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**Ritual Knowledge, Virtual Analysis: Reading Vodou from the Inside Out**

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**A**

**Thesis**

**in**

**The Special Individualized Program**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
(Special Individualized Program) at**

**Concordia University,**

**Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**September 2001**

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# RITUAL KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUAL ANALYSIS: READING VODOU FROM THE INSIDE OUT

by Alexandra Boutros, M.A.

Vodou is a syncretic and hybrid religious tradition that generates unique understandings of concepts such as identity and home. This examination of Vodou practices in Montreal focuses on a growing number of new initiates and converts to the religion. These newcomers to Vodou have a complex relationship with a religious discourse that is often continuous with the historical and cultural specificity of Haiti, the birthplace of the Vodou tradition. The purpose of this analysis is to make a religious system of thought explicit by examining how the religion constitutes and reconstitutes the identity of its practitioners. Exploring how newcomers to the Vodou tradition both shape and are shaped by discourses transmitted through the language, literature and rituals of Vodou reveals a unique and fluid epistemology that is original to the Vodou tradition. What emerges in this self-reflexive and interdisciplinary analysis is the realisation that Vodou posits ways of understanding the world that differ substantially from ways of knowing embraced by the academy. The ease with which the discourses of Vodou empower practitioners to concurrently encompass seemingly conflicted identities disrupts standard and dichotomous perceptions of identity. In addition, the knowledge generated and disseminated through the *lwa* (gods) of the tradition shapes the way in which new Vodouists understand the world and their place in it. Sometimes this conception of the world opposes the one generated by academic discourse. This thesis illustrates the dialogue and tension between these divergent ways of knowing.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to Professor Sally Cole, Professor Norma Joseph and Professor Christine Jourdan for their support and assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. Special thanks to all those whose words and stories, as well as the extension of friendship, made this work possible. And final thanks to Kaarla Sundstrom, whose editorial and moral support was invaluable.

### **A Note on Orthography**

Simply, I use those Kreyole spellings of words and names with which I am most familiar and with as much consistency as possible. However, when quoting other authors I respect their choice of spelling. This may account for any inconstancies in orthography.

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## Chapter 1

### Hesitating and Hoping...the Tricky Business of Defining Academic Parameters

To assert that one is a “white middle-class woman” or a “black gay man” or a “working-class Latina” within one’s study of Shakespeare or Santería is only interesting if one is able to draw deeper connections between one’s personal experience and the subject under study. That doesn’t require a full-length autobiography, but it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied. Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed.

*The Vulnerable Observer, Ruth Behar*

#### ***Writer’s Block: An Ad Hoc Approach to Writing a Thesis***

As my research on the Vodou religion wound down, I was plunged into thinking not about what I had learned, nor even what I hoped to say about all that I had learned, but into the rather terrifying world of Ph.D. and funding applications. And perhaps this wouldn’t have been so difficult to swallow, so difficult to accommodate into the everyday reality of writing a dissertation on Vodou, but for what had gone before. It has become increasingly clear that it is necessary to excavate some of what has gone before in order to proceed. But how much of this “before” gets written into an academic text and how much gets left on other less public pages of field notes and journals? What is pertinent to this piece of writing, to this text, and what is peripheral and unimportant? Perhaps the process of applying for funds and Ph.D. acceptance in the middle of trying to complete a text about Vodou practices in Montreal threw too much of a spotlight on me, the writer. Applications require decisions...and I found myself mired in trying to decide where I was going to study, what I was going to study, why I was going to study, and perhaps inevitably, whether or not I should keep studying. Six months ago I was ready to drop out of academia forever, to plunge myself into the world of performing artist and writer, to use a recently received grant as a sign (from the gods, or the Canada Council for the Arts, I hadn’t decided which) that *art* was my calling, that *art* was what I was meant to do. I am still not sure

what made me decide to “stay in school”, much less to proceed into the even higher echelons of Ph.D. status. I watched a lot of Oprah. And her talk about finding your passion and celebrating your spirit got to me. Sometimes, in the world of television, spirituality is a lifestyle choice, something, that if applied correctly, can lead to inner happiness and success. Although I turned my critical (and academically trained) eye onto the people behind the screen, although I “deconstructed” what they were saying and saw elements of Christianity mixed with un-abashed cultural appropriation and an uncomplicated acceptance of capitalism and a system of class hierarchy, I couldn’t help absorbing what I saw. I tried to “uncover my shadow beliefs”, to “free” myself, to “live a better life”, to find my “passion”, to “remember my spirit”. After a while I realized that most of the people represented on what some would call a neo-religious quasi-spiritual televised quest were looking for “fulfillment”, a profession, occupation, or pastime, which they would enjoy, even “love” unequivocally. They were not torn between two such possible professions. They were not faced with choosing. They were not living in the same place that I was. I did decide to stay in school and I plan to continue because, despite tugs into other worlds of existence, I like it here, surrounded by books and notes and journals, and receiving hundreds of emails from academic list-serves. I like what I know of the academic world. I feel at home here. And I like what I study. I like studying Vodou; I even like the ethical questions I find myself embroiled in when I do study such a maligned and secret religion. I like studying religion. I like studying what is happening now and I don’t mind trying to know what happened in the past. I like studying the theories, methodologies, epistemologies and even the cosmologies that circulate in the practice of scholarship. I am fascinated by the arguments taking place at lightening speed on list-serve lists and more slowly in journals. And sometimes I even like writing down my own tentative contributions. I probably stayed because I like what I do. Although I can’t for the life of me say *why* I like it, or explain what it is that has drawn me and continues to keep me in a world I sometimes view with suspicion. This is certainly not the life I had envisioned for myself as a child growing up on the low-income streets of Toronto. I saw

myself as a future artist, a great pop icon, cool and hip and suave, who would command the attention of others. Someone who people listened to. Now that doesn't seem quite so desirable. I think it was a fear that someone *would* listen to me, or more accurately, read what I have written, that infected my body three months ago and has made this excavation of the whys and wherefores so necessary.

Three months ago, after the last of my Ph.D. applications had been completed, I woke one morning to find myself unable to get out of bed. There was nothing wrong with my limbs—they all appeared to be in working order—but whenever I attempted to lift myself up I would become short of breath, dizzy and nauseous, until, panting, I would collapse back onto my pillow. I decided it was the flu and treated myself to two days off eating ice cream and watching t.v. (more Oprah, *Touched by an Angel*, *Charmed*, the *X-Files*; even in repose I liked to fool myself that my rather vacant gaze was directed at witnessing religious expression in the contemporary world). When on the third day I awoke with the same dizziness and shortness of breath that had afflicted me all of a sudden, I began to imagine more malicious ailments. As always, when I am sick, I cast my mind over all the illnesses I have ever witnessed, extrapolating horrible possibilities from the most benign symptoms. Logic was beginning to fail me and panic was setting in. I never liked being sick. So my partner dragged me down to a health clinic, me moving much slower than I am accustomed to, and we awaited the diagnosis of an esteemed and very nice doctor. She agreed that I might indeed have the flu, but was a bit worried by my shortness of breath for which there seemed to be no physical cause. Reluctant to prescribe anything when I wasn't even running a temperature (she had ruled out emphysema, meningitis, asthma, and half a dozen other possible ailments that I had suggested myself), she sent me home and told me to let her know if I wasn't better in a week. In a week I was better. The extreme dizziness was gone, as was the nausea that accompanied it. The shortness of breath remained, but wasn't as constant, occurring mostly first thing in the morning and whenever I walked up stairs.

But now I found myself exhausted and lacking the ability to concentrate. The slightest sound would have me up from my desk wandering around the apartment lost, not remembering what I was doing, or what I was looking for. I slept nine hours a night and woke up tired. I couldn't bear the thought of walking my adorable dog for an hour, something that I had always loved to do. My other activities were suffering. My position on the board of a theatre company I adored and believed in was threatened because I couldn't drag myself to the 6pm board meetings. I said no to shows where I usually performed. I had amassed dozens of unanswered emails and phone messages. And, even with all this extra time, I wasn't really writing my thesis. I was writing an essay that I tried to convince myself would turn into a chapter, but whenever it came to correlating all the material I had already amassed I found myself surfing the net looking for web sites on Vodou or reading a book (always slightly tangential to my thesis topic) and making copious, but disjointed notes. And I was so tired I would, more often than not, put my head down on my desk and fall asleep, waking with awful pains in my shoulders and neck that took days to go away. As time progressed my fatigue became worse and, not liking the neck and shoulder pains I got napping on my desk, I took to taking real naps on my bed. A month after that first day I found myself unable to get out of bed, I calculated that I was sleeping eighteen hours a day. The shortness of breath was getting worse too. I went back to the doctor who took blood and asked questions. When the lab results came back I was slightly anaemic, so she prescribed me iron pills which made my stomach hurt. Things kept getting worse. I was beginning to forget the names of things. I would start a sentence and stop, not remembering the word for computer, microwave, scanner, telemarketer. I went to a health food store and bought sixty dollars worth of herbal remedies for fatigue, lack of concentration and forgetfulness. One week later I went back to the doctor. I could feel myself shaking when I told her that there really was something wrong. I wasn't normally like this, I insisted. She took me seriously. But that wasn't a comfort. Words like depression and chronic fatigue syndrome were brought out and bandied about the bright white room. I could feel myself growing numb. I couldn't think. She called a friend, a specialist

in something. She asked me to make an appointment with a psychiatrist. I went home and fell asleep for fifteen hours.

The next day my partner took off work to be with me. We did little things like groceries and sweeping the balcony. The following evening a few friends who I had refused to see for months because I was too busy and too weary came over bearing small gifts, flowers and jars of jam. I was embarrassed. We ate spectacularly good rice wraps filled with noodles and tofu and grated beats and carrots, and peanut sauce and we drank mugs of silky smooth spinach soup topped with cheese. It was like a *déjà vu*, this moment, like so many other moments I had shared with my friends in my home. But something was off. Something was different. I couldn't talk with them about what cultural grants I had applied for, what shows I had done recently, I didn't even know who was dating who. I was out of touch, not only with my friends but also with an entire sub-culture of artistic-anglo life in Montreal. I was in my apartment, the current site of my academic work, the place I read academic books, wrote essays and filled out Ph.D. applications, and I was surrounded by artists. All my friends are artists, "would be" and "full time" writers and poets, actors and musicians who hope for the future and talk with a careful mixture of cynicism about this hoped for future and self-depreciation. They are loud and irreverent and they have little respect for the "establishment" and even less inclination to define what that establishment is. Half of them have lived in India, Japan, or Africa for a substantial period of time (usually teaching English as a Second Language and having guilt pangs about promoting the colonizers tongue), the other half are from "the islands", mostly Haiti and Jamaica and they too have lived substantial parts of their lives elsewhere. As we ate and talked I felt as if something was coming into focus, something that had been flitting across the edges of my vision.

Like most artists, everything is an experience for my friends. Africa is an experience, India is an experience, going back "home" to Jamaica is an experience. And all these experiences become grist for the mill. All these experiences become material. My artist friends go abroad, or stay home, but wherever they are they process their experiences in such a way as to utilize them

for their art. They write poetry, novels, and songs not necessarily about their experiences, but during them, they chew up their experiences and store them undigested until they need them to “flesh out” a character they are acting or a plot they are developing. They constantly note and observe and, although they are amongst the most ethical and empathetic people I know, they are gloriously selfish about this process of using their experiences to produce work that they find compelling and gratifying. They are a driven people, and if you were to corner them in some quiet place away from each other and the need to maintain the cynicism to and irreverence for everything that keeps them afloat in a world strewn with artistic failures and rejection, and ask them “why do you do what you do?” they would answer, “because I have to”. For them, it is not primarily a choice, not even a passion, although it is both those things, but is first and foremost a necessity, a reflex, something that they cannot help but do. They go, they see, they take and then they give something back. What is given back may or may not be “representative” of what they have seen or where they have been, or even who they are, but it does contain recognizable elements of all three, *especially if you know them*.

I realised that my decision to climb the ivory tower, to become an academic, had made me think that I needed to revamp my own identity, to give up what I had learned and become as an artist and by associating with artists. Academics don’t just write down what they have experienced, they theorize, they extrapolate, they make definitive statements. Anthropologists don’t just observe, they conduct participant-observer research. I was now an academic writing an ethnography, not an artist *just* writing. I was choosing to identify with the establishment and I think I was having a bit of an identity crisis in the process. I suppose, at that moment, I envied the artists’ freedom to create, the no holds barred approach to writing and remembering. At that moment, I thought my own endeavour, the writing down of what I had seen and experienced (and read) of Vodou, was ever so much more difficult, fraught as it was with concerns of truthfulness, representation, accuracy, accountability, and ethical responsibility. Now, I doubt this is true and while I am tempted to suggest that comparing artistic activity to academic production is like

comparing apples and oranges, I am going to refrain from making comparisons at all. I do not really know where the boundaries lie between ethnographic representation and fiction. Having just completed *The Magic of The State* by Michael Taussig, an ethnography about spirit possession that is “set” in an imaginary local, I can’t help but see a whole range of tricky questions about ethnographic documentation. It has also opened up a whole range of questions about me and where I sit in amongst the current debate about form and function, context and content. These concerns seem too big for this project, too peripheral to my own “work” on Vodou. They could, potentially, take up too much space and too much time. Nonetheless, I have to locate myself somewhere. I have to decide who and what I am. I have to stand somewhere to speak something. Rather philosophical and, in my case, esoteric concerns to have at the start of a process that requires focus and cohesion. Nonetheless, what became clear to me that night as I sat a few yards from my computer, a place that had become such a contentious and frustrating spot, and surrounded by artists was that my mysterious illness might be less of a disease and more of a dis-ease. A discomfort with what I was trying to do, what I was trying to write, and what, in that doing and writing, I was trying to be.

Nine years ago, when I had known my beloved partner for only a year, she sweetly discouraged me from buying an outdated medical dictionary I had spied in a secondhand bookstore. I claimed that I was interested in biology and could use it as research for that novel I had always been planning to write. She maintained that I would use it to self-diagnose my own illnesses and in no time would have come down with malaria or something equally obscure and unlikely. She was probably right and I didn’t buy that dictionary. I still tend to diagnose myself and the lack of a medical reference section has seldom deterred me. As I sat and ate with my aspiring friends that night I began to wonder if my inexplicable and sudden illness was rooted in something other than my body. As a good feminist I knew that I could have chronic fatigue syndrome or be depressed, thinking that my illness was all in my mind, or even psychosomatic was explicitly not a good feminist thought. Still, as I listened to my friends talk I wondered if I

couldn't have something as prosaic and uncomplicated as, well, writer's block. The simple fact was, I didn't want to be sick and I didn't really want to find out that I had a debilitating and crushing ailment. That night I self-diagnosed myself with writer's block and proceeded accordingly. I cancelled my next doctor's appointment and avoided rescheduling. I never went to the psychiatrist appointment that had been booked for me. I decided that I was going to write three hours a day. I bought a yoga tape. And I did something else that I have no idea why I didn't do earlier. I went to my *mambo* in North End Montreal and asked her to give me a talisman to ward off curses and evil eyes, just in case my own diagnosis wasn't quite right. Progress was slow. I still felt tired and I still became short of breath. Yoga helped, as did my talisman, a small mojo bag filled with sticks and leaves, beans and beads. I wore it day and night. I began to write but it felt like swimming through molasses. What had come easy for me a year ago as I wrote essays on my research topic felt painfully difficult with a "real" deadline looming. I didn't always write three hours a day. I still found myself surfing the net for Vodou web pages and reading books I didn't really need to be reading, but now I chalked this up to simple (natural) procrastination. I would experience one day where I would accomplish so much I was euphoric, intoxicated with my capabilities and the very next day I would find myself exhausted and aching, unable to prop my eyelids open long enough to read what I had written the previous day. Still, I needed to believe I was better. I had had a bad bout with the flu. I had writer's block.

