much interest in Afrocentric religions in New Orleans as in other U.S. cities. On the contrary, there are several Yoruba priestesses in the New Orleans metro area, and the annual Maafa commemoration, an Afrocentric procession dedicated to remembering enslaved ancestors around the Fourth of July, draws hundreds of people each year. I suspect that locals seeking an explicitly Afrocentric religious experience are not as drawn to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple because Priestess Miriam does not engage much in that discourse. She declines doing so in part because she sees some people fixating on their ancestors and being properly spiritual to a point where she says it derails their actual spiritual growth. Furthermore, like the Spiritual Church minister Wehmeyer interviews (Wehmeyer 2000: 69), Priestess Miriam understands Spirit to be universal, and labels only impede people’s understanding of this. Within this

context, hybridity, then, is not an issue that deserves a great deal of reflection. This is important to consider because although a focus on material culture can help realign scholarly inquiry with practitioners' concerns, it can also lead scholars to focus on questions that hold little interest or practical importance to practitioners.

CHAPTER 4: SPIRIT AND SPIRITS AT THE VOODOO SPIRITUAL TEMPLE

The Place of Personhood

In scholarship on the Spiritual Churches, arguments about hybridity rest in part on examinations of the non-human beings with which Spiritual people interact through ritual practice and material culture. Whether examining altar objects as reinterpretations of Kongo *minkisi* (Wehmeyer 2000) or statues of saints as evidence of Roman Catholic influence of the movement's development (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991), scholars at least allude to the relationship between non-human beings and the rich material culture of the churches. In this chapter, I examine material culture that provides insight into the categories of beings present at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, particularly Spirit, spirits, and living humans. In doing so, I continue my examination of embodiment and the ways in which different categories of being are made present through their varied relationships to matter. Exploring the nature of the living human body is necessary to understanding this polyontological world view. In this chapter, I also demonstrate how my consultants simultaneously accept and reject what scholars term Cartesian dualities of mind and body. The term "polyontological" best describes the ways in which conventionally "Western" and seemingly "non-Western" understandings operate cohesively in my consultants' world views (Miguel Astor-Aguilera, personal communication, November 21, 2015).

Since Hallowell's publication of his influential essay on Ojibwe worldview in 1960, anthropologists have turned to the concepts of other-than-human beings and personhood to illuminate the nature of non-human beings in non-Cartesian, and especially those

considered “indigenous,” world views. Hallowell argued that in many cultures that anthropologists study, concepts of the person transcend the merely human to include other-than-human beings with whom human persons enter into social relationships (1975: 143-144). Kenneth Morrison (2002) and Graham Harvey (2005) continue to build upon Hallowell’s work, demonstrating that other-than-human persons are relational in Native American world views. According to Harvey, “persons” typically are contrasted with objects, which are spoken about as opposed to spoken with (2005: xvii). Moreover, human and other-than-human persons interact through reciprocal relationships (Morrison 2002: 55).

Scholars of Africa and the African diaspora have further pursued the exploration of concepts of personhood in their research. Simon Coleman identifies the trope of “negotiation” as central to this literature. Specifically, the African and diasporic communities whom scholars research negotiate different modalities of understanding the person as both dividual and individual (Coleman 2011: 244). In his comparison of Ghanaian Pentecostal conceptions of personhood in Ghana and in diaspora in the Netherlands, Rijk Van Dijk finds multiple modalities of personhood operating simultaneously. Even as his consultants view themselves as individuals transcending ancestral traditions, persons are defined in dividual terms through their relationships with others (Van Dijk 2001: 231). Van Dijk’s analysis of multiple modalities co-present among Ghanaians resonates with much of the literature on African American religions, especially in the U.S. South. Although these studies generally have not explored these issues using the term “personhood,” they present relevant information regarding

understandings of relationships between the individual and community, especially as they relate to health. I explore this further later in this chapter.

In her examination of the category of the person, Jean La Fontaine argues that the key to understanding variant forms of the concept of person is recognizing that they are embedded in social contexts (La Fontaine 1985: 138). In the case of the Spiritual Churches, non-human beings must be understood within Spiritual people's social contexts, which include dynamics of race, class, nationality, and gender. These categories of identity experience periods of flux, especially in colonial contexts. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff explain, for example, that "for Tswana of the colonial era, in sum, 'the person' was a constant work-in-progress; indeed, a highly complex fabrication" (2001: 269). Under colonial rule, the Tswana people of South Africa had to negotiate new ideologies of gender, race, and class as they interacted with precolonial world views.

Contextual frameworks for interpreting concepts of personhood are not relevant only in colonial contexts. Han J.W. Drijvers effectively demonstrates that early Christian hagiography and non-Christian biographies between 200 and 400 C.E. place individuals' lives in "the framework of current concepts of the human person" (Drijvers 1990: 138).²⁵ Because models of the person are constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts, there cannot be a universal model. Anthropological explanations, therefore, must be uninhibited by etic terminology, which can erase nuance, and as I will suggest in this chapter, it is questionable whether the category of "personhood" itself does not do

²⁵ Drijvers' aim in this essay is to show that early Christians had a worldview much more similar to non-Christians in their societies than scholars tend to acknowledge. This includes similarities in conceptions of personhood.

that. Charles Winqvist insists that “the concept of the person implicates philosophies of being, consciousness, and language in soteriological questions even when they modestly prescind from these questions.” He argues the concept is weighted with theological implications about the meaning of life (Winqvist 1998: 237). Like “religion,” “theology” and “soteriology” are terms weighted with very particular histories. If the category of person is a scholarly construction, its theological implications may depend on whether or not scholars employ it in a universalist manner.

As conceptions of personhood are dependent on sociological and historical context, so are understandings of embodiment as they relate to personhood. A notion of personhood that relies on embodiment necessitates attention to place. According to Steven Collins, “if personhood consists in the (universal) fact of a body needing psychological and social ‘completion,’” any “realization of personhood will be particular, dependent on the – contingent – conditions of a specific time and place” (Collins 1985: 74). As I will demonstrate, my fieldwork revealed that in the Spiritual Churches, manners of embodiment vary among different categories of human and non-human beings. Moreover, the types of spirits present may be interpreted according to proximity to different material objects.

In the case of all of the scholarship on personhood, Nurit Bird-David points out that “person” is an analytic term, not a translation (Bird-David 2015). In this sense, it does not avoid all of the pitfalls into which etic terms lead scholars. Although the literature on personhood is useful in understanding Spiritual people’s relationships with non-human beings, ultimately, personhood is an etic term. Unlike words such as “religion” for which scholars have traced etymologies (c.f. Smith 1998), the origins and development of

“personhood” is insufficiently understood, which makes it a potentially inaccurate descriptor depending on the context in which it is deployed. As such, deploying “personhood” in this study runs the risk of predefining my understanding rather than illuminating terms (Coleman 2011: 247-248). In my research, I have not found sufficient evidence to demonstrate the use of “personhood” in illuminating consultants’ understandings better than their own categories can; therefore, I continue to use emic terms, such as Spirit and spirits, in discussing these beings. In effect, I argue that the histories and meanings of these categories are rich enough to reveal a great deal about Spiritual people’s world views without relying solely on the category of the person.

Spirit

In the Spiritual Churches, Spirit is the category of being least like others, and the same is true at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Much like Pentecostal understandings of the Holy Spirit, Spirit is perceived as an omnipresent and omnipotent member of the Holy Trinity (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 54-55). Spirit is key to understanding the problem of presence, which is “how a religious subject defines and claims to construct a relationship with the divine through the investment of authority and meaning in certain words, actions, and objects” (Engelke 2007: 9). Similarly, it appears at the Temple that through the Holy Spirit, the divine becomes immediately present and able to be experienced in ritualizations.

Historically, Spiritual people have described gifts, such as healing, as gifts of the Holy Spirit which are received at baptism (Smith 1984: 45). At times, my consultants use the terms “God” and “Spirit” interchangeably, reflecting the perspective common among

Spiritual people that God is a spirit. This view, expressed by the Divine Spiritual Churches of the Southwest in a 1936 meeting and again in a 1937 statement, derives from the Church of God in Christ, a black Pentecostal denomination (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 45, 53). Indeed, Jacobs and Kaslow show that the association's statement on the nature of the Holy Ghost is copied almost directly from the Church of God in Christ's "Confession of Faith" (*Ibid.*: 53, 55). This concept comes at least in part from John 4:24 in which Jesus states, "God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth" (The New American Bible).

Although Spirit is perceived as omnipresent, its presence is most evident during ritualizations. For example, Spiritual people may be possessed by the Holy Spirit during worship services. As in many Pentecostal denominations, Spiritual people may get "in the spirit," a phrase referring to times in which individuals enter trance-like states that may involve dancing, speaking in tongues, or falling to the ground in a faint (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 129). At the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, such possession by the Holy Spirit is infrequent. However, more frequently, consultants describe Spirit as communicating in several ways, including through dreams and messengers. Dreams have played a large role in Priestess Miriam's life. In her early adulthood, she told me that Spirit sent her signs that she later understood to be foreshadowing her work in New Orleans. Her grandfather and great grandmother, for example, came to her in different dreams to give her the numbers that would be the street numbers of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple and adjacent Cultural Center. Similarly, when Priestess Miriam lived in Chicago, she had a dream about palm trees swaying in a breeze. When she took a bus to New Orleans with Priest Oswan, Priestess Miriam explained to me, she saw the same palm trees growing along the

side of Lake Pontchartrain. In each of these instances, Priestess Miriam understood that Spirit was communicating to her about the work she would undertake in New Orleans.

As an aspect of the Holy Trinity that may interject itself directly into people's lives, it is interesting to note that Spirit, unlike God and Jesus Christ, lacks a gender in my consultants' descriptions. They refer to God as "he" or "Father" whereas they reference Spirit with the genderless pronoun "it." I have been unable to determine whether this is the case in more mainstream Spiritual Churches where previous studies suggest more clearly masculine language sometimes is used to describe interactions with the Spirit. For example, Michael P. Smith's consultants describe people being "slain in the Spirit" (1989: 61). At the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, attendees have talked about being "in the Spirit" or seeing "the Spirit come on" someone, but I have not heard them use language that demonstrates inflexibly gendered attributes of the Holy Spirit. I theorize that Spirit's lack of a clear gender provides greater flexibility in terms of who may interact with and wield the gifts of Spirit. Since Spiritual people seeking ordination commonly are expected to display gifts, such as healing and prophecy, it is important that women are able to participate in them in order to be considered authorities in the Spiritual Churches more broadly (Estes 1993: 164). Women's perception of greater gender equality at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple may also be one of many reasons that they comprise the majority of regular attendees. More research is needed to test this hypothesis, though.

Spirits and the Dead

Other beings present at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are significantly different from Spirit in how they are embodied and how people interact with them. Among these are

“the dead.” As in many African diasporic religions, the dead may play an active role in life at the temple. Priestess Miriam has constructed various altars for deceased people whom she knew well in life, including her first husband, Priest Oswan, and friends who served the Temple in other capacities. Altars may include statues and belongings as well as offerings of liquor, tobacco, and food. The activities of spirits of the dead are often interpreted in relation to the objects associated with them. One’s proximity to a deceased person’s belongings is significant in attributing causal relationships for events. Two examples involving a former drummer and Priest Oswan demonstrate the role of proximity in people’s interactions with the dead at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple.

In life, Johnny was a musician who frequently attended rituals at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. He also drummed for Priestess Miriam, who prefers to incorporate music spontaneously into rituals. To this end, she keeps a variety of drums and a guitar in the Temple. When Johnny passed unexpectedly, his funeral was held at the Temple. The well-attended funeral included music by Johnny’s bandmates, sermonizing from Priestess Miriam, and a prayer to St. Joseph in which all of the attendees joined using the prayer cards Priestess Miriam had made with Johnny’s face on the front and St. Joseph’s prayer on the back. Afterward Johnny’s wife left his ashes in the Temple for a few days. They stayed near the table where Priestess Miriam performs her readings for clients. During that time, Priestess reported pieces of paper and other small objects flying through the air at clients who came for readings. When Priestess told me about these events, she said that Johnny had always liked messing with people; now he was playing tricks on her clients whom he thought needed to lighten up a bit. Once Johnny’s wife collected his ashes, no

one subsequently mentioned any activities attributed to him occurring in the Temple, though his drum sticks have since been incorporated into an altar for musicians.

Although Johnny's remains were perceived as the means through which his presence continued at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, some altars in the Temple are comprised of objects belonging to or otherwise associated with a dead person's spirit. One altar dedicated to Priest Oswan contains his ashes and some of his former belongings, such as small statues, as well as bottles of rum and other liquor. Above the altar, several photographs of Priestess Miriam with Priest Oswan are arranged. A mojo bag hangs to the left of these photographs. It is decorated with concentric, beaded circles of many colors. Priestess Miriam once mentioned that Priest Oswan bought it, and it belonged to him. Slightly large than my hand, it is significantly larger than the mojo bags that Priestess Miriam sells.

One day, a member of the Temple community was alone in the temple sitting in a chair next to Priest Oswan's altar. When she entered the temple, she had been working long hours and was very tired. As she was sitting in the chair, she reportedly felt a stillness come over her, and it seemed like someone else was directing her movements, turning her in the chair to face an altar covered in images of women, including the Virgin Mary. Draped in a blue cloth, the altar features figures dressed in the blues and pinks typical of Marian imagery as well as reds. Later when the woman asked Priestess Miriam about her experience, Priestess Miriam said she had been telling Priest Oswan that the woman was overworking herself. Consequently, he was telling her to rest more and calm her mind. Thus, in the Spiritual Churches, altars, saints, and spirits can be important means of creating order in an otherwise chaotic world.

In the case of Johnny's ashes and Priest Oswan's altar, people's experiences were interpreted in relation to their proximity to remains and belongings. Moreover, the spirits' actions and offerings made to them reflected their personalities in life. This resembles findings in scholarship on African diasporic religions in the Americas and Caribbean. In Haitian Vodou, for example, altars for different lwas typically contain food associated with them, such as cassava bread on Azaka's altar (Brown 1991: 42). Paul Christopher Johnson writes about the Garifuna of Central America entertaining their deceased ancestors with favorite foods and songs (Johnson 2007: 95-96). This similarity is particularly pertinent in the case of Priest Oswan who was exposed to Garifuna culture growing up in Belize, and Priestess Miriam has traveled to Belize many times since meeting him in the 1980s.

In New Orleans, vernacular Catholicism features similar practices of tailoring offerings to particular spirits. This includes leaving favorite foods, toys, and other objects on relatives' graves on All Saints' Day. Every year on All Saints' Day, the Archdiocese of New Orleans blesses the Catholic cemeteries while families paint and repair relatives' graves. The activities may include picnics for the living as well as the dead. This is common among white as well as black communities, both Catholic and Protestant, in the city. Such practices suggest that historically New Orleans has been a place generally receptive to world views that understand the dead to be potentially interactive beings.²⁶

²⁶ The material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple further indicates that the dead may be associated with specific locations in ways that may bind their spirits to those places to some extent. In particular, Chicken Man lived in the building currently inhabited by the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Priestess Miriam explained to me that before the Temple moves to another location, she will have to scatter his ashes in the courtyard. Whereas she will take Priest Oswan's remains to a new location, Chicken Man will stay

Many spirits present at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple were once living humans; however, unlike Johnny and Priest Oswan, not all of them were members of the Temple community in life, meaning they were not members of what Wehmeyer terms the “personal dead” (2010: 44). Therefore, proximity to their belongings is not necessary in understanding their presence. Such spirits often are present through statues. Some, such as Black Hawk and the Virgin Mary, are popular among New Orleans’ Spiritual Churches. It is common, though, for different congregations to demonstrate variability in the spirits and spirit guides with whom they form special relationships (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 143), and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is no exception. Princess Diana, a statue of whom occupies a prominent place in the Temple, is illustrative of this. Because Princess Diana was very charitable in life, Priestess Miriam finds much to admire in her. Consequently, in the form of a three-foot-tall doll, Princess Diana sits on a throne in the temple.

According to Priestess Miriam, Princess Diana was a gift from a friend who lives in Texas. Princess Diana has blond hair wrapped in a low bun and a pink gown with matching shoes. At various times, I have seen her wearing a tiara and matching necklace as one might find in a toy store, though some day she is wearing more jewelry. Her little throne is draped in a pale fabric that lends elegance to the battered chair. Pope John and St. Theresa stand just a few yards to the left of Princess Diana. Perhaps because she sits rather low to the ground, first-time visitors often overlook her, distracted as they are by the piano against the wall behind her. People have left offerings of money, photos, and

there. Exactly why some spirits are bound to specific locations while others are not merits further exploration in future research.

petitions along its keyboard. Occasionally, someone leaves a piece of candy or rolled up dollar bill directly in Princess Diana's lap. Someone also wrapped a beaded necklace around her wrist like a bracelet.