Now, still following the pattern of one good day, one bad day, I worry quietly in the back of my head that this is not true. There is a steadily growing list of possible ailments taking up space in my brain and to that list I have added lists of people who may have asked someone to curse me with this unexplained illness, and to this last list I have added my own concerns about my future, wondering whether this fatigue is not a sign that I am, somehow, "on the wrong path". I dream of the euphoria that will come when I have finished this text. I never did write that novel that I had used as a justification for wanting to buy a medical dictionary nine years ago. Only about seventy pages have been preserved, waiting for completion in an email account suspended



somewhere in cyber space. I am now writing the longest text I have ever written in my life. I find it hard to wrap my head around the fact that I am, although still an amateur, writing a text that anyone who cross-references the word Vodou in the library database will be able to access. More difficult, even, is the realisation that despite my hesitations and my fears I am moving towards writing not about myself, but about others. There are days when I wake up and would much rather be in the studio than in the classroom. Days when I would much rather be carefully crafting words and hoping for meaning to emerge than trying to craft ideas while hoping for words. There are days when poetry is easier.

While I was having my difficulties with fatigue and with the world's tendency to spin out of control in front of my eyes, there were stories unfolding in other lives all around me. Four months ago my friend Nita gave birth to a baby boy. She started out her delivery in a birthing center and then had to move, with her midwife, to the hospital when it became necessary to monitor the baby's vitals. We saw new born Marco for the first time when he was three days old and have developed the annoying but occasionally endearing habit of talking for him, giving voice to his (imagined) thoughts in a stream of never ending commentary that sometimes makes his overly-exhausted mother laugh hysterically. Four months ago my friend Trudy returned to Toronto unexpectedly from Corsica where she had been on hiatus, trying to finish a book of poetry. She had been planning to go on from Corsica to Brixton in London England where she had already developed many contacts to help her re-launch her performing career (England has become a place many artists go to establish themselves before returning to north America; it is reputed to be more forgiving than Canada and more discerning than the United States). Her reasons for returning to Toronto were unclear, but upon her return she found employment as an artistic director in an emerging theatre company, found a publisher for her book, and has launched her own performance series. Six months ago my partner, finishing an M.A. degree in English literature, decided to start her own company. As I write my thesis she is writing a business plan and amassing friends who will form a "management team". In the past twelve

months Haiti has elected a new president, or re-elected an old one, which one has occurred depends on who you talk to. As I write this Jean Bertrand Aristide, the newly elected/re-elected president of Haiti is making plans to attend to the "Summit of Americas". A free trade conference for leaders of the "western" world, in Quebec City, a two hours drive from my home in Montreal. Many of my friends will be there on the "wrong" side of a large fence, a concrete and metal barrier that will be erected to keep them out. All around me lives are changing and will continue to be changed, often in radical and unforeseen ways. What do these stories; the stories of those around me and my own story of writing a thesis have to do with the study of Vodou? Hopefully, more than naught. The purpose of this narrative is not simply to provide a quixotic insight into my life, but to set the stage (or the context) for the following discussion and description of the Vodou religion. Because what I have been studying of Vodou and what I am now trying to set down on paper is not the centre of this religion but the periphery, not the religious experts but the common practitioners and the "new comers" to the religion, not the core of religious beliefs but those beliefs that continually intrude upon and contradict this core, I have chosen to approach this text from the periphery as well. I am writing from the outside in, positioning myself as far away from "my" subject as I can get not to obscure this subject but to embed it in the "real" and "everyday" context in which it has meaning. As I speak about Vodou, about the people who "choose" to practice it and what they come to know during this practice, and about the difficulties in elucidating this knowledge, this "Vodou vernacular" in "outside" contexts and places the connections between this narrative and the more formal body of my thesis will, hopefully, become clearer. Throughout this text I weave in a subtext that traces not only my journey to this act of writing, but also the stories of the women I have mentioned so briefly above. The bits of our lives that are rendered into narrative in this process are the context, the foundation, from which I hope to spawn an examination of the "ins and outs" of Vodou as I have come to know it on the island of Montreal.

### ***Terminal Terminology: The Practice of Defining Commonly “Batted” About Theories***

As I glance back over these words I cannot help but smile a smug little analytical smile at my own story – the story of a “New Ager” if I ever saw one, a mixed up mix of cultures and cultural appropriations, a borrower of religious elements, flitting in and out of identities as they suit me. Yoga to Vodou to homeopathy, sacred and secular, talisman and medicine, everything is up for grabs and, more importantly, everything is accessible to me in this Western setting. Critics of an apparently insatiable Western appetite deride the availability and more specifically the commodification of these cultural and religious elements and practices and complain of a “religious market place” that makes it impossible to preserve and trace authentic traditions in the face of the wholesale vending of spirituality to a hungry demographic. It is in this setting, the West and its unique relation to religion and spirituality, that I live and work and write this text. And maybe because of this, this text is a lot like me, a product of my times and upbringings, an uneasy mixture of science and voodoo. If what preceded these words is the story of a story, the text about this text, what follows is the flip side. The point of this text is to make explicit a religious (or Vodou) system of thought while concurrently pointing to some of the values, practices and behaviours that go along with this system of thought—explicit. I do this by examining how the Vodou religion constitutes and reconstitutes the identity of its practitioners. But before embarking on this task, an orientation in the vast discourse and rhetoric of cultural studies is required. What is needed is a metaphoric “you are here” sign, a brief description of the ideas that have led to my thoughts and conclusions and that may account for the ways in which these thoughts and conclusions are organised from here on.

Terms need to be defined. At times it seems as if more time is spent defining terms than discussing fields or subjects of study. At times that is probably true. I will do my best not to make this one of those times. Nonetheless, this is an era of shifting meaning, a time of dis-ease,

when those engaged in the study of culture and religion are faced with continual challenges to traditional notions of bounded fields and bounded identities, to concepts of field and the authority of the fieldworker, while at the same time facing the concurrent challenge of providing ethical and accountable scholarship in the wake of changing rules. In what follows, I speak briefly of these challenges and try to locate my own work within the ever-shifting parameters of these debates. I situate my study of Vodou within an interdisciplinary context of anthropological theories of transnationalism, religious theories of ritual and syncretism and autobiographical literary theory of self, identity and experience.<sup>1</sup> I also situate my study of Vodou within an analytical framework elucidated from the discourses of Vodou itself.

Vodou is a religion with a long tradition of critical analysis embedded in its spiritual discourses. It is a religion which interprets and reinterprets history, contemporary social conditions, and identity according to an epistemological framework that, I hope to illustrate, understands such concepts in ways very different from the understanding arrived at through “traditional” academic analysis (be that in the disciplines of anthropology, religious studies, or literary criticism). It seems ludicrous not to position any study of Vodou within this rich analytical framework. In the introduction to *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society*, Andrew Apter explains how Yoruba scholars have developed such a monumental tradition of self analytical work, much of which has entered the mainstream of academic discourse, that “for many decades it has not been possible or conscionable for non-Yoruba scholars to write “about” or “for” the Yoruba, but rather with the Yoruba, within a complex discursive field”(3). Part of the endeavour of this project is not to become wholly

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<sup>1</sup> While my interdisciplinary approach to the study of Vodou has allowed me to borrow from the literature specific to anthropology, religious studies or literary criticism, it also requires me to be aware of the corresponding literature in each of these disciplines. For example, I may have come to my analysis of religious syncretism from the perspective of religious studies but I am aware of, and make use of, the extensive literature on this topic within anthropological discourse. Interdisciplinary, in this analysis, is not meant to value one disciplinary perspective over another, but to illustrate the ways in which different disciplines, and the analytical frameworks they support, provide different views on the Vodou tradition. These perspectives often overlap and sometimes contradict one another and the mediation and dissolution of disciplinary boundaries facilitates an analysis of a fluid and fluctuating religion such as Vodou.

submerged within the “complex discursive field” of Vodou, but to mediate between intercultural and interdisciplinary discursive fields in an attempt not only to know Vodou, but also to understand how it is known.

True to my method of moving from the inside-out, the practitioners whose identity is central to this work are practitioners who may be considered by some to exist on the periphery of “traditional” Vodou, practitioners who are “newcomers” to the religion and who arrive from differing ethnic, racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. The ways in which these “newcomers” to Vodou interrelate with the discourses, cosmology and rhetoric of the Vodou tradition is something that is largely ignored by academics interested in the study of Vodou. It is these practitioners who have captured my attention and it is their stories, and more importantly their understanding of their own identities, that I will explore here in hopes of elucidating an epistemological system that uniquely constitutes identity. This task seems simple. One should be able to present these stories and musings, interspersed with some important contexts and some history, and this should suffice. It does not. As I went over all of the pieces of narrative and discussions that I could recount throughout this exploration of the “periphery” of Vodou practice, I realised that those who had spoken to me and had given me their words did so with a presumption of shared knowledge, a sense of camaraderie, an understanding that there was much they could leave unsaid, much that they could presume I knew—that I was one of them. As an “insider” to this “outside” space I have to do more than just provide a context to the stories and thoughts that emerge from this place, I have also to elucidate that “common knowledge”, that shared way of thinking, that makes us say what we do and do what we do and constitutes, at least partially, our understandings of ourselves. Consequently, this exploration of the way in which Vodou constitutes and reconstitutes identity is contingent on an examination of epistemological workings, not only those indigenous to Vodou itself, but also those which come to circumscribe and limit knowledge of this religion. These epistemologies are not clearly delineated from each other. The interaction between the discourses of Vodou and the discourses that “talk” about

Vodou is immeasurably complex. Part of the task of this analysis is to move towards an exploration of this complex dialectic and a concurrent realisation that the parameters of this dialogue are shaped as much by those who call themselves Vodouists as by those who purport to study these religious practitioners. Perhaps it seems strange to give so much weight to the narratives of those who are so far from the centre of the Vodou tradition. Many of these new practitioners conceptualise their conversion to Vodou as part of a process of return, as an act of “remembering” a spiritual and cultural heritage that they “forgot” as a result of the fragmenting forces of racism and neo-colonial<sup>2</sup> subjugation. Many of these people were not born into Vodou, most are not religious specialists and many are not even *hounsi kanzo* (the lowest level of Vodou initiation). However, Vodou is a religion that resists notions of centre and forces a reconceptualisation of what is meant by the word “tradition”. The narratives about the way in which these “peripheral” devotees practice Vodou, provides a unique window into the workings of a cosmological and epistemological system that defies many of the conventions that usually govern the study of religion.

Some time ago I wrote; “Vodou is one of the fastest growing religious traditions in North America. This burgeoning phenomenon has been largely ignored by both “popular” culture (including mass media) and by the academy. Consequently, there is little statistical or ethnographic inquiry into the growth of Vodou in North America. How, then, can I posit that the practice of Vodou is, *in fact*, growing? In some circles, the growth of Vodou is common

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<sup>2</sup> While I will discuss this concept of neo-colonialism further later in this text, it should be noted that I use this term to refer to a continued perpetuation of discursive and institutional structures which have their roots in colonial ideology. I derive my definition of neo-colonialism from the theories and ideas posited by the African-American cultural movement that gave way to Black Nationalism, or Afrocentrism, a movement which advocated a return to “pure” African roots and a celebration of “pure” African cultures. One of the foremost critics of this movement is Molefi Kete Asante (see, for example, his *Afrocentricity*, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1988 and *The Afrocentric Idea*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). In *Masters of the Drum: Black Literatures Across the Continuum* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995) Robert Elliot Fox explores the symbiotic relationship between the recognition of a theorizing about neocolonialism by the Black National movement and the emergence of what he terms Neo-Voodoo or Neo-Hoodoo.

knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> For me, the rapid growth of Vodou has always been common knowledge, something I knew but could not remember learning—I had to search (hard) for citations to substantiate this common knowledge and searching found me only a few (Barnes 1989; Constetino 1993; Glazier 1998). Why is this burgeoning growth of Vodou (and, I would hazard to guess, a concurrent growth of Santeria, Yoruba and other Caribbean and African religions) so seldom cited? Why did I have to search so hard to find academic substantiation for what almost any Vodouist, Caribbean specialist, neo-spiritualist, *mambo*, or *houngan* in North America knows? The reasons for this discrepancy between common and academic (or academically substantiated) knowledge are complex and have much to do with the way in which Vodou comes to be known in North America, who it comes to be known by, and for what purpose that knowledge is “brought to light”. Common knowledge is an interesting and oddly forceful form of knowledge that may be based on casual observation; it may be simply a story, even something akin to a rumour. Or it may be something far more elusive that has begun to circulate, and is now a part of the currency of knowledge. When delving into the cosmological structure of the Vodou tradition a lot of common knowledge is uncovered. Common knowledge or folklore has been a central component of the analysis of many who attempt to elucidate the complexity of Vodou (Price-Mars 1928; Herskovits 1937; Hurston 1938; Courlander 1939; Deren 1970; Desmangles 1992). However, the fluid and hybrid nature of the Vodou tradition makes the categorisation of knowledge, of any sort, a difficult task. Since it is difficult to delineate the boundaries of the Vodou tradition, it is difficult to decide what knowledge belongs to Vodou and what does not. Perhaps more significant to an analysis of Vodou than where the knowledge generated by this tradition belongs, is how this knowledge is generated and by whom, and even more significantly, how this knowledge is disseminated and by whom.

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<sup>3</sup> From “Bittersweet Victory, Bittersweet Defeat: Strategies of Identification in Vodou Cosmology” in *The Journal of Religion and Culture*, (Vol. 13, 1999) by Alexandra Boutros.

As narratives of Vodou are disseminated, they accrue multiple meanings, meanings that often contradict one another. Oddly, it is at this moment of seeming contradiction that the narratives of Vodou seem to coalesce, not into a unified and chronological story, but into an entity, fluid and hybrid, that come to constitute its own knowledge as well as the identity of those who enter into its narrative stream. By tracing the multiple strands of “Vodou narrative” to the moment, or moments, at which they coalesce, the moments of the concurrence of apparent conflict, a process is exposed. This process explores the conflation of past and present, Vodou and Catholic, human and divine, and male and female (amongst others) in the discursive structure and cosmology of Vodou. It is by charting the movement and process of narrative that something approximating an analysis of Vodou identity can begin to emerge; and this fluid and fluctuating terrain of Vodou does not allow for the creation of a static analysis that attempts to represent a reified picture of the religion.<sup>4</sup>

Academics who specialize in the study of both New Age religions and African spiritualities,<sup>5</sup>—and the intersection between the two—are engaged in a re-examination and a reconstruction of the theories and methods that have been commonly used in the study of religion and ritual. For some, this entails redrawing the boundaries between religious studies and cultural anthropology. Perhaps because, particularly in the West, religion is seen as a “voluntary” identity (as opposed to race, ethnicity, gender and, sometimes, sexuality) there seems to be concern over whether and how religion is submitted to the analysis of social science. It is in the halls of religious studies departments that I encounter a concern over the possible “reductionism” of such an analysis. While there is internal disagreement over whether or not religion should be

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> These are two terms that I use with a great deal of trepidation. New Age refers to emerging spiritualities in North America which are often (although not necessarily) grounded in Non-Western traditions and can be applied from anything to the proliferation of yoga classes in North America to the California Taoist movement. For a more detailed exploration of this term see Wendy Doniger’s *Other Peoples’ Myths* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1988). African spiritualities does not refer only to spiritual traditions of Africa, but also to what is reductively termed African-derived spirituality. Many of the authors, in the collection *New Trends and Developments in African Religions*, edited by Peter B. Clarke (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998) make reference to African-derived spirituality. When I use this term it is in deference to the work of scholars who identify Caribbean religious systems of thought in this manner.



explained or interpreted, understood as something inherently sacred or as a product of human consciousness, (Saler, 1993:3), there seems to be the belief, within religious studies departments, that anthropological theories and methods always run the risk of positing a reductionist view of religion because they generally adopt the latter attitude. I do not want to become overly immersed in this debate between disciplines. For me, the distinctions between anthropology and religious studies are not as significant as the need to define some of the terms that get “batted about” in this debate. In particular, I am concerned with placing my own scholarship within a rhetoric that acknowledges the claims made by both “reductionists” and “non-reductionists”. In “Beyond The Sceptic and The Devotee: Reductionism in The Scientific Study of Religion”, Donald Wiebe defines “descriptive” rather than “interpretive” theories of religious study as nonreductionist. Despite the positive implications of the term, Wiebe does not wholly advocate non-reductionist interpretations of religion:

Phenomenological accounts that “take religion seriously” in the sense of interpreting religion “religiously”...only fulfill their appropriate academic role by providing (or attempting to provide) the outsider (nondevotee) with the meaning of religion *to or for the believer*. This constitutes the “descriptive” aspect of the study of religion which is entirely unproblematic as long as it is not assumed to constitute the sum and substance of the scientific study of religion. (1984:158)

There is an underlying implication here that the “descriptive” approach to the study of religion, with its empathetic approach to the devotee, implicitly endorses the religious belief under study (Wiebe, 1984:161). Not surprisingly, this endorsement, which is seen as problematic for critics such as Wiebe, within the discipline of religious studies, sounds a lot like anthropological concerns about “going native”. In both disciplines there is a determined history of maintaining scientific objectivity, scepticism and distance from the field or subject of study that has gradually been thwarted by contemporary developments in post-modern theory. Nonetheless, the remnants of “scientific preoccupation” still has implications for contemporary theorists. Although Wiebe sees merit in the descriptive method of religious analysis described above, he clearly believes that this description must be embedded within an “interpretive” or reductionist framework of analysis.

This analytical framework runs the risk of “explaining religion away”, conceptualising it as the result of psychological, political, economic or any number of other factors external to the explanations put forth by the religion itself. What is clear from even a cursory examination of this on-going and in-depth discussion about the study of religion is that this debate presupposes an inside and an outside, a clear delineation between the believer and the sceptic, the devotee and the non-believer. What is left largely undiscussed is not only the dissolution between these dichotomous distinctions, but also the motion between believer and non-believer so common in contemporary Western culture. My own experience has led me to observe that belief in the west can be transient. Individuals move between (and out of) religions with ease, practicing religions that exhibit conflicting doctrines in rapid succession and sometimes concurrently, or choosing non-belief as an equally viable option. While I will be exploring this tendency in relation to the Vodou tradition, I do not think it is limited to the practitioners of this religion. As I mentioned before, religious identity is seen as an autonomous choice in North America and as a choice it becomes the object of many individuals’ quest to “find” their religion in what is increasingly referred to as a religious market place. What seems necessary in this contemporary context is a theoretical and methodological framework that can account for the fluidity, transience and concurrence of belief systems held by North Americans.

Such a framework, however, has the difficult task of determining the viability of a religious system that is not mediated by tradition. Text based religions, including Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism,<sup>6</sup> have sanctioned writings that can provide the ground for new religious systems. While the interpretation of these texts can change, continuity is built into this process of change and the emergence of a new or neo-spirituality in so far as the texts themselves (usually) remain unchanged. For religions, such as Vodou, which do not have a central text,

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly these five “world religions” are the ones most commonly studied, and endorsed as fields of study, by religious studies programs across North America. While there are many reasons for focus on these select religions, the hermeneutics of textual analysis that these religions make possible is undoubtedly a factor.

ritual becomes the primary site of the dissemination of religious knowledge and the place from which continuity or discontinuity emits. For reasons that I will explore further later in this text, I do not make a distinction between “neo-voodoo” practices and “traditional” Vodou. However, newcomers to the Vodou tradition do share some characteristics with New Age practitioners (specifically the idea that religion is a “choice” and the notion that one’s “true” religion is not necessarily the one that one is born into, but the one that is “found”) and it is helpful to understand how ritual theory is used by scholars of emergent religions or religious groups. Although New Age spiritualities are not usually front and centre in on-going debates about the scientific study of religion, many academics who do examine emerging spiritual movements are concerned with developing a criteria by which the neo-spirituality can be distinguished from the root spirituality from which it is derived.

In “Shamanism From Ecuador to Chicago: A Case Study in New Age Ritual Appropriation”, Paul C Johnson see the burgeoning of neo-spirituality as a result of the “modern” condition which engenders fragmentation and pluralisation and leads to an increase in individual agency. Johnson clearly links

pluralism with the experience of subjectivity and agency; the modern condition is one in which the ‘sacred canopy’ has been torn and where only privatized, chosen or individually preferred religion remains. It is ‘real’ to individuals but lacks any common, binding quality and cannot fulfill religion’s classical task of constructing a common world within which social life receives ultimate meaning which is binding to all. (1995:174)

Johnson goes on to explain that neo-spirituality is distinguishable from the root spiritual tradition from which it is derived because it is embedded in “radical modernity”, which then becomes reliant on universalist spiritual ideas in the face of a plurality of religions that confront the increasingly autonomous individual in contemporary society (174).<sup>7</sup> This need to develop a

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson’s analysis is problematic on numerous levels. As I will explore in the course of this analysis, emergent religions and growing numbers of Vodou practitioners are not, contrary to popular belief, more interested in private or individualized spirituality than in communal spirituality which Johnson associates with traditional religions. In addition his supposition that fragmentation and plurality are indigenous to contemporary Western experience is something that this study of Vodou will disprove.

critical framework that can differentiate traditional from emergent religions is premised on *a priori* assumptions of the purity of religious experience and practice and the ability to define who belongs within these bounded categories. Simply put, I think the study of religion in general, the emergent religions in particular and most specifically the Vodou tradition, requires an analytical and methodological framework that is “unbounded”, which does not assign religions such problematic appendages as “traditional” or “spurious”, authentic or appropriated.

However, and this is a significant however, the forces of tradition, authenticity and maybe most importantly cultural appropriation must be taken into account in any examination of contemporary religious experience. An attempt to account for tradition, authenticity and cultural appropriation, while understanding religion as an unbounded analytical category that does not categorize experience or practitioners as either traditional or neo-spiritualists may seem a contradictory endeavour. Nonetheless, the process or method of cultural comparison, which has been the mainstay of anthropological and religious studies analysis, is a process that can allow for an interplay between the values, practices and ideologies of cultures without necessarily aligning those values with one particular and bounded cultural category.

In *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives and Unbound Categories*, Benson Saler attempts to explain the symbiosis which occurs when cultures are submitted to comparative techniques (or what Saler terms the recognition of family resemblances, the search for similarity to or difference from one’s “own” culture) not to arrive at definitive (or terminal) definitions, but to arrive at a realisation of the fluidity of cultural and religious experience;

Conceiving of...religion as an unbounded analytical category provides an example of how we might bridge the immanence of anthropologists and the transcendence of the natives. As an unbounded category based on our appreciations of family resemblances, religion serves as a two-way analytical bridge that facilitates back-and-forth travel in the establishment and contemplation of analogies. By traveling this bridge in both directions, indeed we distance ourselves from its poles as we compare them. (1993:260)

Saler's analysis is rather convoluted, and ultimately, although he tries to distance himself from the potential ethnocentrism of his conclusions, he arrives at the rather problematic assumption that religions can be "good" or "less good" examples of the organisational category "religion" as it is understood in the West (perhaps not surprisingly, monotheistic traditions of the West are particularly good examples of religion, as Saler sees it). However, Saler's explanation of the "back-and-forth" dialogue that can occur in an unbounded analytical framework is an important one. What such a framework allows for is a re-positioning of the often derided common or folk knowledge, moving it from the position of passive "description" to one of active analysis within an ethnographic text. Essentially, what Saler hints at and other academics develop is an ethnographic and anthropological approach that utilises "indigenous" epistemologies as analytical tools for the exploration of non-Western cultural and religious categories.

### ***Stealing Bases: The Method of Theory***

Clearly, avoiding terms such as indigenous and Western, traditional and emergent, authentic and appropriated, pure and impure (or syncretic) throughout this study will be nearly impossible. Although these terms should not necessarily be avoided, they should be examined for how they are used in the dissemination of knowledge about Vodou. An awareness of the hegemonic discourse which creates such perpetual dichotomies can and does break down, revealing a fluidity of experience that moves between these seemingly opposed categories is intrinsic to the development of so called "indigenous" theoretical frameworks. It is this realisation that those academics of African and Caribbean religions who propose indigenous methodologies exploit. In chapter one, "Vodou Vernacular or The Land of the "Qualifying" Quotation Marks: Tonalities in the Examination of Syncretism", I explore this concept of "indigenous" theory and methodology, the critique it may offer post-modern understandings of identity and culture and the way in which it allows for different conceptions of religion and the

ideas that pervade the study of religion, including concepts of authenticity, purity, origin and tradition. I have set this discussion within a larger discussion of the term syncretism because syncretism, and its application to religions such as Vodou is one of those instances where the dis-ease with contemporary theories and scholarship is most visible to me as a student of Caribbean spirituality. In a sense it is an arbitrary beginning. I could have just as easily begun with a discussion on identity, the self and experience, which I explore in "I Be Longing To Belong: Vodou Identified?", or with an examination of the way in which diasporic experience and transnationalism intersect with the Vodou religion, which is discussed in "Gods on the Move: An Examination of Faith, Memory, and Motion in Vodou Discourse". These three chapters explore the central concepts that circumscribe the way in which knowledge about Vodou is known. Interjected here is ethnographic material that challenges this knowledge and posits an alternative that implicitly redefines some of these terms and concepts. Consequently, the next three essays in this text carry on a practice of defining and redefining, a type of textual call and response that is initiated not only in this text, but also in the epistemologies of most oral traditions, including Vodou.

It is this practice and reinscription of call and response techniques that make narrative and experience so central to this analysis of the epistemologies of Vodou and the identities that are embraced as a result of those epistemologies. This chapter, "Hesitating and Hoping: The Tricky Business of Defining Academic Parameters", starts with a story. The anthropology of experience has made the intrusion of the ethnographer's voice commonplace and theorists of reflexivity and autoethnography have made valid claims about the importance of examining the intersection between the experience of fieldwork and the written text produced by the fieldworker. It is this work, the logic of its discourse, that has informed my own work and has led to my own inclusion of personal narrative within this text. I include it in hopes of making links between this text and the world in which I, and those I work with, live. Unlike many of the personal narratives that surface in other ethnographic texts, the narratives that circulate in this text

are not simple descriptions of my fieldwork. In part, this is because of the close proximity of my own life to the life I experience as a fieldworker. Fieldwork at home naturally blurs the boundaries between ethnographic and non-ethnographic experience. However, the circumstances of my fieldwork are not the sole reason for the inclusion of narration that at times seems removed from the central subject of this thesis. This narrative is a narration of the hopes and hesitations that I have had in fulfilling this endeavour. It is a narration, not only of my fieldwork, or my experiences as a Vodouist (although it is that too), but of that in-between place that all ethnographers inhabit, the place between self and others. It doesn't really matter how "inside" the ethnographer is to the culture she is studying, the act of writing ethnography removes the ethnographer from the field. The act of writing about others puts a distance between you and them. My writer friends get a look sometimes; I recognise it; it is how you look at a bug on a pin. And when they direct that look at me I know that some part of me, my story, or my life is going to end up in some bastardized form on a page somewhere. Anthropologists get that look too. It is the nature of the beast. Putting my story on these pages is a way of putting myself under scrutiny. Not to make myself uncomfortable (although it does that) but to submit my narrative to the same analysis that the narratives of those necessary "others" are submitted.

In *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*, Dorinne Kondo explains how experience, transcribed textually, highlights, not so much the "reality" of that experience, but the specificity and fluidity of experiential discourse. For Kondo, the narration of personal experience is "a strategic method that allows a theoretical framework to emerge. It is a strategy that expands notions of what can count as theory, where experience and evocation can *become theory*, where the binary between "empirical" and "theoretical" is displaced and loses force" (1990:8). Like Kondo, I hope to blur the boundary between empirical data and theoretical discussion in this analysis of Vodou. In the same way that I position my work as a mediator between the seemingly opposing poles of "descriptive" and "interpretive" (or reductionist and non-reductionist), this method of textual production allows for an analysis that

mediates, that attempts to bridge the gap between what is known about Vodou and what Vodou knows. As I have already mentioned, the epistemologies and discourses of Vodou do not support dichotomous knowledge but rather facilitates the concurrence of what seems to be contradictory identities. The positioning of personal narrative within this text works to mediate a space where dichotomies are both revealed and rejected, where the “realities” of the distinctions between the “personal” and the “theoretical”, the “individual” and the “collective” are, hopefully, disrupted. This methodological and theoretical approach makes visible the way in which my particular and unique experience of not only Vodou itself, but also of the process of studying the Vodou tradition, and of the act of inscribing this study into text. As Kondo explains;

Experience and the specificity of my experience – a particular human being who encounters particular others at a particular historical moment and has particular stakes in that interaction –is not opposed to theory; it enacts and embodies theory. That is to say, the so called personal details of the encounters, and of the concrete processes through which research problems emerged, are constitutive of theory; one cannot be separated from the other. (24)

At times the theory that is constituted in the “personal details of the encounters” must be made explicit, at other times they remain implicit, something readers can choose to analyse should they wish. In all cases the personal narratives embedded in this text are meant to elucidate the complexity, the fluidity and the multiplicity of experiences that fall within the general rubric of the Vodou tradition.

Vodou is a full time religion. It occurs everyday. It demands time and practice, discipline and dedication. As one acquaintance put it recently; “This is a religion that is with you all the time. Not just in a Sunday-go-to-meeting kind of way”. Vodou is “interpretive” in the sense that it requires practitioners to constantly analyse and explain circumstances in their own lives. Illness, fatigue, failure and success are all the result of a complex interplay between people and spirits, between physical acts in the “real” world and their metaphysical consequences in the realm of the *lwa*. Although ritual is an important aspect of this spiritual tradition, even the distinction between ritual and non-ritual moments blurs for practitioners who serve the *lwa*



privately and daily in their own homes and who attend larger ceremonies bi-weekly or monthly. Even in one's sleep, the lwa can visit you in dreams, prompting the need for divination or a consultation about the meaning and significance of these visitations. In such a context, everything is "up for grabs", every aspect of one's life can be "read" for religious significance. And in this *mélange*, Vodou "grabs at" whatever tools may be most readily available—elements from other religions, cultural signifiers, even theoretical frameworks—to better understand the illusive meaning of experience in a context in which experience is not simply constituted by social and cultural factors, but also by cosmological structures that reach beyond the phenomenological reality of the everyday. It is this characteristic of Vodou, the constant "practicing" of the religion and its willingness to adopt and adapt new forms, theories and symbols to its own use that made it so imperative for me to include a narrative that does not simply talk about Vodou, but also talks about the problem with that talk. In "Writer's Block: An Ad Hoc Approach To Writing A Thesis", I attempt to give voice to a dis-ease that is not simply personal but that also operates on a larger scale. This is the dis-ease that the academy faces when encountering knowledge that does not fit into pre-formed categories; it is the dis-ease of the ethnographers faced with writing about those they are like as if these subjects are "others"; it is the dis-ease of the researchers who question their authority to speak; and it is the dis-ease of those being written about who wonder what part of their lives are going to be bastardized this time. The elements of "Writer's Block", the hesitation with which I approached this task, the New Age tendencies of the central character, the hybrid mix of cultural and religious elements, are offered up for analysis.

In "In/voluntary Exile: Neo-Voodoo Rites/Rights/Writes in Neo-Colonial Times", I explore the literature that literally transmits knowledge of Vodou across North America. In "I Shake My Shackles, Raise Every Hackle with My Tongue Loose: An Exploration of Slavery, Language and Faith in Vodou Discourse" I explore a more elusive transmission of knowledge through the discursive and linguistic structures specific to the Vodou tradition. However,

throughout this analysis I reflect back on narrative and identity. The methods of ethnographic reflexivity and autoethnography (Clifford 1986; Kondo 1990; Wolf 1992; Behar 1996; Okely 1996), which posit an understanding of the academic self as an intrinsic part of the data and subsequent knowledge that is produced in the field, have undoubtedly influenced my work. These methodological approaches to ethnographic production are concerned with the production of a text where the result of intellectual inquiry and research is much more concerned with an understanding of the self, than an understanding of the “other”. This allows for seemingly conflicted and irreconcilable discourses to overlap. It is in this moment of overlap that I attempt to situate an examination of the dialectic between Vodou and the academy, an intermediary space where everything is “up for grabs”. In this free-for-all space I make use of multiple theories and methodologies to elucidate the workings of a tradition that always talks back to the academy and to me as a member of this academic institution. Rather than defining these methodological and theoretical approaches all at once, I scatter these definitions throughout this text allowing the fragments of narrative to form a counterpoint to the “formal” discourses produced by the academy. Since the point of this analysis is to elucidate the epistemological workings of a religious and cultural entity that resides in an “in-between” place, where the boundaries between empirical data and theoretical analysis dissolve, it seems pointless to insist on one (academic) theoretical or methodological framework with which to “read” the fluidity of Vodou religiosity. However, it is necessary to at least speak of the method by which I come to find myself in possession of ethnographic data.