One day a client came into the Temple bringing what Priestess Miriam diagnosed and described as a disordered energy. The client knocked Princess Diana off her chair, breaking her wrist. With the help of Radihya, a Botswanan woman who often visited the Temple, Priestess set about mending Princess Diana's wrist. Over the course of several days, they set the wrist with strong adhesive, painted over the crack, and made a bracelet to cover any evidence of the break. In subsequent analysis, it was not that Priestess Miriam and Radihya mended Princess Diana's wrist that was revealing so much as the way they went about it. Firstly, everyone involved referred to Princess Diana as "she" or "her" but never "the doll" or "it." Princess Diana was never referred to or treated as an object. Instead, Priestess, Radihya, and a few others who visited the Temple during the mending, treated Princess Diana as a subject, a being with feelings to be considered.

Throughout the mending process, the Temple community also made efforts to keep Princess Diana comfortable. When they had to leave the glue to set overnight, they created a bed for Princess Diana on the floor of the Temple. They propped her arm on a pillow and tucked her under warm brocade blankets before closing for the night. When it came time to paint over the break, Radihya was careful to get just the right shade of paint to blend in with the rest of Princess Diana's arm. Everyone discussed the bracelet they were going to make before it was constructed. Both the matching paint and the bracelet were spoken of as efforts to help Princess Diana feel that she was still beautiful despite

the unfortunate break. Her feelings were being considered and addressed through the Temple community's efforts.

Unlike the cases of Johnny's remains and Priest Oswan's altar, Princess Diana's spirit seems to have been embodied in the doll, not active in proximity to it. This implies that not every type of spirit is embodied in the same way. In the case of Princess Diana, her spirit's emotional state seems to be affected by her physical state vis a vis the doll. According to Alfred Gell, images and icons should be treated as person-like in anthropological theory because they are treated as human persons in the context of worship and ceremonies (Gell 1998: 96). Gell uses the term "idolatry" to describe "the practice of worshipping of images" (*Ibid.*) and explains this phenomenon as the result of artworks being "enculturated beings" that occupy places within networks of human social agency almost entirely equivalent to that of humans (*Ibid.*: 153). Despite this, Gell maintains that "the mind of any reasonable person" would not accept that a depiction of a being could be the embodiment of that being (*Ibid.*: 99). In the case of Princess Diana at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, though, it seems that the statue of Princess Diana is precisely that - an embodiment²⁷ of her spirit. Still, this does not mean that all objects embody a spirit but rather that many objects have the potential to do so.²⁸

²⁷ For my purposes, I define embodiment as the manifestation of a being in a physical object, which may include but is not limited to a relic, statue, medal, picture, or human, as a means through which that being communicates with other beings.

²⁸ This is similar to Hallowell's experience conducting ethnography among the Ojibwe. Hallowell's consultants viewed some, but not all, stones as being alive, and they relied on experience to indicate which were what Hallowell terms other-than-human persons (1975: 147-148).

Moreover, the material objects with which spirits are associated, whether they be ashes, tobacco, or dolls, are indexes of their presences - signs, not symbols. While symbols are multivalent and context-specific in their meanings, signs index something specific that is generally agreed upon within a culture. This dissertation builds upon work that, up to this point, despite attention to possession by spirit guides, primarily has interpreted spirits and spirit guides as symbols. Claude Jacobs, in particular, draws on Wolf's concept of a master symbol which "ties together and upholds the most important ideals and hopes of a group" (1989: 65). This approach illuminates the ways in which spirit guides can empower Spiritual people marginalized due to race, class, and gender. Queen Esther, for example, provides precedence for women's leadership in the movement and reflects Spiritual women's potential to achieve a higher status in the Spiritual Churches than those they left behind (*Ibid.*: 50). Although this is helpful in understanding the sociohistorical context shaping the Spiritual Churches and Spiritual people's practices, the examples of Johnny, Priest Oswan, and Princess Diana demonstrate that viewing spirits strictly as symbols does not account for their presence in Spiritual people's lives as interactive beings who are embodied in a variety of ways.

The Living Human

In the course of my ethnographic studies, I became aware that the relationship between spirits' embodiments and the human person's body is complex at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Often statues are treated as bodies that may be cared for, neglected, fed, or harmed. On the other hand, to undertake communication with these spirits, living humans are encouraged to still their mind and create a more "disciplined order of

thinking” and perceiving the world - “mind over matter,” as some of my consultants say. Priestess Miriam and several other consultants at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple frequently refer to the significance of “order.” People are encouraged to work toward a “disciplined order of thinking” to influence their health, relationships, and spiritual growth positively. This reflects the influence of New Thought and Unity writers such as Catherine Ponder who claims that people “can direct and control thought and its effect on the body” (1967: 9). Through a methodological approach to analyzing and changing one’s “thought patterns,” attendees and clients of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are told they will benefit in a myriad of ways. This is the reason Priestess Miriam’s sachets are accompanied by affirmations which enable “pent-up energies in mind and body... to produce healthy results” (*Ibid.*: 51), including increased love and prosperity.

Just as internal discipline and order yield positive consequences, disordered energies and thought patterns have adverse consequences. Many in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple community understand an overactive mind and strained nerves as having diverse negative consequences to one’s physical health, ranging from carpal tunnel syndrome to infertility. Priestess Miriam once told me about a friend who suffered from uterine bleeding as a result of resentment towards her child. When the woman identified the underlying cause of her illness and changed her attitude toward her child, she healed quickly. This interpretation of the connection between one’s psychological state and physical ailments shows similarities to contemporary strains of New Thought²⁹ that posit that “any physical

²⁹ The influence of New Thought philosophy at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is also notable because its antecedent Theosophy was instrumental in bringing popular attention to comparative studies of religion (c.f. Chidester 2014). This may account, in part, for

condition due to pathogenic agents or functional abnormalities has its spiritual counterpart in some mental unhappiness or morbid idea or belief” (Haller 2012: 259).

Similar understandings of physical ailments originating in psychological or spiritual disturbances can be found in African American cultures as well, especially in folk healing practices. Such folk healing practices provided plantation slave communities with a resource for addressing health problems outside of the white medical establishment, and they reflect a relational understanding of health as a balancing dynamic between the individual, community, spirits, and ancestors (Fett 2002: 6).³⁰ As Stephanie Mitchem compellingly argues, folk healing practices persist in holding an important place in African American culture because they address significant spiritual needs (2007: 5). In particular, she highlights a twenty-first-century resurgence of conjure, which combines knowledge of nature with “cultural concepts of the interconnectedness of life” (*Ibid.*: 22). This overlaps with Christian concepts of faith healing in which a divine or spiritual cause is diagnosed as the cause of an affliction (*Ibid.*: 24). In the Spiritual Churches, and at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple in particular, illness is often understood in these terms, and practices historically stemming from conjure and faith healing are often prescribed.

The issue of psychological and spiritual imbalances negatively affecting health often arises in relation to concerns about fertility. In the course of my fieldwork, several

Priestess Miriam and other Temple attendees’ openness towards other religious traditions.

³⁰ Yvonne Chireau points out that assigning “supernatural” causes to diseases did not mean nineteenth-century black Americans “dismissed physical or organic etiologies.” Rather they viewed the world in such a way that these understandings co-existed (Chireau 1997: 100). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, this resonates greatly with my consultants’ explanations of their views of health.

women came to Priestess Miriam seeking help in conceiving children after they felt allopathic medicine had failed them. Often Priestess Miriam provided counseling along with mojo bags or herbal remedies. These material objects, whether they were to be carried or consumed, were intended to help calm the women's anxieties which Priestess Miriam explained were exacerbating, if not causing, their infertility. For the living human person, at least, the mind has a great deal of power over the body whether or not one is conscious of it. To this end, Priestess Miriam made a treatment comprised of an anisette liqueur base mixed with lavender, oregano, star anise, and shaved ginger for some clients. These herbs are primarily valued for their medicinal properties of soothing and relieving anxiety as well as aiding with digestive functioning. According to Priestess Miriam, by bringing oneself into awareness of this relationship between mind and body, one can begin to address the physical, spiritual, and psychological issues.

Although my consultants understand physical ailments to correspond to mental or spiritual disturbances, most do not advocate a purely mind-cure approach, which may disregard allopathic medicine altogether. Priestess Miriam worked as an operating room technician and nurse in Chicago before being ordained, and she views her experiences in medicine as formative for her work as a metaphysical healer. While in nursing school, Priestess Miriam took a course in which she was assigned to draw a cell. When she did so, she felt the vibrations of Spirit coming from the cell. In Priestess Miriam's understanding, this demonstrated the inextricability of body and mind. Other members of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple echo this understanding. When Marie invited me to pray the rosary with a friend and her, I asked if they prefer to pray together to have a system of accountability in their practice. Marie said the point was that more voices amplify the

vibrations. Every person has a vibration, and by unifying theirs in prayer, they had achieved their goals for prosperity and love in the past. Just as spiritual or psychological distress can cause physical suffering, the converse is true as well. This view occasionally has led Priestess Miriam to disagree with alternative healers who dismiss conventional allopathic medicine completely. In the course of my fieldwork, I only encountered one person who refused allopathic care for his terminal illness. Instead Priestess Miriam advocates an integrative approach that holistically considers physical and spiritual wellbeing in disciplining energies.