Having already discussed my insider (but definitely not authoritative) position within the “peripheral” community that is central to this thesis, as well as to the autoethnographic method of my approach to the writing of this text, it seems clear that how I approach the subject of data collection is an intrinsic part of my study. However, the way in which I elicit the words of practitioners found in this text is, like all else in this analysis, suspect and susceptible to a disruption of any simplistic understanding of data. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-*

*American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates Jr speaks of the Afro-American practice of “signifyin(g)”, the act of constantly and continually revising and reinterpreting information received in a type of discursive improvisation. All the Vodou practitioners whose words and narratives find their way onto these pages are new Vodou practitioners, individuals who were not born into the tradition but who came to it later in life. In addition, many of these practitioners are not of African or Caribbean descent. Nonetheless, the practice of “signifyin(g)” is applicable to these Vodouists who constantly juggle disparate meanings and signifiers in a never-ending stream. Like musical improvisation, the revision of meaning or signifyin(g), must comment on that which is being revised, it must retain some recognisable relationship to the original. In an improvisation, a tune or rhythm is repeated while the rest is embellished, extended or cross-referenced. This act of disturbing the original opens up the possibility for new interpretations and new meanings in an ever-expanding “discursive” matrix. Like Vodou rituals, which throw dance, liturgy, music and numerous other elements into a loosely orchestrated performance, discussions of Vodou are also improvisational. Inevitably, in these discussions, I become first signified and then a signifier not because of my insider status but because of the irresistible pull of this improvisational play. However, this raises the question; if I act as one who signifies can I also then interpret? It is a rhetorical question, because I do interpret regardless of my authority to do so. Nonetheless, it does necessitate the realisation that the techniques of data collection that I use, specifically first person accounts and personal narratives, are not particularly “good” methods of data collection. In the constant revision of meaning one receives few “bald facts” and meaning is elusive, constantly being juggled from one speaker to another. For the most part I try to sit quietly and listen. Inevitably I become drawn into the discussion. What emerge in this text are salient fragments of these discussions and while I do not always include my own voice it is always implied. And as for the voices that are included in this text? Asking them their permission to use their words, I am reminded, no matter what the critiques and complaints levelled at these people (that they are upper class, diasporic, concerned more with talking than

with doing), how unbelievably generous they are. They lend me their words the way a neighbour lends you a cup of sugar. They don't really expect to get anything back. And they certainly don't expect to read anything here that they don't already know.

### ***Fielding Homers: The Praxis of Fieldwork at Home***

When asked to define “my” field for this study, I hesitate. I suppose Montreal is the primary site of this research on Vodou practices. Montreal is where I attend Vodou ceremonies and where I often meet with my “informants”. However, as with the metaphysical boundaries of Vodou itself, it is equally difficult to define the physical boundaries of field in this study. I tend to go to the places that Vodouists meet. In Montreal these places are just as likely to be at a bar, listening to the music of a local Haitian *compas* group, at an outside concert listening to a rare show of *Boukman Eksperyans*, the Haitian roots band that has been known for its political and religious lyrics, at a community centre gathering, at a wedding of a friend. In addition, the Vodou community of Montreal is transient and modern technology does not preclude communication over great distances. If I need to clarify something with someone who is no longer residing in Montreal, I do not hesitate to contact him or her, usually via e-mail, and more often than not the discussion continues despite the physical space that separates us. Rather than cordon off information, validating that which I gained through physical experience over the on-going dialogues that I sustain on the internet, I have decided to blend the two with the recognition that the words that are mulled over (and perhaps even edited) in e-mail format provide a unique insight and addendum to the more colourful night time world of Montreal's bars and semi-private Vodou ceremonies. Arguably, the places that Vodouists meet, especially the “type” of Vodouists that I am most concerned with in this study, are both “real” and “virtual”. Numerous internet sites and web communities devoted to Vodou offer virtual community as well as access to divination (“readings”), information on Vodou communities and events in various areas, and

supplies used in practice and rituals. Although understanding Vodou practice and the rituals and ceremonies that constitute the spiritual tradition, is essential to this study, I am more interested in Vodou practitioners, what they think about the doctrine and dogma of their religion, and in the discourse and rhetoric they generate as a religious community. For this reason it seems limiting to restrict my field site to the physical realm of Montreal. Montreal is a unique city and the politics of this city—its relationship to discourses of language rights, religion, immigration and nationalism—interact with Vodou communities in unique ways. Hopefully the uniqueness of Vodou practice in Montreal will be somewhat illuminated in this examination. However, like most Vodouists (and most Haitians too), I am aware of what is going on in other North American Vodou “centres”, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Miami. Like most Vodouists, I am aware of what is going on in Haiti. For most, Vodou is a communal and not a private religion and the forces of transnationalism and globalization have created communities that span enormous distances with ease. While I will soon be exploring the forces of deterritorialisation in greater detail, for now I would like to acknowledge that my field site is a fluid entity with boundaries that sometimes shift in unexpected ways.

I should also acknowledge that I live in Montreal and so, for me, my field site is also home. Although hybrid, this text is sometimes an ethnographic account of Vodou practices and practitioners in Montreal. In part, this ethnography is necessitated by the lack of inquiry into the burgeoning growth of Vodou, the increasing numbers of “converts” to this religion, and the impact of these factors on the structures and discourses of the Vodou religion. Perhaps it is my interdisciplinary background in religious and women’s studies, literary criticism as well as my late introduction to anthropology that makes me rather non-plussed about conducting fieldwork in my own backyard. It would be remiss, however, not to at least make note of the discussion about the “field” within the discipline of anthropology. What distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines, including religious studies, literary criticism and history (all of which figure significantly in this study), is not so much *what* is studied, but *how* that study is conducted.

Fieldwork, and usually some form of participant observation, is rather important to anthropology, not simply as a method of research, but also as a method of defining anthropological knowledge as distinct from the knowledge “produced” by other disciplines. While it is increasingly recognized that bounded and fixed field sites are no longer easily defined or visited (and again, the forces of transnationalism play a large part in this recognition), it is still true that fieldwork is a badge of honour amongst ingénue anthropologists. Historically, the field was a place in which the “native” subject could be studied in as pristine and untouched an environment as possible. In “Discipline and Practice: “The Field” as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology”, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson assert that fieldwork derived its import from “naturalistic ideals” that tend to de-historicize “ethnos” or the small scale social groups that form the object of anthropological enquiry:

Fieldwork in socio-cultural anthropology in this way came to share with fields such as primatology the requirement that its subjects be directly observed in their natural surroundings....Those living outside their native state (for example, Native Americans working in towns: Aborigines employed on ranches; or, in Radcliffe-Brown’s case cited above, prisoners forcibly held in a penal settlement) came to be considered less suitable anthropological objects because they were outside the “field”, just as zoological studies of animals came to be considered inferior to those conducted on animals in the wild. The naturalistic genre of ethnography was an attempt to recreate that natural state textually. (1997:8)

While anthropology has moved away from its “naturalistic” heritage and towards a recognition of not only the colonial implications of its genesis but also towards a realization of the need to reconceptualise the concept of field (creating what Donna Haraway (1988) has termed “situated knowledge”), the field still retains its importance within the discipline. The field has expanded to include urban centres and diasporic communities. However, the idea that the field must be a bounded place containing a recognizable sub-category of individuals still asserts itself insidiously into the discourses of anthropology.

In “You Can’t Take the Subway to the Field! “Village” Epistemologies in the Global Village”, Joanne Passaro discusses her frustrations with this insidious assumption that threatens to curtail her own work on the homeless of New York city, limiting her financial (funding)

opportunities and curtailing her support from academic colleagues. Passaro laments what she sees as an assumption, internal to anthropology, that the quality of ethnographic data is directly related to the difficulty and even the danger of the fieldwork. She seems surprised that anthropologists, upon learning that she studies the homeless of New York, have asked her how often she has slept on the streets and seem disappointed when she replies that she has never joined her subjects at night. But it is not just anthropologists who ask this type of question. The other day, when I told my hairdresser what I was writing my thesis about, he asked me how many Vodou ceremonies I had been to. Although he did not know me as even the quasi-anthropologist that I hope to be, he thought that the only way to learn about such an “exotic” and foreign culture was to experience it. What makes fieldwork such an integral part of anthropology is the enduring belief that the root of “real” knowledge is experience and the closer one’s own experience matches the experience of others the better one knows and understands them. My hairdresser’s next question about Vodou...does it work? Interestingly enough, like many others who have asked me similar questions, he didn’t feel the need to first determine whether or not I believed in the dictates of the Vodou religion. Instead, he was interested in what I would pompously call the empirical data of my study, the proof that something beyond his (and by implication my) experience was “real” and not simply a figment of collective imagination. He was interested in hearing stories about something “out of this world”. Passaro’s criticism of the assumptions that can be made about the “field” as a bounded and controlled space and the limited epistemologies that are inevitably generated from such a space is pertinent. Against these assumptions, she calls for an “anthropology of liberation” which would require “continual challenges to our own objectifying practices, practices which, intentionally or not, cut down to “manageable” size the multiple, interconnected, over determined, and enormously complex subjectivities of the people we study (1997, 161)”. While such a redemptive anthropology would both challenge and transform notions of bounded field, it would, presumably, leave intact (although submit to transformed analysis) the experience of the ethnographer. For many anthropologists (Wolf 1996;

Okely 1996; Behar 1996; to name just a few), it is becoming increasingly clear that it is this experience that is the primary site of contemporary fieldwork.

I share with Passaro what she calls the “luxury of exploratory fieldwork” (1997: 156), which has allowed me to conduct ongoing research of a participant-observer nature for four years now. As a student, I would never have been able to spend that long in a “field” away from “home”. I also wouldn’t want to. For a modern woman I am unusually rooted to one place. I do not like to travel and the thought of landing virtually unknown in an unfamiliar place terrifies me. The rite of passage of fieldwork afar that marks the beginning of anthropology for so many of my fellow students invokes nothing but admiration in me. In addition, it seems to me that the “field”, despite all the criticism that may be levelled at it, has been the site of a great deal of productive work aimed at “undoing” a variety of colonialist assumptions that so often go unchallenged in the humanities. Fieldwork at “home” throws into relief some of the ideas about “bounded cultures”, “situated knowledges”, and transnational experiences that anthropologists already discuss extensively. What Passaro defines as the “luxury” of fieldwork at home also affords certain freedoms. As Passaro explains, her own “home”- based fieldwork freed her “of the necessity of defining a project and selecting units of analysis based on existing literatures” (1997: 156) before she “entered the field”. This process, so integral to fieldwork of a limited duration “abroad”, can privilege certain epistemologies that, in turn, circumscribe the knowledge that is gleaned in the field. Implicitly, fieldwork at home undoes the notion that the field is another place (far away from the home-base of the academy) in which you find a distinctive culture with easily defined boundaries. This is not to suggest that the knowledge found (and lived) in any field is not localized or situated knowledge, but to suggest instead that such knowledge, in a transnational world, is not inherently tied to a specific place or local. Fieldwork at home can also highlight the dissolution of the boundaries that separate field and academy and, implicitly, insider and outsider. In “an interconnected world, we are never really ‘out of the field’” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 35). For me, my embeddedness in the field is acutely visible when I run into other Vodouists in



the corridors of my own university. While they are studying history, economics and engineering, I am, rather audaciously, studying them. My insistence on going where other Vodouists go, on defining my field not by place but by the spaces that happen to house, no matter how temporarily, the people I am so interested in, has rendered me a type of “fieldworker at large”, a roving reporter who chases the story rather indiscriminately. The danger of such on-going fieldwork is, of course, the possibility of losing track of oneself as a fieldworker, of becoming so immersed in the politics and realities of everyday life at home that the distinction between fieldworker and subject becomes irretrievably blurred. This creates yet another by-product of fieldwork at home; not only are the distinctions between field and home blurred but so are the boundaries between insider and outsider.

While the blurring of insider and outsider is particularly pertinent to this text, maintaining and policing a fluid distinction between researcher and researched is integral to ethical representation. Perhaps one of the most striking facets of fieldwork at home, expressed again and again by anthropologists, is the status assigned to the fieldworker by those who live and work so close to the academy. Speaking about her work with Gypsies in her native land, Judith Okely explains that “to the Travelers I did not appear as an eccentric foreigner but as a member of the dominant persecuting society” (1996: 23). In her work with the homeless of New York, Joanne Passaro found that she had to negotiate not so much the suspicion of those whom she was “studying”, but the suspicion of some academics who conceptualized the stories of the homeless themselves as suspect:

They are the rejects of *internal* colonialism, peripheralized because of our race, class, and gender systems of domination and subordination. This lack of “distance” makes them doubly suspect – the position of homelessness in U.S. society stigmatizes not only homeless men and women themselves, but also their words. (1997: 154)

In both these cases the authority of the anthropologist is, at times, radically challenged *because* of their status as an insider, even if only a partial one, in the field. In Okely’s case she had to prove her trustworthiness to a group of people used to persecution by those members of a shared society

who so frequently “study” them in such a way as to disrupt their lives (forcing them to move from encampments and send their children to school and conducting governmental surveys that are viewed with suspicion by the nomadic Travelers). Passaro felt much more at “home” with her field subjects. However, the assumptions and ideological underpinnings of her “home” called into question the stories of her informants. Others felt able to question the veracity of these field narratives (and Passaro’s ability to determine the veracity of these narratives) in part because they were spawned on familiar territory, territory which Passaro’s critics walked everyday and about which they subsequently felt justified in forming opinions. What is clear for the fieldworker at home is that they can never escape the politics, and the subsequent political implications of their work, because they are implicated, not as a visitor to a foreign land who may feel benignly towards those she encounters there, but as a member of the same society and social structures which accord her privilege while, very often, denying privilege to those she is working with. In my case, I find myself negotiating multiple discourses of domination and subordination in my own home based fieldwork.

While many North Americans do not necessarily associate Vodou with Haiti, it seems that many Montrealers do make this connection though not necessarily in a positive way. In Montreal, the Haitian community is often viewed with suspicion, the Vodou community even more so. The proliferation of Haitian gangs in North End Montreal, due to a variety of economic and social factors, has increased both the levels of suspicion and ethnicism with which the Haitian community is viewed. In the summer of 2000, many Haitian community leaders actively criticized local media for the often racist and ethnicist portrayal of the Haitian community as they reported on increasing violence in the northern part of the city. The conflation of Vodouism with Haitian identity, along with unsympathetic and racist representation of Haitians by both the Francophone and Anglophone press, and a strong Catholic rhetoric about superstition, has directed a great deal of negative stereotyping and assumptions at Vodou in the past forty years of Montreal’s history. In addition to the stereotypes commonly levelled at Vodou by outsiders

(namely that it is a primitive and barbaric superstition), Vodouists in Montreal also face a great deal of negative rhetoric from within the Haitian community. Some of the more than fifty thousand members of Montreal's Haitian community are transnationals of Haiti's middle class elite, many of whom left Haiti in the early 1960's in the wake of the first wave of the Duvalier dictatorship.<sup>8</sup> Others, some of whom arrived in a "second wave" of immigration after 1971, are seen as hailing from Haiti's lower classes. Both in and out of Haiti, many of the middle class seem to have an uneasy relationship with Vodou. Most of those I have met are either atheists or Christians (Catholic and increasingly Protestant) who see Vodou as a folkloric tradition that at best keeps the poor of Haiti poor ("forcing" them to prepare elaborate feasts and expensive rituals in tribute to "insatiable" gods) and at worst perpetuates the myth of Haiti as a barbaric and uncivilised land.<sup>9</sup> In Montreal, Vodou is subjected to both "internal" pressures from some members of the Haitian community (it should be noted, though, that many non-practicing Haitians are very informed about and supportive towards a religious tradition that they perceive as being an integral part of Haitian culture) and external pressures from the Montreal community at large.

As a non-Haitian Vodouist I occupy a position of simultaneous privilege and lack of authority. As must now be quite evident, Vodou is also my religion. In a world of finite

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<sup>8</sup> Haitian politics and politicians are, in and of themselves, a large and complex subject which will only be cursorily explored in this paper in so much as it relates to contemporary Vodou practices. For a more detailed discussion of the Duvalier family and its impact on Haiti politics and immigration see David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Color and National Independence in Haiti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> The ambivalence, and occasional hostility, of the Haitian elite towards Vodou is a result of the convergence of a number of factors. A desire to embrace Western ideology and to create distance from an African past, from the influence of Christian missionism, from a complex history that saw divisions and re-divisions of the population and the land made on the basis of color and economic status, and from the resentment toward the elite that allowed François Duvalier to turn the rhetoric of Vodou against the Haitian middle-class, are some of the most significant factors in this complex bias which goes back deep into Haitian history. In *So Spoke the Uncle/Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* (originally published in 1928, translated by Magdaline Shannon, subsequently published, Washington, D.C., Three Continents Press, 1983), Jean Price-Mars explores this bias as he attempts to record the folkloric traditions of Haiti. For an analysis of this text and the context surrounding it see Magdaline Shannon's *Jean Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite and the American Occupation, 1915-1935* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

dichotomies I could position myself as an insider to that tradition. However, I would hesitate to call myself an “insider” to Vodou. Like those I am interested in here, I am a “newcomer” to the religion, an uneasy product of my age and culture. In fact, I seldom categorize myself as an unqualified insider in any community (an anarchist in the academy and an academic in the art world, a racial and ethnic hybrid) I am more comfortable with a foot in at least two worlds. While I am not a complete outsider to this tradition, I hardly consider myself an authority on the religion and despite my “insider” status I try to keep my strong opinions about the shape and structure of Vodou to a minimum in this account of those who can sometimes be viewed as living on the periphery of this religious tradition. Nonetheless, I do share the belief systems of Vodou, and regardless of my status as a Vodouist, it is belief that generally positions one as an insider. I will speak further to the concept of belief and how it operates in this study of Vodou and the study of religion in general, but for the moment I would like to shift attention to the ways in which I have privilege despite my uninitiated status as a Vodouist. As I have already mentioned, some of the Vodouists with whom I interact are not from a different class than myself. They are university-educated individuals with middle class aspirations. They are often from varied ethnic and racial backgrounds, although the majority of them are blacks of North American, Caribbean and African heritage. The ones with whom I am most familiar are mostly young, between twenty and thirty-five years of age, although I am told there exist a great influx of new initiates amongst an older demographic. Amongst these “newcomers” to Haitian Vodou in Montreal are diasporic Africans and Caribbeans who find Vodou at once resonant and unfamiliar with the religions that they encountered in their own “homelands”. Others are the children of the first wave of Haitian immigrants to Montreal and North America in general who are looking to “rediscover” their roots in a religious practice that they see as an affirmation of and a strategy for black resistance to continued white oppression and domination. Still others are non-Haitian westerners of mixed heritage who are drawn to Vodou for a variety of reasons that will be explored further throughout this essay.

What distinguishes me from other “new” Vodouists is not so much any of the characteristics mentioned above, but my choice to conduct a study of a community and spirituality with which I am involved. In a society where dominant and disenfranchised identity categories are readily distinguished by race, class, and gender differences, my position as an individual member of this society is never clearly one or the other. However, as an academic, a student of Vodou, I have the privilege and the responsibility of the power of representation. As much as I hope to let those that I work with “speak for themselves”, this text will inevitably be filtered through my experiences, consciousness, opinions and understanding of that which I choose to study. I would be lying if I did not admit that it seems bizarre and rather humorous to me that I, out of all those I have met and spoken with, am the author of this text. My “right” to speak about this lies not only in my own academic training and status, but also definitively in my choice to render the “secrets of Vodou”, (that most secretive of religious traditions) and the private moments and dialogues of my “fieldwork” not only public but also inevitably vulnerable. Like Ruth Behar in *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, I profoundly distrust my own authority (1996: 21). And so I must qualify and re-qualify the knowledge that is generated by and within this text, I must continually acknowledge and undo this privilege of representation that I have taken upon myself not to make some sort of politically correct point about systems of power and authority, but to match the vulnerability that I subject my “subjects” to with my own. It is only by putting myself into question, by writing an account that makes the connections between the forces that shape me as an individual and those that constitute not only the shape of Vodou but the way that it takes shape on the following pages, that I can create a space for a representation that “captures” something of the truth of this religion and my journey with it.

## Chapter 2

### **Vodou Vernacular or The Land of the “Qualifying” Quotation Marks: Tonalities in the Examination of Syncretism**

I cannot count how many times I have read, how many times I, myself, have said that Vodou is a syncretic tradition. Despite the controversy and dis-ease that has surrounded the term, syncretism has become a convenient handle with which to describe the religions of the new world. Arguably, all religions are syncretic. All contemporary religions can be interpreted as the result of some sort of cultural and religious mixing, of the borrowing and re-adaptation of elements from diverse places. Academics of the study of religion can spend a great deal of time identifying “foreign” elements and drafting maps of religious lineage. The debate surrounding the contemporary use of the term syncretism within the rhetoric and discourse of religious and cultural studies is voluble. However, the need for further exploration, given that the term is so controversial it can even subsume discussion on a given religion, lies in its common and persistent usage in reference to Caribbean religiosity in general and Vodou in particular. There are numerous reasons for this persistence, many of which lie embedded in the *a priori* discourse underlying contemporary uses of “syncretism” that are dependent on notions of “otherness” and often ignore claims made by practitioners. Surely, an examination of Vodou set, as this examination is set, within the structures of the academy must at least nod to on-going debate about syncretism. Rather than simply become immersed in this debate, I would like to examine not only the reasons behind this persistent use of syncretism to refer to the Vodou religion, but also the ways in which the discourses of Vodou enter into the debate about this term, perhaps even fuelling its continued though controversial use.

Syncretism has fallen into academic disfavour for numerous reasons. Although in active circulation since the Renaissance, current discussions about syncretism seem to associate the term with modernity. As some of the ideologies of modernity have become well worn, discarded or

just unfashionable, descriptions of cultural occurrences have changed. Terms that have come to be substituted for syncretism have a much more post-modern flavour and thus a much higher academic currency.<sup>1</sup> Desiring, as I do, to be academically hip, I would like very much to shelve any discussion of syncretism and opt for using “cooler” words such as hybridity, plurality, fluidity, and interculturality. For the most part, I do use these hip and cool words. However, when I am asked to give a talk on Vodou for an audience who has little knowledge about the religion I find myself speaking yet again of syncretism. Perhaps because the term surfaces so often in the literature about Vodou, perhaps because I believe it is a term that is recognisable, giving academic audiences something to hold onto in a sea of unfamiliar concepts and words, perhaps simply because, spoken in passing, syncretism requires less definition than some of the other terms I like to use, it surfaces with persistence and regularity. For this reason, it would seem to behoove me to examine both my (and a more general academic) dis-ease with the term syncretism and the way in which this term has insinuated itself so well into the discourse on Vodou. Simply, syncretism refers to cultural or religious mixing. However, the term has never been transparently descriptive, but always laden with rather specific cultural and religious meaning. Having a long and rather ambiguous etymological lineage<sup>2</sup>, syncretism surfaced most

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<sup>1</sup> My term, academic currency, may seem rather nebulous and therefore requires some definition. I am of the opinion that certain concepts, words, methods, theories or research topics come into favour within the more general discourse of the academy (specifically, the academic study of the Humanities). Usually this is an organic process by which the evolution of theories and ideas lead to greater interest in those theories and ideas, their by-products (i.e. new terminology) and growing critiques of these emerging theories and concepts. However, with surprising rapidity, these now “hot” topics become favoured by book publishers and granting agencies. Academic currency refers to these now-in-favour ideas that come to circulate in academic discourse both within the metaphoric currency of commonly used rhetoric and within the more literal meaning of currency promised by the money generating systems of academic knowledge. This phrase is not offered as a criticism of this system, but as a way of acknowledging how some research and work is privileged over others. This acknowledgement, however cursory, opens up the possibility of exploring why this might be...why, for instance, Caribbean spirituality is at once a “hot” topic and at the same time not given much currency in Canadian Religious Studies departments devoted to the study of only a handful of “World Religions” (namely Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam).

<sup>2</sup> See the Introduction to *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited by Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London: Routledge, 1994) and also “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem” by Andre Droogers in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Jerald Gert et al, (William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1989).

prominently in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when attempts to reconcile the sometimes disparate denominations of emerging Protestantism led to the use of the term “syncretic controversies” (Shaw and Stewart, 1995:4). These often raucous debates involved attempts to disentangle religious elements and inevitably to classify them as authentic or inauthentic. During this time syncretism took on what many analysts call a “negative” definition and “came to refer to the illegitimate reconciliation of opposing theological views. Syncretism, thus, became a polemic term employed to defend true religions against heresy” (Droogers, 1989:9). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars of comparative religions examining ancient Roman and Hellenistic worlds added their own two cents to this definition of syncretism by recognizing that syncretism, or the actively encouraged mixing of cultural and religious elements by the Romans, had been an imperialist strategy (Shaw and Stewart, 1995:5). This is one of the first times that cultural power dynamics were looked at as factors in the syncretic process. It was not, however, the last. In fact, today’s theorists, those engaged in “reclaiming” the term syncretism from its implied inauthenticity, its reduction of a culture to its lowest common denominator, or its “unprincipled jumbling” of religious elements, seem to posit that the term can be ethically used so long as “power” is accounted for. Andre Droogers suggests that the negative connotation of syncretism is simply the result of its legacy as part of the discourses of faith:

It is interesting that the difficulty of syncretism, viz. that it has a pejorative connotation, is also present in two other terms used by religious elites to oppose unauthorized religious production: magic and sect. Thus, relations of power indirectly influence the vocabulary adopted in the study of religion. It is therefore all the more surprising that in the study of religion this power dimension often remains unnoticed. (1998:17)

Droogers goes on to explain that when looking at instances of syncretism it is necessary to determine what form power imbalances take. Droogers is one of many academics who write that the term syncretism is redeemable if it is used in conjunction with an analysis of power. In “Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance” Peter van der Veer states that “the



term 'syncretism' refers to a politics of difference and identity and that as such the notion of power is crucial in its understanding" (van der Veer, 1994:196). In the introduction to *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols* (1995), Goran Aijmer is not asking for a direct analysis of power relations. However, by adopting a semiotic understanding of cultural interaction, Aijmer suggests that religious symbolism be examined for the ideological views that underpin them. He insists not only that symbols are encoded with social discourses but also that it is through the intermingling of such symbols that social discourses come into conflict with one another. This conflict and its resolution (or dissolution) is the syncretic process for Aijmer. It is the understanding of inherent conflict that implies and perhaps necessitates the power analysis so clearly advocated by the theorists above. And this all seems to be in working order. This "recasting" or "reclaiming" of syncretism seems logical, possible, even probable. What could possibly be wrong with wanting to understand cultural and religious mixing through an analysis of discursive power dynamics?

Irrationally, I find myself annoyed when I choose to use the term syncretism to describe the Vodou tradition. In my most "unacademic" moments I cannot help feeling that, even with the newly found white knight of power analysis riding in to save the terminological day, the use of the term is still somehow....*rude*. And there it is, no more profound than that. I feel rude when I use the term. Rude and slightly embarrassed. (How awful. It is one thing to feel awkward and socially inept in the field, but quite another to feel so within the academy...a place in which I should, by now, feel at home). From a nagging feeling in the pit of the gut to academic analysis is a leap, but in a typical follow-my-nose research style, it seems a permissible move since it is more often my gut that keeps me accountable to the people I write about (as opposed to those I write for). It is precisely the introduction of power analysis to theories of syncretism that has illuminated, for me, the source of my own discomfort with the term and idea of syncretism. Specifically and surprisingly, it is the implied ideas of conflict, marginalisation, and subjugation in the continuing debate about syncretism that sends those twinges of embarrassment. Having a

background in post-modern feminism<sup>3</sup> I am familiar with concepts of hegemony and domination and the flip side of oppression that characterises much of western discourse including, it could be argued, western religious discourses. Certainly, systemic domination, or the understanding that western culture has been organised, pyramid style, in such a way as to maintain privilege and disenfranchisement through discursive and institutional structures, has proven most valuable to analytical frameworks which attempt to understand “marginal” cultures and communities. Why, then, should analysis of syncretism not benefit from the inclusion of a power analysis that recognises the institutionalization of both privilege and disenfranchisement? Perhaps it should. And it may be folly to suggest that religion, or the study of religion, should be submitted to any different analysis than the study of any other aspect of culture. However, post-modern feminism in the West, unlike the study of syncretism in the West, arose as an articulated response to dissatisfaction with the *status quo*, discontentment with a system that seemed to arbitrarily privilege a few. And feminism in the West arose from within the west itself. Feminism is still battling demons, still making an effort to incorporate not only an awareness and analysis of the disenfranchisement of women, but also accountability for systemic oppression based on race, class, sexuality and myriad other factors.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, what emerges in all but the most cynical feminist debates, is a belief in and a hope for change, an anticipation of a future that is, somehow, more just. And while many members of the West may disagree with feminist precepts and hold out a view of justice or the future that is very different from that of feminists, engagement with this act of visualisation and discussion about this hoped for future come from within the West itself, even if the West is understood to have fluid and permeable boundaries (Okely, 1996:26). Similarly, the internal discourses of a religious tradition may allow for the recognition, as Vodou does, that the processes of syncretism do shape spirituality. However, the *application* of power

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the collection of essays in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Bultler and Joan W. Scott (N.Y.: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Consuelo Lopez Springfield (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) for a critique of post-modern feminism.

analysis to instances of syncretism “out there” in the (often non-Western, or “not-seen-as-Western”) field seems to imply an inevitable world of oppressed and oppressor, of dominant tradition and recipient or malleable tradition, of assimilation and resistance, of hegemony and marginalisation. And I know where Vodou would lie in such an analysis. Even if the pejorative assumptions behind terms such as syncretism (or magic, or sect) were removed, Vodou still ends up the marginalized, resistant, oppressed, recipient tradition. To some extent, there is no arguing with such an analysis. To some extent it is true. I have used words such as marginalisation and resistance to describe Vodou and Vodou practitioners. Then again, to some extent it is...*rude*. There is something in my raisin’ (academically speaking, of course) that makes me cringe at the thought of putting forward a theory that implies that the Vodou tradition was formed in the wake of a monolithic power imbalance that inevitably shaped the religion and its emerging practitioners. While the current debate about syncretism is meant to provide more ethical methodological tools for the analysis of intercultural relationships, an application of these tools to the Vodou tradition illuminates how precarious current ideas about syncretism render cultural analysis.