Temple attendees also perceive that undisciplined energies can inhibit one's communication with spirits and attract malicious people. In this sense, Spirit's relationship to matter becomes more apparent. Priestess Miriam's services, such as bone readings and mojo bags, help people create internal order by interpreting and impacting their realities. Even the altars in the Temple are part of this larger project as much as they are in service to particular spirits. It is for this reason that Priestess Miriam does not always answer direct questions about specific objects on the altars, emphasizing the Temple's wholeness when she thinks people can only see pieces of it. People risk missing the forest for the trees if they do not understand the relationship between Spirit, spirits, and the material culture of the Temple.

The concept of Spirit and understandings of the mind as having influence over the body suggest a strict dualism in Voodoo Spiritual Temple attendees' world views; however, the embodiment of spirits in material objects and the lack of distinction between body and spirit in these instances points to a world view that is not what Western philosophic and academic traditions refer to as Cartesian. Examining material culture and

its relationship to Spirit and spirits demonstrates that, at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, people simultaneously embrace and reject Cartesian dualism, an issue not raised in existing literature on the Spiritual Churches. Rather than view this as a contradiction, which would reinscribe patronizing trends from anthropology's colonial roots, I argue that it is more accurate and ethical for scholars to view these as manifestations of polyontological world views. The historical and cultural contexts shaping my consultants' world views have led to their ability to disregard a need to choose between Cartesian dualism and "non-Western" non-dualism.

CHAPTER 5: A TRANSNATIONAL TEMPLE, AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT

Locating the Spiritual Churches in a Global Diaspora

The material culture of the Spiritual Churches provides a lens through which the movement can be understood as diasporic and, at times, transnational. In his foundational text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy challenges scholars to expand their concept of diaspora to better reflect the dynamic workings of transnationalism in the Atlantic world (1993). Expanding on Gilroy's framework in her 2011 article "African Diaspora Studies and Religion," Jualynne Dodson argues that scholars should use interdisciplinary techniques to conduct research about people of African descent (Dodson 2011: 18). She advocates focusing on their movements, especially involuntary ones, around the globe to better illuminate the interlocking nature of religious work throughout the African diaspora (*Ibid.*: 21). Scholarship on the Spiritual Churches has connected the movement to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practices of enslaved people (c.f. Wehmeyer 2000) throughout the Atlantic world and, to a lesser extent, the Great Migration of the early twentieth century (c.f. Baer 1984). Although these examinations are important to understanding the development of Spiritual people's world views and practices, they do not reveal the international and transnational connections that continue to place the Spiritual Churches in a global socio-cultural network. Focusing on the dynamism of this network reinforces J. Lorand Matory's assertion that "the isolation of local cultural units has long been the exception rather than the rule" (2011: 2). Despite inclinations scholars and popular writers sometimes demonstrate to depict the Spiritual Churches as insular and hyper-local, they exist within

a wide network of changing political, economic, and cultural contexts. In this chapter, I investigate the international and transnational connections between the Spiritual Churches and other religious practices in the Americas, further clarifying the Spiritual Churches' place in the broader African Diaspora. Due to the international nature of Priestess Miriam's practices, training, and clientele, the Voodoo Spiritual Temple exemplifies these intersections. Material culture here serves as my departure point.

Before beginning, I will clarify some key terms, particularly diaspora, translocalism, and transnationalism. The exact meaning of diaspora, as well as which communities qualify as diasporic, has been contested in academic literature (Dodson 2011: 6-7), but now it is generally accepted as applying to African-descended populations among others, including Armenians, Cambodians, and people of Indian descent in the Caribbean and Europe. I use Dodson's definition of diaspora as "the massive involuntary and semi-involuntary movement of a people from their land of origins" (*Ibid.*: 7). The involuntary nature of diaspora is significant for distinguishing it from other types of migration. The trauma and displacement that cause diasporas require a theoretical paradigm that takes these conditions into account. Indeed this is one reason Baer's characterization of the Spiritual Churches as a religious response to racism and racially-driven exploitation is convincing (1984). Dodson compellingly argues that diasporic movement begun with the Atlantic slave trade continues in post-colonial contexts throughout the world due to social and economic systems put in place by colonial powers (2011: 8).³¹ The Atlantic slave

³¹ Isidore Okpewho argues that postcolonial African migrations must be understood as a new diaspora because conditions motivating migration in the twentieth century were "strikingly different" than the Atlantic slave trade (2009: 6). Dodson counters, though, that many contemporary migrations continue to be influenced by colonial histories and

trade and its social, legal, and cultural repercussions continue to shape the context in which Spiritual people perceive the world and practice their religion.

As Dodson's essay indicates, the development of African diaspora studies as a distinct field of area studies within the academy has brought debates about the methodology best suited to approach research on diasporic communities. Historian Kim Butler observes that scholarship in African diaspora studies often has held most interest among Pan-Africanists and Afrocentrists (2010: 24). Richard Price warns that such political positions often lead to over generalizations of historical and sociocultural particulars (2010: 58). Price argues for the centrality of the creolization framework for understanding dynamic processes of cultural change and self-representation (*Ibid.*: 68). Butler meanwhile suggests that biography, cliometrics, and art history provide avenues through which scholars can explore diasporic communities in a non-reductive way (2010: 38). Both Price and Butler's proposed methods speak to Yelvington's concerns for a dialogic method to acknowledge and move past scholarly assumptions about diasporic communities and cultural processes (2006).

In the African diaspora, some people have come to occupy roles as transmigrants. That is, they develop identities and relationships connecting them to at least two nation-states (McAlister 2002: 16). Transnational, then, is a more specific adjective than international in that it describes ongoing relationships of exchange between people across geopolitical boundaries. Matory argues that scholarship on transnationalism tends to ignore "translocalisms that preceded the nation-state" rather than engage them

power structures, making them a dimension of "*the African Diaspora*" rather than a new diaspora (2011: 16).

comparatively (2011: 8). Matory's critique points to the nation-state as a defining characteristic of transnationalism. Translocalism, on the other hand, removes the emphasis from the nation-state allowing for analysis of migrations and cultural exchanges preceding the nation-state but also between cities in the United States, for example. Both transnational and translocal networks are reflected in the material culture and practice of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple.

Transnationalism has become critical for nuancing scholars' understanding of diaspora as well as their methodological frameworks. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, for example, observes that transnational approaches challenge scholars' privileging of Protestant Christianity and U.S. exceptionalism because a transnational focus shows that cultural flows are not unidirectional (2014: 130-131). Matory underscores these points in his exploration of "multidirectional travel and migration between [Africa and South America], the movement of publications, commerce, and so forth [which] have shaped African and African-American cultures in tandem, over time and at the same time" (2011: 291). That cultural exchanges are ongoing conditions of the African diaspora requires scholars to follow their research communities beyond limited geographical and cultural boundaries that are in many ways academic impositions. In the last two decades, scholars of Haitian Vodou have begun exploring the implications of transnational networks for Haitian religious practices in relation to migrants in the United States and Canada as well as their families and acquaintances in Haiti (c.f. McAlister 2002; Richman and Rey 2009). As I will explore in this chapter, the international influences on the Spiritual Churches are numerous, but the Voodoo Spiritual Temple presents a case in which transnationalism is particularly evident and significant. Examining this dimension of the Spiritual Church

movement and especially the Voodoo Spiritual Temple offers a new approach to issues of hybridity.

Many scholars of transnationalism treat it as a relatively new phenomenon; however, African and African-descended peoples have never remained temporally or geographically isolated. Rather they have been producing self-representations through translocal dialogue since before the growth of the Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century (Matory 2011: 268). Moreover, developments in transportation and communication technologies, critical mechanisms for transnationalism and translocalism, represent millennial trends, not abrupt changes (*Ibid.*: 8). To assume otherwise would “do a deep disservice to history” (*Ibid.*: 75). Spiritual people similarly have been treated as being outside self-consciously diasporic and transnational cultural networks. An examination of the case of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple as well as a revisiting of previous scholarship on the Spiritual Church movement suggests that Spiritual people have always been at least somewhat aware of the translocal and transnational dialogue in which they participate through changing communication technologies.