There is a growing sense of frustration amongst a small band of scholars, intent on the study of Afro-Caribbean culture and spirituality, with the tools of analysis brought to the table in the more general toolbox of postmodernism. While I worry about being rude, these scholars have much more coherent ways of articulating their dissatisfaction with the ideological underpinnings of some post-modern methods of analysis. In “Recasting Syncretism...Again: Theories and Concepts in Anthropology and Afro-American Studies in the Light of Changing Social Agendas”, Sidney M. Greenfield argues that current ideas of syncretism used in reference to Afro-American cultural studies reflect a post 1960’s social reality (in the U.S.) in which marginalized groups struggle to survive in the wake of dominance (Greenfield, 1998:10). By tracing the more recent history of the use of syncretism to describe cultural interaction, Greenfield reveals how such

terminology comes to encode the political and social ideas of the eras in which they surface and goes on to illustrate how such terminology has been used to attain and perpetuate specific social goals. Greenfield traces what he believes to be the current “separatist” social agenda behind recent attempts at reclaiming syncretism to the 1920’s when, he posits, notable anthropologist Franz Boas and his students were influenced by ideas of assimilation circulating in the U.S. Assimilationist ideology was conceived of as an answer to growing racism and racial unrest in America and had as a goal an integrated national society in which all citizens were to be included as full participants. Boas utilized assimilationist ideology; an ideology, which Greenfield believes, was incorporated into the scientific outlook of anthropology at the time, in order to deny the importance of race in the categorization of the emotional and mental characteristics of individuals (2). This universalism implied that blacks and immigrants were “naturally” inclined to assimilate to an ever increasingly hegemonic U.S. society. While this may have informed the general scientific precepts of Boas and his colleagues in anthropology (2), there was a simultaneous move towards pluralism. Boas himself utilized pluralist theories to insist on the need for recognizing the unique contribution of each separate culture to human civilization and to justify his ethnographic research. Apparently, Boas never reconciled the co-existence of seeming conflict between pluralist and universalist ideology in his own work. Another notable American anthropologist, Melville Herskovits, initially situated his own research within the theoretical framework of universalisms. According to Greenfield, the assimilationist direction of Herskovits’ work was altered when he encountered the black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance<sup>5</sup> and their intense desire to develop distinct cultural traditions (4). This movement

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<sup>5</sup> The Harlem Renaissance refers to an intellectual and artistic movement of black ideologues, writers, musicians and others. Spanning the 1920’ and 1930’s and often attributed to a large migration of blacks to northern American cities, the Harlem Renaissance started in Harlem and spread across the U.S. Although originating in literary circles, the Harlem Renaissance included a number of sociologists including W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey and Alain Locke. The focus of the movement was on the celebration of the “Negro” past and cultural traditions and literary and musical forms were embraced for their “African ness”. Jazz and poetry were everywhere and this mixture of artistic production and social critique may well have spawned the rise of black nationalism, a movement that I

challenged the inevitableness of assimilation and may have partially directed Herskovits' research on the origins and forms of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean society and culture. Syncretism was (re) used by Herskovits in the 1930's to support both his view of acculturation as an inevitable aspect of prolonged contact between cultures and his later pluralist ideas of cultural distinction. By the 1960's anthropological theory and the ideological concepts underlying the continued use of syncretism to explain cultural mixing had adopted the view, perhaps initiated by Herskovits' interaction with the intellectuals of the Harlem renaissance, that minority identity groups are, and wish to remain, separate in some sense from dominant culture. Greenfield sees this adoption of a particularist understanding of syncretism as a result of the political climate of the Civil Rights movement and the subsequent failure of enforced legislation designed to eradicate prejudice. Greenfield suggests that post-modern attention to concepts of power, hegemony, domination and marginalisation arose out of this political context. These policies and political movements, according to Greenfield, bred the need for a separatist social agenda in which identity groups are forced to cement their uniqueness and difference, as well as their suffering due to marginalisation in a hegemonic society, in order to obtain social and monetary benefits. In this socio-political context, syncretism, read into the culture and religion of marginalized identity groups, becomes a means for establishing boundaries and distinctiveness, and ultimately "provides a voice for any group who wish to interpret or reinterpret the world in a way that enables them access, under the law, to their rights"(12).

Greenfield's rather scathing interpretation of the originating flavour of current post-modern debate on syncretism and the work of theorists such as Droogers, Shaw and Stewart, and Aijmer, point to his dissatisfaction with not only the mode of analysis provided by current ideologies of syncretism, but also the theories of postmodernism which underlie current "recastings" of syncretism. Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests that post-modern theories are a

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believe has greatly influenced the contemporary shape of Vodou in North America, as well as having, in part, instigated a growing influx of new practitioners to the Vodou tradition.

specific response to modern forces of globalization and transnationalism. Unlike Greenfield, he critiques, not so much these viable theories, but the way in which they have been spawned within the space of the academy, acquiring what he sees as a de-historicized validity. Trouillot explains:

The key to dominant versions of postmodernism is an ongoing deconstruction lived as shock and revelation. Postmodernism builds on this revelation of the sudden disappearance of established rules, judgments and known categories. But the very fact of revelation implies a previous attitude towards such rules, judgments, and categories—for instance, that they have been taken for granted or as immutable. The post-mortem inherent in the postmodernist mood implies a previous “world of universals”. It implies a specific view of culture and culture change. (Trouillot, 1994:21)

It is precisely this view of culture change, which implies a “previous world of universals”, that so discomforts Greenfield in recent debates about syncretism. Most of the tools available to academics intent on the study of religion and culture are founded on a fervent belief in “otherness”. Syncretism, in its current reincarnation, is no different. The presumption of continual conflict that Greenfield explores is based on an understanding of the “other” that may not have its origins simply in post Civil-Rights socio-political climate of the U.S., but still shapes much post-modern inquiry into syncretic processes. While the maintenance of a belief in the continuing conflict between marginal and dominant social groups, which Trouillot and Greenfield suggest is inherent to post-modern ideological politics, may not seem overly problematic, the *a priori* assumption of conflict plays out most visibly in the study of syncretic processes. Inevitably, explorations of religious syncretism have to negotiate ideas about religious origin, purity and authenticity.

These terms seem especially pertinent to the study of Afro-Caribbean spirituality. Melville Herskovits, whose *Life in a Haitian Valley* is cited by most scholars of Vodou, was one anthropologist who maintained that identifiable aspects of African religions can be seen in New World traditions. While this presumption was opposed by such scholars as E. Franklin Frazier<sup>6</sup>, it

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<sup>6</sup> In many of his writings, Melville Herskovits articulated his insistence that Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean traditions contained recognizable and traceable elements of historical African spirituality. This is most notable in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941). E. F. Frazier disagrees in *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Stocken Books, 1964).

seems that even today scholars must decide whether to pursue their study of Afro-Caribbean spirituality from one of two philosophical positions: either these traditions are African derived with religious elements that can be traced back to Africa, or these traditions are completely new entities and the act of “uncovering” original African elements is not only unnecessary but impossible. Academics who believe that elements of African traditions can be recognized and identified in such New World spiritualities as Vodou, Santeria, Candomblé and others, become embroiled in trying to separate the new from the old, the original (pure) African elements from the emergent elements that have come about as a result of syncretism. Those who believe that New World traditions should be examined separately from African religious history may find themselves wearing blinkers, trying to ignore not only a vast and lengthy body of academic literature, but also aspects of New World religions which insist upon and vocalize continuity with the past and with Africa. Having tried to maintain the latter position in my own research, I gave it up when I realized that the Vodou concept of *Ginen* not only embraced a connectedness to the past or to Africa, but also to ideas of origin, purity and authenticity, the very terms I had learned to problematize in my academic upbringing as a postmodernist. The complex discourse of Vodou never presents simple or literal explanations of concepts such as *Ginen*, that make up the cosmological and ideological framework of the tradition. Without delving into a discussion of Vodou conceptualizations of *Ginen*, Africa or home within the body of this essay, it is possible to say that the existence of such a concept may illustrate an interest, on the part of Vodou practitioners, in maintaining elements of the African religions which were practiced by the slaves who met on the island that now is Haiti. While this would seem to suggest that Herskovits’ insistence on uncovering African elements when examining such syncretic religions as Vodou is valid, I would suggest that far more valid is the realization that the current parameters of the ongoing debate is (and should, to a greater extent, be) influenced by practitioners of religions such as Vodou.

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In “Contested Rituals of the African Diaspora”, Stephen Glazier points out that the same debate about the origins, authenticity and purity of Afro-Caribbean religiosity that takes place within the academy is playing out amongst a growing number of spiritual practitioners and leaders:

many Caribbean leaders have made concerted efforts—with varying degrees of success—to purify ritual forms and “restore” the so called African elements within their own services, while other Afro-Caribbean leaders have resisted such attempts. (Glazier 1998:105)

Glazier maintains that it is this inquiry on behalf of contemporary spiritual leaders and practitioners that should set the current debate on syncretism apart from previous debates. While I am not sure how Glazier’s proposed inclusion of spiritual leaders into the debate on syncretism will take form, his insistence on this inclusion raises issues central to my own research. As a scholar who researches Haitian Vodou practices in Montreal, what I call the double-diaspora (removed from Africa and from Haiti, and sometimes also from large Haitian centres in the U.S. where Haitian immigrants often stop before continuing on to Montreal) the issue of syncretism is horribly tricky. Like most Afro-Caribbean traditions, Vodou changes often and varies from locale to locale. In addition, I am not conducting my work in rural Haiti, arguably the centre of traditional Haitian Vodou. I am also not engaged in the observation of the ritual specialists of Vodou. Instead, my work is with the practitioners of Vodou in Montreal, and even more specifically, with those on the periphery of Vodou practice. These practitioners are seldom the embodiment of what one may stereotypically associate with a “traditional” Vodouist. A good portion of the Vodouists with whom I am in contact are middle class, well educated individuals who have spent considerable time in the west. Others are in the process of “coming back” to Vodou, either as second or third generation Haitians who are rejecting the atheism or Protestantism of their parents generation, or as non-Haitians who conceptualize their “return” to Vodou as a “remembering” of an African or black spirituality that they “forgot” due to the forces of colonization and white domination. Given my associates, I have little authority when it comes



to what traditional Vodou looks like, and I would posit that half the practitioners with whom I am in contact would also hesitate to define such a term. I also have no idea who, out of all who I have met and spoken with, to authorize when it comes to determining the valid shape of the Vodou tradition. And yet there is a valid shape to Vodou according to most practitioners. And I think so too. It is for this reason, the belief (and sometimes it is no more than a belief, a gut feeling) in an over arching unity of the Vodou tradition, when all that is visible to the naked eye is change, flux, disparity and diversity, that I find discussion about syncretism in relation to Vodou...*rude*.

In fact, many of the Vodou practitioners with whom I am in contact find the suggestion that Vodou is a uniquely flexible and malleable religion problematic and disconcerting. When I asked one individual, a mambo, if she thought that Vodou was a particularly individualistic or personal religion she responded with incredulity;

Where do people get this idea? I've heard this before, and I just can't understand why people would think this. Perhaps they get confused between the different denominations of Haitian traditional religion - Vodou, Makaya and so on. But within Vodou, there are most definitely standard practices! Our religion is not just some free-form, catch-as-catch-can activity. When a Houngan or Mambo conducts a *kanzo*, for example, things have to be done in precisely the correct way, or the *kanzo* is invalid! If we all did it differently, what would be the point? There are certain things we all agree on, certain things that are always required and certain things that are always forbidden. We all give our initiates the same passwords, how could it be otherwise? If each house were different, everyone would have different passwords and different handshakes and so on, it would be useless. (Mambo Maxine, personal communication)

While not all Vodouists (or *mambo* or *houngan*) would agree with this view of "standardized" Vodou, this insistence on universal practices is strategic, a response to criticism levelled at the religion by non-Vodou Haitians, to a growing anti-Vodou sentiment in Protestant denominations adopted by Haitians and, increasingly, by academics. When these "neo" - Vodouists "talk back" to academics they do so with an extensive knowledge of the discourses ("popular" discourse in particular) that circumscribe knowledge about Vodou in North America. At best, these discourses posit Vodou as a marginalized and stigmatized religion; at worst they conceive of it as primitive superstition, or witchcraft. Asked how they feel about the study of Vodou, these

Vodouists frame their responses within an understanding of the parameters within which Vodou is generally understood in North America and with a keen critical eye towards the assumptions academics can make about this religion. In an open dialogue about the merits of the academic study of Vodou, one practitioner voiced a frustration with the lack of applied work done by such academics:

I do appreciate those who study Vodoun but the first question coming to my mind is why? Is it purely for ones own intellectual satisfaction? Is it purely for ones own professional activity? In any case, everyone has to refer to the sources. Everyone benefits from the tradition that his or her Haitian brothers and sisters have preserved for centuries. What do those receive in return? *Tou le jou kuiye al kay gannel, ki le gamel pral kay kuiye?* Everyday the sun rises, hundred of anthropologists, ethnologists, priests, pastors and simply curious individuals roam around the country, visit our *houmfo*, ask hundreds of questions to pick up valuable knowledge and to bring it back to their respective institutions. (Peter, personal communication)

Another Vodouist disagrees;

Why do alpinists climb Mount Everest, or why did we travel to the moon? The answer is simply because they are there. Many study Vodou because it exists. The scholarly study of Vodou or Haiti is very important nevertheless to Haiti in many ways. It helps with understanding of Haitian culture, and that's very important for Haiti. It allows non-Haitians to understand Haitian culture, and helps explain the worldview and politics of the Haitian people. Vodou is a way of life that is not so different from those observed among so many other peoples of the world. It can shed light on many scholarly endeavours related to the cultures of other peoples of the world. Why shouldn't Haiti help scholars understand many of the dimensions of contemporary life? ("Nephertiti", personal communication)

What is significant to me in these narrations is an awareness that Vodou, which in these dialogues seems to be conflated with Haiti and Haitian discourse, is a repository for both knowledge—a “source” that has been “preserved” by practitioners—and analytical frameworks that can “help” scholars understand others, not only Vodouists. Nowhere in these concepts is it articulated that Vodou is subjugated. This is not to say that these individuals do not understand the extreme subjugation and disenfranchisement of Vodouists (and Haitians) that has occurred historically and continues to occur in a North American climate of considerable general ignorance about this religion. However, these Vodouists choose not to emphasise this. Their rhetoric is not one of disenfranchisement, or even overt resistance, but is one that implicitly empowers the discourses

of Vodou, positioning them in such a way as to be able to offer a helping hand to academics who choose to study this tradition. It may be too much of an extrapolation to suggest that this rhetorical positioning of Vodou in a dominant position is strategic on the part of neo-Vodouists. Nonetheless, this discursive jostling may be part of that which Glazier maintains is changing the current parameters of the debate on syncretism;

What sets the current debate apart from previous debates is that the major participants in the current debate are themselves members of the religions in question. This sets a different tone and provides different perspectives on issues of African survivals in the New World. There is a greater perceived urgency. A major difference is that believers' assumptions vary considerably from scholarly assumptions that have hitherto informed debates on the topic. (Glazier, 1997:106)

I would be according myself far too much insight and authority if I do not acknowledge how much of my own understanding of not only Vodou itself, but the way Vodou is understood both by practitioners and by others, is dictated by the opinions of those with whom I converse. My own position within this on-going debate, my understanding that it is problematic simply to *apply* theories of syncretism that harbour an implicit understanding of Vodou as marginal or sub-dominant, as the (sole) result of colonial discourse only populated by disenfranchised individuals, is certainly derived from my awareness of how the practitioners above receive such a premise. They think it is rude.

It is rude, any way you look at it. Syncretism is understood, by most in the academy, as a process that occurs when two or more cultures interact. Whether power dynamics are taken into account or not, Vodou seems always to end up as the religion to which syncretism happens. Even if this is conceptualized as a "good thing", a strength, and as evidence of Vodou's (or the pre-existing African spirituality's) inherent ability to survive hardship and adapt to difficulty, it still renders Vodou either passive or resistive. In contemporary analysis of syncretism it is difficult to conceptualize Vodou, clearly a marginalized religious identity, as the initiator of the syncretic process. And yet, this is precisely what Vodou does, it appropriates elements of other religions, imbuing them with new meaning, changing them and yet retaining important aspects of their

originating identities (Dayan, 1995:71). If Vodou, in its present incarnation in the New World, initiates the syncretic process, why then must it be an immutable assumption that Vodou was not an initiator of the syncretism which may have led to its genesis on the island of Haiti?

Discussion about Vodou and syncretism is further problematised by the assumption made by most academics (Herskovits 1937; Desmangles 1992; Burton 1997) who see Vodou as the ultimate or quintessential syncretic religion. Such academics assume that Vodou does have its genesis on the island of Haiti where “original” elements of African traditions mixed with the indigenous spirituality of the aboriginal inhabitants of the island and Catholicism. However, many Vodouists believe that Vodou did not result from arbitrary events, created by the happenstance of circumstance, but rather as a predestined occurrence orchestrated by gods who met each other for the first time in the New World. It is this belief that is often cited as an explanation for the similarity between Haitian Vodou and Voodoo or Hoodoo practices in the U.S. It seems the gods had never ventured far from Africa before, but once in the Caribbean they quickly took advantage of their proximity to other continents to practice their own unique brand of colonization. In their attempts to distance themselves from the origins of this problematic term, contemporary debates about syncretism do not make much room for faith perspectives or explanations. Post-modern interpretations of syncretism which assume continued cultural conflict produce an interesting picture, one in which the cultural product that is Vodou is but a reaction to the West, or more specifically, to the forces of colonization and missionism. And this is rude, but more than rude, I think it is inaccurate. It de-historicizes the history of Vodou itself and, interestingly enough, the history of those African traditions that so many see as being at the root of religions such as Vodou. What such a view of syncretism fails to take into account is a system of thought which does not see continued conflict as inevitable and which does not view the processes of syncretism that are part of the Vodou tradition as resulting from oppression and domination. This does not mean that Vodou practitioners do not recognize forces of hegemony in their contemporary lives, nor that they “forget” the horrors of colonization, slavery and

missionism. On the contrary, Vodou is a religion in which history is often “re-enacted” through ritual. What it does mean is that, for Vodouists, it is not the conflict that is the point. Like the Western feminist social agenda that I mentioned earlier, Vodou holds forth a wished – for, hoped – for future. Vodouists may focus on small parts of this, looking for a good life, health, monetary success, but they do articulate dreams of possibility. These dreams may be for Haiti, a home that is struggling beyond measure, they may be for the fate of Vodou in general, or more specifically for the fate of Vodou in Haiti. Vodou practitioners may be aware of conflict and they may have learned to deal with it (and in it) daily, but it is not where they stay. And this is what is missing in post-modern conceptualizations of syncretism. Hope. Faith. This is not to imply that one must be a believer to engage in the study of Vodou, but simply to suggest that belief must be taken into account, not as an interesting phenomenon, but as an organizing principle of the knowledge that is spawned by Vodou. Like feminism, which is often a critique of hegemony, oppression, domination and marginalisation from within the West, systems of analysis of Vodou should, it would seem, be generated from within the discourses of Vodou.

I would like to illustrate the epistemological systems of Vodou, its practitioners and the discourses they create. The theories that I would like to use to explain the culture and religiosity of Vodou are the theories set forth by the discourses of this vibrant religion. This, however, is a rather daunting task and cannot be based on the presumption that the discourses of Vodou and the theories generated through these discourses are completely “other” from Western academic theories. On the contrary, these discourses interact and critique one another. And, fortunately, this is not a wholly original idea. Academics studying African and Afro-Caribbean or American religions have come, increasingly, to insist on writing ethnographies that utilize “indigenous” epistemological frameworks. Margaret Drewal’s ethnography, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, is an example of such a work. Drewal illustrates most pervasively the way in which the constant adaptation of Yoruba ritual performance creates a discursive system that “undermines the dominant notion in scholarly discourse that ritual is rigid” (1992:xiv). Acknowledging the

strategy behind transformative and syncretic practices, Drewal presents a work in which the agency of Yoruba ritual specialists is paramount to Yoruba practitioners and “attempt(s) to make an African system of thought explicit from the vantage point of its practitioners’ theories and embodied practices”(xiv). Another Yoruba specialist, Andrew Apter, also develops an ethnographic framework that works “toward those indigenous or vernacular forms of knowledge and understanding which render Yoruba politics, history, and religious experience intelligible—not only to “us”, but to the Yoruba themselves” (1992:5). And the well – known Afro-American literary critic, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., undertakes a similar objective in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* in which he works to belie the “notion that theory is the province of the Western tradition” (1988:xx) and to create “a theory of reading that is there, that has been generated within the black tradition itself, autonomously” (xx)<sup>7</sup>. Like Apter, Gates also explores the “vernacular” as a means of carrying not simply knowledge, but complex epistemological systems which house theories of religion, culture and discourse and which shape how individuals who are “raised” within these cultural systems come to relate to and view their world. And this is what I attempt to do in my own study of urban North American Vodou. I valiantly attempt to illustrate something that is already there, to bring readers who live mostly in the academy closer to an understanding of something that is not so much “other” as it is “othered”. So if I restate, at this point, that Vodou is a syncretic religion, please hear the irony in my voice. It is true that African traditions were carried to the New World on slave ships and that these traditions, their rites and their gods, were clearly positioned within general colonial rhetoric as subordinate to the Catholicism practiced by the French slave owners. However, interpretations

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that it is not only academics interested in African and Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions who are interested in so called “indigenous epistemologies”. In fact, feminism has long been interested in shifting praxis. Margery Wolf explains in *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford University Press, Stanford California, 1992); “We have begun to search for a way to do ethnographic research that not only will not exploit other women but will have a positive effects on their lives. Feminist anthropologists are struggling with ways of transforming the objects of research into *subjects*, who themselves identify and design the research projects *they* think are needed (52).”

of the relationship between Catholicism and emergent Vodou have led to some problematic assumptions. Karen McCarthy Brown tries to address these assumptions in her explanation of the religions mixing;

On one level it was a matter of habit. The African cultures from which the slaves were drawn had traditionally been open to the religious systems they encountered through trade and war and had routinely borrowed from them. On another level it was a matter of strategy. A Catholic veneer placed over their own religious practices was a convenient cover for the perpetuation of these frequently outlawed rites. Yet this often cited and too often politicized explanation points to only one level of the strategic value of Catholicism. There was something very deep in the slaves' religious traditions that very likely shaped their response to Catholicism. The Africans in Haiti took on the religion of the slave master, brought it into their holy places, incorporated its rites into theirs, adopted the images of Catholic saints as pictures of their own traditional spirits and the Catholic calendar as descriptive of the years holy rhythms, and in general practiced a kind of cultural judo with Catholicism. They did this because, in the African ethos, imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery but the most efficient way to gain understanding and leverage. (1989:237)

Although she does not adopt a conventional opinion that views African – Catholic syncretism as a “mask” behind which slaves hid their “true” spiritual beliefs and practices, Brown implicitly describes a world in which religion became yet another strategy of survival and resistance. Brown, like most academics, presents conflict, an “us” (colonizers and their descendents) and “them” (slaves and their descendents) scenario. Even the “us” and the “them”, however, are seldom unified identity groups. It is good to keep in mind that colonial rhetoric, like any other rhetoric, is fraught with internal conflict and disagreement.

In “Contested Rituals of the African Diaspora”, Stephen Glazier attempts to untangle some of this internal conflict by looking at religion, following Edward Sapir, through the terms “genuine” and “spurious”. While categorizations of religion or religious elements is a problematic practice often resulting in the creation of binary dualisms out of what had initially been a complex and multifarious entity, Glazier effectively points out that, contrary to *a priori* assumption, the religion of the plantation owners was far less genuine than that of the slaves. Defining “genuine” as religion that does not contradict itself morally, or posit spiritually meaningless edicts, Glazier suggests that planters and plantation owners often exhibited

ambivalence about both their own Christianity and about converting slaves to Christianity. In some cases plantation owners saw Christian teachings as providing slaves with a rhetoric which may result in demands of freedom and ultimately in threats to the status of whites on the islands. In other cases plantation owners did not want to accord slaves equal status by giving them a shared religious identity (Glazier, 1997:107). It should be noted, however, that the Christianizing of slaves, during colonial time, was one of the foremost justifications for the slave trade. Slaves, on the other hand, were at the time apparently far less concerned with the social implications of their religious identity and far more concerned with getting their religion to work in a new and unfamiliar context. According to one *mambo* here in Montreal, newly arrived slaves wondered if their gods knew where they were and more importantly, if they would still visit them in this new land. "It was a bad time." Mambo tells me; "we forgot who we were." Implicit in this cryptic statement is the dislocation and disorientation produced by slavery and colonialism, and also the realization that the genesis of Vodou in this chaotic context provided both furtive and fertile reflection on issues of identity. It is not reading too much into this statement to assume that it also underlines the realization that identity and awareness of identity is still an intrinsic part of post-genesis Vodou. Analyses of the components that constitute religious and cultural identity are an important part of the discourses of Vodou. The rituals of Vodou can be both private and communal, both "performative" and introspective (although both in Haiti and, in my experience, in Montreal there is an emphasis on communal practice). These rituals often allow for a reconstruction or re-membering of events from the past. But these acts of remembering are not simple re-enactments and repetitions. Rather, they are part of a process of constant revision and constant reinterpretation. It is in the rituals of Vodou, that the methodology for the continual processes of religious and cultural analysis which have become so characteristic of the Vodou tradition surfaces. Conflict, while an intrinsic element of Vodou genealogy, is superseded by agentic religious innovation that "remembers" a "new" religious identity. And ritual is the means



by which past and present have been negotiated, guidance has been received, and identity has been solidified, albeit upon a contradictory and shifting ground.

Ritual in Vodou, as in most African and Caribbean spiritual traditions, is transformative. Clearly, rite of passage rituals such as the *lave tèt* or *kouche sou pwèn*, can be understood as resulting in the transformation of the social status of an individual. Ritual in Vodou also serves to transform individual and collective human consciousness. This is evident in the healing rituals of Vodou, rituals that Karen McCarthy Brown has examined extensively (1991, 1989) in her research on Haitian Vodou practices. Finally, and this is often excluded from academic explanations and theories about ritual which assume that repetition is an intrinsic part of ritual practice, Vodou practitioners agentically transform the structures of ritual from the inside out. It is this last element of the transformative nature of Vodou ritual that seems to accelerate the processes of change or “syncretism” that are seen as characteristic of Vodou. Vodouists act as knowledgeable agents capable of transforming the structures and, inevitably, the meaning of rituals. In addition, the gods of the Vodou pantheon are unpredictable; they emerge in the ritual of possession to demand new services and new sacrifices. As Joan Dayan explains, “Papa Legba appears in epiphany with a Coca-Cola bottle in his hand (though the foreign receptacle contains the alcoholic drink *clairin*), and Guede smokes his favourite cigarettes”(Dayan, 1997:27). Similarly, Hindu deities such as Krishna have come to make regular appearances in North American possession ceremonies. Even elements of Islam, specifically recitation of parts of the Qur’an, are also now in evidence. This multifarious and ever changing influx of religious and cultural elements dispels notions that ritual is a predictable repetition of elements, which have a unified meaning for all practitioners. Instead, ritual in Vodou creates a multi-layered discourse that gives voice to multiple perspectives and intentions. Although change is a constant in Vodou practice, it should not be assumed that change is effected lightly. In fact, my own research has allowed me to understand that while there exist techniques of ritual practice which facilitate these processes of change, acquiring these techniques without at the same time acquiring the value

system behind such ritual knowledge leads to misuse of ritual power. Vodou ritual transforms individuals, communities, itself and most importantly “reality” in its insistence on leaving no element untouched in its bid to illuminate not a static, reified notion of human existence, but an understanding of life as ambiguous, uncertain and indeterminate. It is the indeterminacy, a place occupied most visibly in the space of ritual, that evokes what Drewal calls “free play” and Gates calls “signifyin(g)”, a place where both reality and how it is experienced is shaped.

Perhaps more intrinsic to the current debate about syncretism than consideration of power dynamics in the processes of cultural change, is an understanding of how the agency of religious practitioners subverts what comes to be readily “known”. It is difficult to speak of Vodou in the academy, partially because this much-maligned religion still remains on the periphery of the knowledge generating systems of the academy. It is for this reason that those presenting or transmitting this peripheral knowledge cannot wholly disregard terms like syncretism. However, such terms must be integrated into a methodological and epistemological framework which illuminates not only the historical and cultural “realities” of social, religious and political change, but also takes into account the “realities” understood and lived by practitioners of the faith. If these “faith perspectives” are not taken into account, it becomes difficult to grasp the processes of religious change (manifest, for example through the transmission of ritual knowledge) that stem from “inside” and it becomes easier to perpetuate not only rudeness, but also inaccuracies.

As I look back on these pages I realize that this essay is peppered with qualifying quotation marks. Clearly my dis-ease with the term syncretism extends to a larger disease with the language that I find myself using to try and elucidate a complex religion and religious experience. While I hope that, like Gates, I come to bring fragments of a “Vodou vernacular” into the discourses of the academy in an attempt to better disseminate the epistemologies and ideologies of this religiosity, I still find myself cringing at the things that come out of my mouth or, more literally, out of my computer. One of my friends, a stand-up comedian, tells me that you can say “just anything” as long as you get the tone right. Perhaps what I hope to develop, as I try to

occupy that indeterminate space of practitioner/academic, is a tone, a voice that is at once critical and naïve, inside and outside, hybrid and whole...and like Vodou itself, just a little ambiguous.

### *Subtext I*

Trudy is mercurial. She changes with the weather. She never stays anywhere long. Last summer she flew to Corsica to complete a book of poetry that she couldn't seem to find the time to write in North America. Unlike most of my other "artist friends" who wait patiently for process grants and advances from publishing companies, Trudy does her work first and looks for money afterward. She is always poor. And she always disregards her poverty, living well beyond her means, flying around the world, trusting that money will find her as long as she follows the "right path". This is something that Trudy and I have in common. The belief that if we "do what we are meant to do" or follow the "right path", (the one laid out by the gods or destiny) then all the pieces will fall into place—everything will be all right. When things go wrong, when manuscripts don't get completed, when illnesses strike, when relationships turn sour, when dishes break with more frequency than usual, these are signs. When we finally notice these signs we take time from busy lives to consult the divine. While I clearly and flagrantly identify myself as a Vodouist, Trudy is more eclectic. I can talk to her about the *lwa* and she recognises them. But Trudy does not identify with any religious community. She practices Yoruba rituals when around Yoruba, Vodou when around me, and in a pinch, she uses the Tarot system of divination.

Trudy had planned to send her manuscript back to Canada in search of a publisher and go on to Brixton, England in search of opportunities as an actor and playwright. But Trudy called me from Corsica last summer. Things were not going so well. The manuscript was not what she wanted it to be...dishes were breaking with untoward frequency. She did her cards and they told her to go back to Toronto. She wanted to know what I thought. I did not think that Toronto was a good place for Trudy to land. My own "sense" was that the Toronto artistic community was too divergent, too split along the lines of identity. I worried that Trudy would encounter a black performance community which would look askew at her and her white Jewish boyfriend, even

more askew at her unconventional sexuality. I worried that she would encounter a women's performance community perpetually divided along lines of race and sexuality. I worried that she would find resistance to her unconventional approach to art. I worried that she was too much of a hybrid to fit into the segregated art scene that I remember encountering myself in Toronto. The thing is, Trudy does not look like a hybrid. She looks like a young black woman, Jamaican born and raised in that country for fourteen years. But if there is one thing I have learned in my lifetime it is that things are seldom what they appear to be and so I had this "sense". I did my own cards, a beautiful set of Vodou tarot cards that were bought and made for me in New Orleans, my own little windows of access to the divinities that populate the pantheons of Vodou *lwa*. But my cards were inconclusive; maybe Trudy was too far away.

When Trudy returned to Toronto everything went well for her. She did her cards again and got the Wanderer card...upside down, a sure sign that she should stay put. She found a publisher for her manuscript and received that all-important advance. Shortly after she found a job as an artistic director in an emerging Black theater company. She moved into a great loft. And my sense seemed to be misplaced. But the problems with paths, even "right" ones is that they sometimes diverge. Facing this divergence requires making choices and sometimes even divination tools cannot help. Sometimes the gods forsake you and from afar insist that you decide where you want to go, what path you want to follow, who you are going to be. The signs of this are simple. All of a sudden you find yourself blessed with great success while a whole swatch of things is going wrong. All of a sudden dishes are breaking while you are receiving casting calls. I think this is what Trudy is now experiencing. The signs are mixed. Kinda like Trudy herself.

### Chapter 3

#### I Be Longing to Belong: Vodou Identified?

"These new people," his score was saying, "these in-between colours people, these trained-minded people play the percussion so loud and so raucous the wee small baby could know they feared the tune. Now, if they think of worms and black boil, why come to me? I am not that kind of doctor. No. They know it is something else, that only I can handle yet they come blasting my ears and shaking my etheric with their clashing cymbals. This discord could shake a man out of his roots.