International and Transnational Connections at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple

The Voodoo Spiritual Temple sits at the locus of transnational and translocal networks through Priestess Miriam’s ties to Belize, her travels abroad, often for invited lectures, and her clientele which includes transnationals as well as international travelers. These networks shape the material culture and practices at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, revealing transnationalism to be a mechanism of ongoing cultural change. That is, transnational dialogues are one means of continuously effecting change at the temple.

Although Priestess Miriam has always lived in the United States, she developed transnational ties to Belize through her first husband, Priest Oswan. A practitioner of Obeah, Priest Oswan was well-versed in herbal healing as well as the magical uses of Central American plants. Contrary to its negative reputation, which grew out of conflicts between slaves and British colonial officials, Obeah centers primarily on the use of tropical plants and herbs to cure diseases. Similarly to conjure, Obeah became popular among eighteenth-century enslaved populations as an alternative to white doctors' medical treatments, and it remains relatively common in the Anglophone Caribbean (Bryson 2013: 72-73). Priest Oswan immigrated to the United States as an adult. After he married Priestess Miriam, they travelled back whenever it was possible to visit his family and friends. Through Priest Oswan and his family and acquaintances in Belize, Priestess Miriam learned about traditional medicinal practices similar to those she learned from her grandmother.³² Priest Oswan eventually compiled a booklet, which is for sale at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, on the herbs of Belize and their medicinal properties. Over a decade after Priest Oswan's death, Priestess Miriam continues to visit Belize when she is able to maintain relationships and bring back herbs for her work.

In addition to connections between North and Central American herbal healing practices, Obeah holds other similarities to Priestess Miriam's background in the Southern United States as well as the Spiritual Churches. In particular, like Spiritual people, Obeah practitioners typically use incense, candles, and oils to achieve their ends

³² Although I have most frequently seen Priestess Miriam administer herbs through teas and tinctures, she sometimes will prescribe different methods of consumption. For example, she once gave me a piece of a bitter Belizean root to chew to cure some nausea I was experiencing.

as well as mystical texts, including the Bible and *The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses* (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003: 138). As I will explore further in the next section, the availability of these texts and products across the Atlantic world demonstrates a transnational dialogue has been ongoing among Spiritual people and others using similar tools in their practices since the movement's inception.

Many spirits embodied in objects at the Temple clearly reflect a transnational dimension. African and African diasporic elements especially manifest in the influence of Caribbean and Central American practices. Two Elegua heads, stones covered in cement with faces made of cowrie shells, sit in bowls in a corner of the Temple and behind the door of the Cultural Center. The Elegua heads are similar to those common among santeros in Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean. It is common to keep Elegua beside a door to bring in prosperity but also to provide protection. One of Priestess Miriam's neighbors recounted the story of a house fire in which the corner where he kept his altar for Elegua was left undamaged.³³ As with Princess Diana, one of Priestess Miriam's friends gave her the head as a gift. Although Elegua sits in a discreet corner of the Temple, Priestess Miriam often invokes him during ritualizations, especially while singing, and he appears to be interchangeable with Legba. Sometimes she invokes his aid when she sermonizes. For example, during my wedding, she instructed my partner and me to light our St. Anthony candle before asking his help in keeping our path open and clear. This suggests that spirits may be interacted with through various material

³³ In New Orleans, one cannot help noticing similarities to stories from the Federal Flood of 2005. Many people documented instances of rising water stopping at the feet of crucifixes and images of the Virgin Mary. People tend to interpret this as signifying protection or divine intervention.

objects and potentially embodied in more than one object, not unlike relics of Catholic saints (c.f. Bentley 1985).

As I suggested previously in this dissertation, Priestess Miriam does not concern herself with orthodox religious, cultural, or geographical boundaries, and she does not consider her work defined by or applicable to any one place. Sometimes tourists come to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple and presume that Priestess Miriam was born and raised in New Orleans. Many have been exposed to popular media depictions of Voodoo as secretive and insular and assume Priestess Miriam will fit into a similar narrative. Usually Priestess Miriam can tell early in an encounter if a visitor has come in with such fixed presumptions in mind. When they ask her where she is from, she sometimes responds that she is from her mother's womb. This simple yet unexpected statement appears to serve several purposes. First, Priestess Miriam uses humor to change the tone of the conversation from one of preformed assumptions to discovery for the visitors. Second, Priestess Miriam has explained to me that if people are attentive to her words, they will recognize the underlying assertion that we are all human, and that, not a city of origin or other point of difference, should be the starting point for dialogue.

Priestess Miriam does not view her knowledge or practice as geographically bound, and she has traveled widely to teach and learn from others. Since I met Priestess Miriam in 2013, she has been invited to give talks in Slovenia and Germany. Previously, she traveled to give invited talks and run workshops in Rybinsk, Russia, as well as other cities in the United States. Her trips to Russia and Slovenia resulted from tourists traveling to New Orleans, visiting the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, and inviting Priestess Miriam to give lectures and run workshops in their communities. The workshops often

include Priestess Miriam teaching attendees how to make herbal sachets like those sold in the Cultural Center. Notably, in Rybinsk, Priestess Miriam acquired an image of the Virgin Mary that she incorporated into a Voodoo Spiritual Temple altar featuring similar Marian images, which can be found throughout the Temple. Most notably, a picture of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, commonly associated with the Iwa Erzulie Danto, hangs in a corner of the Temple. Two scratches on Erzulie Danto's cheek distinguishes her appearance from that of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, and her image in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple speaks to a long, complex relationship between various forms of Christianity and African diasporic religions.

While Priestess Miriam's teaching abroad has given her opportunities to exchange cultural and spiritual knowledge, it has also opened her eyes, and mine, to the predominance of negative stereotypes of Voodoo in Europe. When she was in Slovenia, for example, the organizers of her lecture and workshop advertised the events on billboards featuring a highly sexualized drawing of a black woman holding needle-studded dolls. Around the dolls, text read "He loves me" and "He loves me not." This is emblematic of the continued stereotyping and misunderstandings dominating popular images of Voodoo in the United States and Europe, especially as they regard the intersections of race, sexuality, and material culture. Such stereotypes may be traced to nineteenth-century public narratives that sought to undergird white supremacy with supposed "proof" of black hypersexuality (Gordon 2012). Priestess Miriam expressed her frustrations that the billboards misrepresented her work, and the organizers assured her that they would advertise differently next time she visits. In the end, Priestess Miriam read the situation as a result of a miscommunication early on. People get so caught up

with the word “Voodoo,” she explained, that they do not look past it to understand her role as a metaphysical healer and counselor.

Unlike her trips to Slovenia and Russia, which were designed solely around her presentations, Priestess Miriam traveled to Germany for a conference on holistic healing where she attended sessions on traditional healing practices in addition to giving a lecture. The conference brought together healers from various cultures and religious traditions around the world. Priestess Miriam told me she was bothered by some participants’ misappropriation of marginalized people’s practices as well as their disregard for the benefits of allopathic medicine. Having worked in allopathic medicine, she sees it as an important component of the toolkit people need available to them to address various challenges. However, Priestess Miriam indicated to me that she was satisfied with much of what she learned, and she did meet other healers and spiritual counselors who made a positive impression on her. In particular, Amma (née Mata Amritanandamayi), an Indian healer, interested Priestess Miriam. According to Priestess Miriam, Amma healed conference attendees through embraces, and the energy in the room in which Amma greeted people was deeply harmonious. Consequently, Priestess Miriam purchased one of Amma’s music CDs and plays it often at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple to create a positive flow of energy. Several regular attendees at the Temple have commented unsolicited that it is good music, meaning it helps create a more ordered energy in the Temple and adjacent Cultural Center. This is indicative of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple community’s understanding that many cultures provide tools for creating the ordered energy which is the goal of a number of practices at the Temple.

As Priestess Miriam's incorporation of materials from her travels suggest, her clientele includes internationals and transnationals in addition to people born in the United States. Several regular Temple attendees who are transnationals described their relationship with Priestess Miriam and service to the Temple, through the assemblage of dolls and other items to sell, as fulfilling a need to work with a community elder or wise person with whom they would be spending their time if they had remained in their places of origin. Radihya, mentioned in the previous chapter as having helped repair Princess Diana, is an artist who was reared among family members who were traditional healers in Botswana. As an adult, whenever she moved, Radihya told me that she sought out a wise woman, which is how she came to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Similarly, a Jamaican woman, who helped in the Cultural Center, considers Priestess Miriam's role as a healer to be highly respected and has brought Jamaican herbs and roots to the Temple as gifts. A Blackfoot woman from Alberta, Canada, explained that twenty years previously, she had considered becoming an elder's assistant in her tribe. Instead she moved to New Orleans. This made her feel guilty at first, but when she met Priestess Miriam and Priest Oswan, she considered working at the Temple to be a way of becoming an elder's assistant.

For these women, who maintained relationships with family and fellow tribe members in Botswana, Jamaica, and Canada, Priestess Miriam fulfilled an important transnational cultural role as a wise elder and healer. These relationships suggest how gender also becomes a significant factor in interpreting relationships and roles at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. In the early 1990s, David Estes estimated that women led approximately half of the Spiritual Churches in New Orleans with the majority of congregants being women (1993: 150). Women's religious leadership in New Orleans, a

city that is still culturally Catholic in many ways, has precedence in Voodoo priestesses, such as Marie Laveau, from the nineteenth century. Estes observes that the relative commonality of women's leadership in Afro-Caribbean religions may be the very reason that Mother Leafy would have publicly rejected Voodoo, and many Spiritual ministers point to Biblical passages to justify women's ordination (*Ibid.*: 156). To some degree, politics of respectability have been entwined with gender in these instances. Like Priestess Miriam, though, the transnationals at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple do not feel the need to make these distinctions. This may be because fears of "hoodoo" are not as pervasive as they once were, although my Jamaican consultant shared with me a number of stories about friends and family members involved in disputes in which magic was used for malicious purposes. These women's personal narratives as they were related to me reveal that they recognize Priestess Miriam as functioning in ways women elders do in their communities of origin. Each woman makes her mark on the material culture of the temple by volunteering time and labor for its maintenance and the production of items to be sold in the Cultural Center.

As much as transnationals often find a wise elder in Priestess Miriam, people from around the world come to the Temple for readings. They either hear about it through word of mouth or stumble upon the Temple's website before they travel, underscoring technology's importance in translocal and transnational relationships at the Temple. Priestess Miriam has developed long-lasting friendships with people from many places, including Sweden, Russia, and France. Sometimes, though less often, people call from abroad, especially from Nigeria, to have readings performed over the telephone. Communication technologies, such as the telephone and internet, enable these

transnational relationships. This is most significant, perhaps, for clients who could not afford international travel. Similarly, Priestess Miriam sometimes conducts phone readings for U.S. residents who are unable to pay for a trip to New Orleans.

Whether clients and visitors happen upon the Voodoo Spiritual Temple in a leisurely exploration of New Orleans' French Quarter, have friendships with Priestess Miriam, or call from across the Atlantic, they often leave traces of these interactions through the material culture of the Temple. Priestess has a store of roots and herbs from across the Atlantic world thanks to her travels and those of Temple attendees. People have also sent photographs, such as one of Dagbo, leader of a Vodun temple in Benin. Dagbo's framed portrait sits in the Temple, reflecting the great respect with which Priestess Miriam and others in the Temple community speak of him. For some Voodoo Spiritual Temple attendees, this prestige may be partly based in the location of Dagbo's temple in Benin; however, based on Priestess Miriam's description of Dagbo, she seems more concerned with his perceptiveness, capacity for powerful spiritual work, and ability to build his temple from very humble beginnings into a successful enterprise.

Sometimes people leave dolls and statues from their places of origin in the Temple. For example, the Blackfoot woman mentioned earlier in this chapter placed a doll made of blue fabric, beads, and moss on an altar with images of the Virgin Mary and other maternal figures. In addition to this handmade doll, she has modified two identical store-bought dolls. They are approximately ten inches tall with tan skin and braided black hair. The woman made skirts to fit over their preexisting dresses. The skirts are decorated with bright geometric patterns made using seed beads. Priestess Miriam explained that they represent the woman's grandmother and great aunt who were twins. They sat on an altar

near belongings of other deceased people, including the urn that once held the ashes of the first wife of Priestess Miriam's second husband. To my knowledge, transnationals always build upon existing altars with their contributions, implying a sense of connection between geographical locations and spiritual communities.

The processes of change and exchange that manifest in the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are on-going. Moreover, writing about Caribbean creolizations, Crichlow and Northover argue that local practices relate to other Creole practices elsewhere, so that they are "constantly refreshed and transformed by various cultural transactions produced under varying conditions within the wider world" (2009: 28). Although Crichlow and Northover were concerned primarily with self-identified Creole peoples in the Caribbean, the framework they lay out helps clarify the role of transnationals as well as international relationships between Priestess Miriam and other spiritual leaders as major reasons for ongoing hybridity at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple.

Historicizing the Spiritual Churches in International Movements

The Voodoo Spiritual Temple provides just one example of a locus of international and transnational networks in the Spiritual Churches movement. Arguably since the beginning of the movement, Spiritual people have been aware of other people and practices as well as engaged in exchanges with them. This interchange has taken place on a number of levels and is perhaps most visible via an examination of material culture. Moreover, historically, New Orleans was a key port for commercial trade in the United States. New Orleanians' interactions with people from a wide variety of places influenced local discourses on identity among people of color, including in the formation of social

aid and pleasure clubs, outgrowths of benevolent aid societies (Turner 2009: 110).

Mother Leafy also founded her Eternal Life Christian Spiritual Church Number 12 just two years after the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the first black Mardi Gras krewe, was established. Zulu, as the group is known locally, is famous (or infamous as it was considered in the 1960s) for its use of black face, grass skirts, and other stereotypically African imagery in its parade on Mardi Gras day. Given the historic connections between African American parade organizations, especially Mardi Gras Indians, and the Spiritual Churches (c.f. Wehmeyer 2010) as well as public and academic perceptions of black religions and Voodoo in particular, it is reasonable to assume Mother Leafy and her followers were aware of contemporary conversations about black³⁴ identity in New Orleans and elsewhere.

As healers and counselors, before the advent of internet retail, leaders of the Spiritual Churches have often relied on mail order houses and retail shops for the supplies of their practices. Through purchasing supplies for her mojo bags and herbal remedies as well as stocking the Cultural Center, Priestess Miriam has become embedded in a network of what Carolyn Morrow Long terms “spiritual merchants,” purveyors of goods that help people attain, among other things, “health, attraction, control, protection, revenge, luck, the power of the saints, and the authority of the African gods” (2001: xvi). In New Orleans, the two botánicas with which Priestess Miriam has had closest ties, F & F Candle Shop and Botánica Solano, which is now closed, were founded and are operated

³⁴ I acknowledge that Mother Leafy’s followers would not have used the term “black” to identify themselves. Some early Spiritual people may have identified as Creole, a term which has been and continues to be a subject of contestation in Louisiana.

by Cuban- and Puerto Rican-born families. Although Spiritual people do not necessarily run them, such botánicas and candle shops have been fixtures in the lives of the Spiritual Church communities in New Orleans and Chicago as well as other cities. Through these connections, Spiritual people have maintained working relationships with people from other spiritual traditions, such as Santería, beyond their congregations. In New Orleans, there is even documentation of women from the Spiritual Churches attending St. Joseph's Eve celebrations at Botánica Solano, owned by a Santería practitioner (*Ibid.*: 176).

The interactions between Spiritual people and the multi-cultural clientele of botánicas and candle shops demonstrates the porousness of the boundaries of the Spiritual Churches and other traditions and helps illuminate Priestess Miriam's refusal to make clear distinctions between Voodoo, the Spiritual Churches, and other practices, such as Santería. Joseph Murphy's 2010 study of botánicas in Washington, D.C., underscores the connections between the racial and ethnic diversity of botánicas' clientele and the material culture present. For example, as the Central American population of Washington, D.C., increased, Murphy found that some Santería practitioners began incorporating Our Lady of Guadalupe into altars and products at their botánicas (Murphy 2010: 96). As Murphy points out, this illustrates the practical approach botánica owners and clientele take to their religious practice as well as their negotiations of "the multiple cultural traditions that have shaped and which are shaping their identities" (*Ibid.*: 89). Similarly, the Cultural Center at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple stocks goods from throughout Africa, Latin America, and the United States, demonstrating on-going processes of cultural change and exchange as clients, especially transnationals, mediate shifting socio-cultural contexts.

Unlike botánicas in Washington, D.C., most New Orleans botánicas are owned and operated by men. In Murphy's study, women comprised the majority of clients and consultants. Consequently, the botánica may serve as "a site of power that can enable women to live as equals to men... It is a resource harnessed by and for women" (Murphy 2010: 93). I hesitate to make claims about equality at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple lest I gloss over the complexities of patriarchy operating in women's lives; however, both the Temple and Cultural Center provide places where women can seek some degree of control over their lives whether through readings with Priestess Miriam or use of products such as sachets and oils. Thus, the Voodoo Spiritual Temple and Cultural Center fits into the broader trends regarding women and spiritual merchants indicated by Murphy's study.

In addition to participating in exchanges with the Latin American and Caribbean clientele of botánicas, Spiritual people often draw on European esoteric traditions. The history of the L.W. DeLaurence Company of Chicago sheds light on these connections. Established in the 1890s as a mail-order business, L.W. DeLaurence published popular works of French and British alchemy and magic as well as books about Tarot and Kabbalah. According to Federal Writers' Project interviews, DeLaurence's best-seller of the early twentieth century, *The Great Book of Magical Art*, was widely used among Southern hoodoo workers (Long 2001: 190). Originally published in 1902, the book contains what Carolyn Morrow Long describes as a "mishmash of ideas culled from European and English ceremonial magic, the kabbalah, Hinduism, and Spiritualism" (*Ibid.*:16). Another popular book from the company, *The Egyptian Secrets of Albert Magnus*, is a collection of German folk medicines and charms (*Ibid.*: 121).

Some of the most popular texts among Spiritual people were published by leaders of British esotericism, such as Samuel Liddell MacGregor Matthers who founded the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Matthers published *The Key of Solomon the King* in 1899, but it primarily circulated among members of the Order of the Golden Dawn until a 1909 printing at which point the text received more attention due to a very public disagreement between Matthers and Aleister Crowley (Gilbert 2000: v). The history of the international circulation of the *Key* remains unclear; however, several of my consultants mentioned it as an important part of their studies in Kabbalah. Like the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, *The Key of Solomon the King* has found a place among people in the Spiritual Churches and related practices. Priestess Miriam and a close friend of hers, a Voodoo priest and spiritual counselor, once lamented that the text is so widely available now. They explained that people used to go to special suppliers, such as the L.W. DeLaurence Company, to buy expensive hardbound copies. For Priestess Miriam and her friend, possession of the book seems to have signified a certain level of financial investment and spiritual commitment. Priestess Miriam states that it was among the books she preferred not to sell in her store, implying that it was not appropriate for those unprepared to use it wisely.³⁵ Because ownership of the text signifies a person's sincerity in seeking wisdom, it is embedded in the larger system of material culture in the Spiritual Churches.

³⁵ Marie used *The Key of Solomon the King* to create a work of art that hangs in the office of the Cultural Center. It features the Third Pentacle of Jupiter, a seal that protects people who invoke spirits (Mathers 2000: 68-69).

Through his interviews and fieldwork in the mid-twentieth century, Baer did discover that some Spiritual ministers, in Tennessee particularly, display ambivalence towards items sold in candle shops and botánicas. Despite their often dismissive attitudes, many of their congregants used candles and oils in their homes (Baer 1984: 133-134). Although not all of Jacobs and Kaslow's New Orleans consultants used products from botánicas, the researchers do not note any ill feelings towards them (1991). Many of the Spiritual ministers and congregants with whom Jacobs and Kaslow conducted fieldwork readily made use of candles, powders, and magical texts on numerology, astrology, and other divinatory methods. Early Spiritual people made use of these shops and items to the extent that medical professionals conflated the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo in the 1930s (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991: 91-92).³⁶ This documentation of ongoing use of candle shops and botánicas suggests that since the inception of the Spiritual Church movement, Spiritual people have interacted with people practicing with other religions, participating in broader cultural networks. In doing so, they continue transnational and translocal practices that have been intrinsic to the black Atlantic world since before the advent of the Atlantic slave trade, and like Candomblé in Brazil, the Spiritual Churches offer proof that "translocal and cosmopolitan fields of migration, commerce, and communication are the normal conditions of human culture and its reproduction" (Matory 2011: 268). As such, exploring these issues among New Orleans' Spiritual Churches provides a lens through which to analyze the broader African diaspora.

³⁶ As I have mentioned previously, medical doctors were not alone in conflating the two practices; anthropologists and other academics did as well.

The African Diaspora: Connections and Comparisons

Tracing the transnational and international connections to the Spiritual Churches movement broadly and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple specifically illuminates the movement's place within the African diaspora in the Americas and beyond. Doing so counters portrayals of the Spiritual Churches and Voodoo as insular, geographically bounded practices. Rather, it is revealed that they are embedded in global systems of cultural connections. Consequently, rather than engage in a straightforward comparison of traits and practices between the Spiritual Churches movement and other African diasporic practices, which could grow unwieldy in the space of this chapter, I theorize that the Spiritual Churches are one of many African diasporic movements the material culture of which is shaped by international and transnational exchanges. Support of this theory also can be found in an examination of scholarship on Santería, Haitian Vodou, and Candomblé.

Generally, scholars consider Santería, also known as Regla de Ocha and Lucumí, to be an Afro-Cuban practice, though in his foundational publication on santeros in the United States, Joseph Murphy also identifies Dominican, Puerto Rican, Haitian, and black American practitioners (1993: 2). The associated divinatory practice of Ifá has been of especial interest to scholars seeking evidence of African influences in Santería's material culture (c.f. Murphy 1993; Brown 2003). However, more recently, Santería provides one of the clearest examples of the effects of print and other media on a transnational religious practice. Material culture exchanges, particularly video and print media, between practitioners in the United States and Cuba have come to shape the practice of santeros since the 1990s. Videos of rituals circulating between Cuba and the United

States have been central to the development of a self-consciously global Santería community (Beliso-de Jesus 2013: 707). Similarly, books about Santería lore and ritual instruction are now available for popular audiences, suggesting changes in a religious practice that historically involved the slow revelation of ritual knowledge based on complex systems of initiation (*Ibid.*: 706). At the Cultural Center, Priestess Miriam, like other owners of botánicas and candle shops in New Orleans, stocks books on the orishas. She also circulates aspects of the practice at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple through CDs of music from rituals at the Temple, expanding the possibilities for uses of the music and its audiences.

Like santeros, practitioners of Haitian Vodou have historically relied on secrecy as “a ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott 1990), a buffer and counter against the juggernauts of colonization, slavery, modernity, globalization, and the market economy” (Johnson 2006: 425). Secrecy operates as a means of controlling cultural practices in resistance to dominating forces; however, the proliferation of books for popular and academic audiences as well as tourism has increased “outsider” access to ritual knowledge and lore. Audiocassette recordings have been a means of connecting Haitians in the United States and in Haiti, transporting music and rituals transnationally and translocally. Karen Richman and Terry Rey demonstrate the way in which these recordings cement transnational ties (2009). The audiocassettes also can result in changes to ritual practice as well as material culture when they replace live musicians for Vodou rituals in the United States (Schmidt 2003: 225). Although Priestess Miriam still prefers live drumming for rituals at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, she does play her CD in addition to those of other religious leaders, such as Amma, in the Cultural Center. In the case of

Haitians' cassettes and music CDs at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, audio recording technologies enable ritual knowledge to be transmitted in new contexts.

Because print and audio media are now significant means of communicating religious knowledge throughout the African diaspora, the advent of photography technologies are important to Brazilian Spiritism and the related practice of Candomblé. Although photographs of ritual possession have been recorded since the 1940s, they have gained popularity more recently as many Brazilians have come to view Candomblé as their national heritage (Johnson 2014: 37). Researchers recording these possessions now circulate their messages beyond Brazil (*Ibid.*: 38-39). It is worth noting that in addition to communicating spiritual knowledge, these photographs document presences. According to J. Lorand Matory, print culture also has been critical for conceptualizing Yorubá identity at the center of popular understandings of Candomblé in Brazil (2011: 75). Moreover, Afro-Brazilians traveling to Benin and other West African countries in the twentieth century may actually have introduced new images into Vodun iconography (*Ibid.*: 29). The changes in Afro-Atlantic cultures are ongoing due to such international travel and exchange.

Despite sharing this similarity with Candomblé, the Voodoo Spiritual Temple demonstrates one noteworthy difference in its approach to these changes. In Brazil, Candomblé priests and practitioners emphasize that Candomblé is fixed and ancient. This likely benefits them in struggles for respectability and acceptance (Matory 2011: 2). At the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, on the other hand, people emphasize this less. Priestess Miriam and others treat change in material culture practices as natural even as aspects of

ritual practice are rooted in esotericism and scripture as well as long-standing African diasporic practices.

CHAPTER 6: END DISCUSSION: CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

Introduction

This study set out to explore the role of material culture in New Orleans' Spiritual Churches through an ethnographic case study of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. As a growing field of research within the field of religious studies, material culture studies reveal a great deal about academic biases that tend to influence interpretations of religious practices and related world views. As such, material culture is a useful departure point for examining the reasons for differences between etic categories of analysis and emic explanations. Many theories of religion and material culture emerged from studies of Africa and the African diaspora to be applied broadly thereafter. Examining the processes of signification at work, then, is critical. My ethnographic study of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple further draws attention to conceptions of non-human beings and embodiment made evident through people's interactions with statues and altars. The examination of non-human beings as they relate to material culture further highlights the role of transnationalism in a religious movement often described as rather insular. To that end, I sought to explore the following questions: What does an examination of the material culture and related practices at the Voodoo Spiritual reveal about the formation of etic terminology and the reasons it sometimes diverges from Spiritual people's explanations of their practices? How might the application of a dialogic method offer insight into Spiritual people's world views and scholars' interpretations of them that previous studies have not?

Findings and Theoretical Implications

The dialogic method focuses on recognizing the interactions between multiple parties that result in the creation of scholarly representations (Yelvington 2006: 4-5). In my historiographical and ethnographic research on the Spiritual Churches, this method proved valuable in addressing issues of signification as they relate to representation of material culture practices in the African diaspora broadly and the Spiritual Churches specifically. Scholars of the Spiritual Churches apply theories of syncretism and assumptions of relative cultural isolation that were outgrowths of early treatments of material culture. Several of these scholars are even critical of their consultants' practices where they intersect with economics (c.f. Berry 1995: 17). Comparing these scholars' attitudes to those of their consultants as well as those I encountered in my ethnographic fieldwork at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple reveals a disparity between scholarly analysis and emic understandings. Recognizing scholars' biases helps move beyond implicit assumptions that material culture reflects spiritual or intellectual immaturity. In doing so, material culture becomes a useful lens through which to view interrelated issues of hybridity, world view, and transnationalism in ways that take emic explanations and concerns into account more fully.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed studies that show how theories of race and religion were heavily intertwined and often based in studies of African and African diasporic cultures with material culture constituting a significant portion of scholars' data. Theories of "fetishism," for example, were highly racialized, implicitly and sometimes explicitly undergirding arguments about white supremacy. As Charles Long (1986), James Noel (2009), and David Chidester (1996; 2014) have demonstrated, this is because theories of

religion developed within colonial contexts influenced by hierarchical views of race. Using Yelvington's dialogic method better clarifies these dynamics that are evident to varying degrees in studies of the Spiritual Churches.

Chapter 3 built upon these findings by examining the theories of syncretism and hybridity resulting from studies of religion and material culture that have been applied to studies of the Spiritual Churches. Again material culture was revealed to be a main body of evidence for scholars searching for retentions and syncretism. Applying the dialogic method to theories of syncretism helps scholars move beyond rehashing survival narratives. As Manigault argues, scholars' preoccupations with Africanisms can risk obscuring lived experiences (2014: 6). During my ethnographic fieldwork, I learned that I could not draw assumptions based on the appearance of the statue of a popular saint or image of Elegua at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Doing so would have led to misrepresentations of Temple attendees' varied understandings of and interactions with them. Moreover, although the idea of some practices being rooted in traditional African religions may be important to some visitors, the majority of the Temple community does not see this as a matter of major concern, reminding scholars that preoccupations with syncretism and retentions often may be more academic than practical. If I had assumed, for example, that Priestess Miriam included St. Joseph in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple because he corresponded to a lwa or was popular among Spiritual people, I would have missed the specificity of her experience, which is more practical and significant in her view.

My exploration non-human beings in Chapter 4 emphasized the necessity of taking emic explanations and practical concerns into account to enable a deeper interrogation of

signification and more accurate scholarly representations. Non-human beings and the material culture related to them provide some of the clearest examples of divergence between scholars' analyses and those of their consultants. In addition to applying a dialogic method in an examination of the historiography, I compared previous studies to my own ethnographic fieldwork. Through my exploration of Temple attendees' interactions with Spirit, spirits, and the dead, I found that previously applied theories failed to represent the varied types of beings as something more than symbols. My ethnographic study revealed a variety of ways in which non-human beings as well as diverse understandings of modes of embodiment were present. Moving beyond theories of material culture as symbolic allows scholars to view Spiritual people as polyontological. Although this is an etic term, it helps scholars better represent Spiritual people's complex understandings of the relationships between mind, spirit, and matter without treating them as contradictory.

Although my findings often built upon or confirmed previous studies regarding the history of the Spiritual Churches, some significant differences arose between my work and those studies regarding the representation and interpretation of material culture. This is in part because few studies of the Spiritual Churches take material culture as their starting point. In doing so, my study affirms Jacobs and Estes' assertion of the relevance of gender in the development Spiritual Churches. Figures of women on altars, for example, underscore women's ability to serve as ministers (Jacobs 1989; Estes 1993). Women at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple sometimes expressed dissatisfaction with men's leadership in other churches or identified Priestess Miriam with women elders in their cultures of origin. My application of a dialogic method further suggests that scholars'

treatment of material culture in African diasporic traditions and related understandings of religion have been gendered as much as they have been racialized. Gender, then, works in a multiplicity of ways in women's participation in the Spiritual Churches as well as in scholars' approaches to the related material culture. Perhaps this is one reason the transnational nature of the Spiritual Churches, which is evident largely in their material culture, has not been analyzed more fully.

Applying a dialogic method to my historiographical and ethnographic examination of material culture reveals that scholars should be attentive to emic explanations because vernacular religious practices, at least in the African diaspora, rarely adhere to the geographical, social, and cultural boundaries that scholars impose. The material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple provides a multiplicity of examples, from the incorporation of lwas and orishas to the use of texts such as the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*. Previously treated as symbols of an isolated religious movement, they point to the necessity of viewing the Spiritual Churches in a transnational framework to better understand Spiritual people's world views. Not only does closer attention to emic categories and explanations nuance currently existing academic theories, but it provides opportunities for the development of new theories and methodological frameworks in future studies.

Directions for Future Research

At times, my examination of material culture in the Spiritual Churches has raised questions that require further archival and ethnographic research. Some of my findings affirmed previous studies of the Spiritual Churches while others challenged them. One

possible reason for differences in my findings and that of other scholars is that the demographics of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple are markedly different from those at Spiritual Churches described by other scholars. Although predominantly women are involved at the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, as in most Spiritual congregations, they come from more diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. As my ethnographic research suggests, this has impacted the material culture of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. A future study using a transnational framework could explore the implications of this further through the comparative use of further ethnography and archival research.

While the questions related to material culture in the Spiritual Churches are numerous, during the course of my fieldwork, I also became aware of the deep complexities surrounding the contemporary practice of Voodoo in New Orleans. What Voodoo is exactly and who has a right to define it have become questions embedded with debates over race, class, and gentrification. To some extent, this is not new. Scholars widely agree that public representations of Voodoo have been racialized and embroiled in debates about regional and national identity since at least the nineteenth century. However, based on my fieldwork, it seems that the tenor of these disagreements have changed markedly since the Federal Floods of 2005 and the subsequent rapid gentrification of the Eighth and Upper Ninth Wards by predominantly white transplants. Few scholars have written on this issue without taking explicit or implicit political stances, and even fewer have focused on material practice as a means of understanding the changes or continuities, which merit further study.

Similarly, since 2005, national attention has been drawn to other aspects of New Orleans culture. In particular, Mardi Gras Indians gained wider attention after the airing

of the popular HBO series *Treme*, which featured a character who masked Indian. Both Jason Berry (2002) and Stephen Wehmeyer (2010) have alluded to historical connections between early Spiritual Churches leaders and Mardi Gras Indian tribes. I have observed similarities in contemporary Mardi Gras Indian suits and the statues and decorations common in Spiritual Churches. In a 1989 article, Claude Jacobs actually mentions a Black Hawk altar adorned by the headdress and beaded pieces of a Mardi Gras Indian's suit (1989: 54). Moreover, the beadwork of Mardi Gras Indian suits arguably display a West African as much as a Native American influence, a fact of which tribes including Congo Nation and Mandingo Warriors seem to be well aware. Material culture, then, provides an excellent starting point for exploring issues of hybridity, religious expression, and identity among Mardi Gras Indians and black New Orleanians more broadly.

Although the Spiritual Churches are sometimes treated as socially, culturally, and geographically insular, their rich material culture reveals them to be embedded in complex diasporic networks. My historiographical and ethnographic analyses emphasize the significance of a transnational framework in exploring Spiritual people's world views and practices. Applying a dialogic method further provides scholars with opportunities to understand the construction of academic categories and devise innovative frameworks of analysis through closer attention to emic explanations of religious practices. Material culture provides an excellent departure point for these explorations.

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