Erna Brodber, *Myal*

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that is lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

Identity and difference are not so much about categorical groupings as about processes of identification and differentiation. These processes are engaged for all of us, with the desire to belong, to be part of some community, however provisional.

Henrietta Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*

For "in-between colours people", for racial hybrids, ethnic, cultural and religious mixtures, transnationals, new agers, neo-voodooists,<sup>1</sup> identity, in some capacity, is always a choice. This choice is never so much about who one *is*, but about *where* one is going to belong. The choice is about putting down and pulling up roots; it is about deciding what one is going to call home. These are people who do not belong clearly to one identity category or another, but sit in an in-between world where they must negotiate a minefield of identities—each making demands on their way of understanding the world. For the subjects of this study, belonging is always provisional. Identity is an important part of my analysis of Vodou. It is also a topic I would prefer to avoid. Identity is a term that relies on an understanding of the world that seems,

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<sup>1</sup> Neo-voodoo is a problematic term, but one that has come into use to describe the growing numbers of "new" practitioners of Vodou that are at the centre of my analysis. Neo-voodoo insists on a separation between these "new" Vodouists and traditional Vodou practitioners that is, to me, artificial. I use it in this context, however, to draw attention to the way in which knowledge about Vodou is circumscribed even by the language we use to identify it. For more discussion on neo-voodooism see Robert Elliot Fox's *Masters*

to me, to contradict the one posited by Vodou. Vodouists are not particularly concerned with essentialized identity categories (white, black, male or female, for example) but with the process of identification. For Vodouists, identity is a practice. However, an analysis of identity as a practice or strategy runs the inevitable risk of ignoring power dynamics between identity groups. Although post-modern theories available to academics interested in identity seem most capable of both subverting reified notions of identity categories and acknowledging systemic domination at work in the constitution of identity, they also posit an “either/or” understanding of identity that doesn’t seem to take into account the constant fluctuation of identities such as Vodou. For this reason an analysis that undertakes an examination of the fluidity and hybridity that is Vodou identity must also examine the academic discourse that speaks to identity. The point of this chapter is not to delve deeply into an analysis of identity but to offer some ways of looking at a term that both circumscribes and complements an understanding of Vodou.

Inevitably, aspects of academic discourse are called into question and issues of authority, authenticity, and purity are thrown into relief against the diversity, hybridity, and plurality of Vodou identity. The methods used to examine, interpret, or “read” this identity are dependent on an intersection of multiple discourses. An understanding of how these discourses affect the production of knowledge is an important component of any analysis trying to take into account the fluidity and specificity of traditions like Vodou. How an understanding of the tradition is generated is as central to my analysis of Vodou identity as is an understanding of the tradition itself. The way in which academics position themselves in relation to a subject or field of study, as well as the way experiential data is utilized in the analysis of a religion or culture, are both issues that affect the production of knowledge. It is these areas of academic discourse that must be negotiated on the way towards an analysis of Vodou. Occasionally, anthropologists, in a malaise of frustration and defeat, acknowledge the existence of dichotomies. There exists a

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*of the Drum: Black Literatures Across the Continuum* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996). Also see *In/voluntary Exile: Neo-Voodoo in Neo-Colonial Times* in this volume.

general consensus that these ontological constructs are problematic, perpetuating inaccurate perceptions of cultures and communities. However, many seem to believe that they are an inevitable component of contemporary Western discourse. Those theorists who do propose a method of deconstructing binary opposition are frequently met with charges of nihilism. Many seem to want to balance on the fence between a post-modern awareness that knowledge is constructed through and by social power dynamics, and a desire for a universalized system of meaning. In the introduction to this thesis, I speak briefly of the tension that exists between reductionism and non-reductionism. I could have just as easily spoken of the tension between relativism and universalism or, as Henrietta Moore does in *A Passion for Difference*, the tension between empiricism and constructivism;

The strange fact of the matter is that while most anthropologists are strongly socially constructionist and, less often, culturally relativist in their thinking, they have a firm allegiance to the empirical nature of ethnographic facts. The result is a fruitful, but uneasy tension between social constructionism and empiricism. (Moore, 1996:29)

Moore cites many reasons for this ambivalence, including the legacy of political liberalism, which leaves a commitment to individualism embedded within the discourse of anthropology. Moore suggests that the ideology of post structuralism implicitly critiques many of the premises of anthropological discourse:

Anthropologists have historically based their knowledge of another culture on their experience of that culture: an experience which is both authentic and unique...Post-structuralist and deconstructionist readings of the subject emphasize that the 'I' does not author experience, that there is no singular essence at the core of each individual that makes them what they are and which guarantees the authenticity of their knowledge of self and of the world. It is clear that from both these perspectives post-structuralist and deconstructionist accounts of the subject appear to threaten the anthropological project. (30)

Moore's observations about the authenticity and authority of experience problematising essentialized notions of identity are salient. These theories renegotiate experiential data in order to understand identity as constituted by experience and do much to disrupt problematic and universalizing assumptions about the authority and authenticity of identity. In her article "Experience", Joan W. Scott explores the need to develop a framework that allows the



experience(s) of a particular identity group or community to be understood as constituted by their proximity and relation to an ideological system and discourse. Scott implies that such a theoretical framework allows for an analysis of how “difference” or “otherness” is constituted within a given socio-economic, historical context:

Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don’t understand it as constituted relationally. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces. (1992:26)

Certainly, it is necessary to contextualize any understanding of Vodou identity and religiosity within the multitude of discourses that have historically constituted Vodou. Any method of analysis that fails to locate Vodou identity within this multitude runs the risk of attributing decontextualised authenticity to the experiential data generated by an anthropological study of Vodou. This attributed authenticity and authority not only precludes, as Scott points out, comprehending the logic of the ideologies that constitute Vodou identity, but also runs the risk of reifying the fluidity of this identity. Since Vodou is a fluid identity in a constant state of flux, or transformation, it is difficult to interpret Vodou identity as anything other than constituted.

However, Scott’s reinterpretation of experience and identity, or subjectivity, also runs the risk of negating the process by which those subjects of “difference” constitute their *own* identity and experience. Scott does acknowledge that “subjects have agency”, an agency that “is created through situations and statuses conferred on them”(34). But Scott does not suggest a method for understanding how these situations and conferred statuses may be attributes of differing, although overlapping, ideological systems. While it is necessary to acknowledge the way in which ideological and political systems can both enable and oppress agency and when constituting subjectivity, it is equally important to develop a method of analysis that can comprehend the way

in which subjects agentially transform these systems. The ways in which Vodou practitioners constitute and reconstitute their own identities are not separate from dominant discourses. Nonetheless, it seems problematic to assume that Vodou identity, indeed the whole of the Vodou tradition, is constituted and circumscribed directly either by those dominant discourses or by the attempts of Vodouists to resist the hegemony of these discourses. What remains unanalysed is how Vodou constitutes identity, not simply in response to dominant discourses, but as part of it, infecting dominant discourses, as it were, "from the ground up".

This is something that those who study creolization, the merging of sometime disparate cultural elements, examine. In the New World, European and African peoples came into close and often violent contact. The creole cultures that resulted from this contact are understood in multiple ways. Some theorists insist that African identity, clearly a subjugated identity in this exchange, was stripped from the slaves, creating a entirely new identity category in the New World, while others insist that there exists an essential African quality that manifests itself in creole identity. In his introduction to *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean*, Richard Burton explains these multiple theories:

Was the experience of the Middle Passage so traumatic that, as one influential theory has it, African-born slaves were in effect stripped of all their cultural assets and compelled to piece together a culture out of what they could beg, borrow, or steal from the European-born masters? Or...did slave culture and the post emancipation Afro-American cultures derived from it remain African in underlying structure if not in all their surface expressions?(1997:1)

Attributing these two theories of creolization to Franklin Frazer and Melville Herskovits, respectively, Burton also posits a third, "mediating", theory which asks:

Did there take place some form of cultural miscegenation between Africa and Europe, Corresponding to the sexual miscegenation of black and white? According to this theory, starting from the very formation of slave colonies in the Caribbean, African and European cultural elements were merged, married, blended, or combined into a new and quintessentially Caribbean synthesis.(2)

Clearly, there has been no consensus amongst theorists about the nature of creolization in the Caribbean. And, although I may favour, this third theory outlined by Burton, my application of

this theory of creolization to the multifaceted countenance of Vodou is tempered, in no small part, by concerns about issues of authority, accountability, and authenticity (and syncretism, as I have discussed). I am less concerned with a theoretical analysis of the processes of creolization than with what these theories signify for practitioners of Vodou. How would such theories be read by someone who believes the doctrine of this tradition? If the notion that each religious community contains some fundamental or essential component that differentiates them from other communities is no longer a valid assumption, the question then arises: how is differentiation possible?

Obviously, Vodou is different from Christianity, Hinduism, and the West African traditions with which it is syncretic. What becomes clear in an analysis of Vodou is that this difference is not static. Instead it is fluid, constantly foreshadowing the possibility of change. Vodou does not retain a single, essential element that which defines its community. Instead it negotiates a plethora of elements, all dependent on the changing socio-economic climate in which religiosity is realized and practiced. Clearly, analysis of Vodou cannot depend on methodology or ideology that reify or naturalize identity categories. Such static concepts will simply not work on a tradition that is in a constant state of flux. The only knowledge generated through such discourse will perpetuate stereotypes and facilitate such wide generalizations that any emergent representation appears as a blatant distortion of the tradition. A methodology is required that is able to comprehend identity, not as a static category, but as something in the process of transition and transformation.

In many academic endeavours, the experience of the practitioner or subject of study is most frequently interpreted as “data”. Fieldwork and personal accounts are analyzed to provide insight into the social organization the subject inhabits. Joan W. Scott explains how certain utilization of experiential material runs the risk of reifying identity:

**It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation - as a foundation on which analysis is based**

that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that exclude considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction, and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualising it. When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. (1994:25)

If identity is understood to be fluid, the subject itself becomes an interpretive framework. The experience of the subject is no longer a static, foundational category. The cultural specificities of a fluid religiosity such as Vodou, rooted in both a historical and a contemporary malaise of social oppression, require both an understanding of the fluidity of identity and a comprehension of how histories of difference can be interpreted to spawn contemporary resistance. These are not mutually exclusive components. In fact, adaptability is a component of resistance. Certainly, adaptability has been cited by many (Brown 1989; Burton 1997) as the reason for the survival of the Vodou tradition in hostile and prohibitive conditions. It is clear that experience cannot be the ground upon which any facet of knowledge about Vodou is generated. Nor can it be used in such a way as to naturalize or essentialize the difference or “otherness” of Vodou practitioners. Instead, the experience of the practitioner becomes central, not foundational, and it is on this centrality that all methods of analysis are contingent.

This seemingly semantic repositioning of experience apparently re-orientes the way in which knowledge about Vodou may be produced. Experience is no longer understood as the authoritative, or authentic, data from which knowledge about a field of study is generated. Instead, experience is repositioned to allow for an understanding of how the experiential is constituted. Experience, according to Scott, is a discursive event, the result of the intersection of a diversity of social factors. By examining the experience of the Vodou practitioner as a series of discursive events along the continuum that is the Vodou tradition, the fluidity of the tradition is partially realized. Contemporary works in autobiographical theory are particularly adapted to an

understanding of experience as a discursive event. While autobiographical theory and criticism are diverse, most recognize the role discourse plays in the production of experience. A methodology based on autobiographical theory can account for both a practitioner's positioning in relation to social power dynamics, and the experience of the practitioner as a site for knowledge production. Such a methodology would necessarily utilize

a theory of autobiography that acknowledges the importance of marginalized voices, but avoids essentializing individuals and groups; that takes into account complex relationships between cultures and discourses that produce the speaking subject, but avoids viewing language as a transparent representation of the imagined real. (Bergland, 1994: 130)

The methodological lens of autobiographical theory provides a means by which identity and experience, constituted by discourse, can be understood as processes, rather than as static categories. In an analysis of Vodou religiosity, autobiographical discourse operates on multiple levels. Firstly, the primary source material of such a study is the experience of practitioners. Whether this experience is textual, or derived from oral accounts, it is represented autobiographically. Autobiographical texts have long been viewed as cultural signifiers, insights into the "spirit" of a given time or place.<sup>2</sup> However, contemporary definitions of autobiography have expanded the parameters of the genre, until it is understood to be "as various as the rhetorical expressions through which, with the mediation of language...subjectivity reads itself into the world" (Smith, 1994:3). As such, much of the ethnographic material of anthropological study falls within the broad generic boundaries of autobiography. Certain autobiographical theory and criticism provides a means of "reading" this self - represented experience. Autobiography is generally understood as a process, a practice of shaping identity out of

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<sup>2</sup> There are numerous discussions on the historical use of autobiographical narratives. See, for example, section I, "Theoretical Considerations" in Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fiction of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For a discussion which situates autobiographical material within contemporary ethnographic studies, see the introduction to *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (N.Y.: Routledge, 1992).

discourse (Smith 5). Post-modern, postcolonial, and feminist autobiographical theorists<sup>3</sup> have attempted to account for the intersection of multiple discourses in the creation of this identity. By examining dialogue that emerges between the “speaking subject” and discourse, theorists can glimpse the workings of power and privilege, marginalisation and oppression, which delineate the parameters of identity and experience.

Vodou identity is clearly situated on the margins of western discourse. The discourse of Vodou resonates with memories of colonization, slavery, poverty, and contemporary neo-colonialism<sup>4</sup>. In addition, Vodou religiosity is frequently marginalized within academic discourse. Perhaps due to its syncretic and hybrid nature, Vodou is often submitted to pejorative analysis, its status relegated to the problematic category of “folk” or “popular” religion. Consequently, any analysis of Vodou religiosity enters into a dialogue with a multiplicity of discourses that relegate Vodou to the margins of western society. Ultimately, the ideology of these discourses must be called into question, refuting assumptions and generalization about Vodou in the slippery quest for knowledge about the tradition. Autobiographical criticism, rooted in postcolonial, feminist, and post-modern discourse, can provide a method of analysis which critiques systemic workings of power, revealing how these systems work to constitute an identity in a constant state of flux. Implicitly, this methodology critiques the monolithic, unified, and hegemonic subject implicitly sought out by some who seek to understand how and where peoples belong. However, awareness of the transient nature of identity and experience creates unstable ground. Sidonie Smith explains in “Who’s Talking/ Who’s Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative”: “with identities in a constant state of flux, the founding mythology of the unified subject loses its power to give meaning to ...life, leaving. . . a state of homelessness” (1993:39). Many emigrants, exiles and diasporics feel, as Salman Rushdie does in the passage cited at the opening of this chapter, a sense of dislocation from place and from homeland.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the collection of essays in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, edited by Kathleen Ashely, Leigh Gilmore, et al (Amherst: The university of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

However, Vodou seems to embrace precisely this sense of homelessness. Home, for the contemporary Vodou practitioner, is often an elusive entity. The discourse of Vodou recalls (a mythologized) Africa, or *Ginen*, as an ancestral home. Vodou practitioners live already at a remove from “home”. This remove is intensified by factors such as immigration and conversion. Such factors shift not only the boundaries of home, but also the shapes, colours and ancestry of those who belong at home. As the Vodou tradition migrates across North America, the boundaries of community, family, and territory are continually redrawn. While mapping these shifting boundaries would be an impossible, if not a futile task, the ideology behind the construction of both internal and external perimeters reveals a complex network of socio-religious discourses that are explored throughout this thesis.

Utilizing an autobiographical methodology to examine ethnographic data yields an understanding of the fluidity of Vodou identity and situates this identity within the multiple discourses of western North American society. However, as I mentioned before, this textual analysis of the narratives and discourses, which constitute Vodou identity, do not fully take into account the way in which Vodou constitutes its own discourse and Vodouists agentially transform their own identities. In “Making Gender: Toward a Feminist, Minority, Postcolonial, Subaltern, etc, Theory of Practice”, Sherry Ortner attempts to develop a theoretical framework which mediates between the deconstructionist position of textual analysis and contemporary theories of experience (1996:3). Ortner’s “practice theory” attempts to understand that experience and identity is both constrained by a given social order and transforms this social order. Ortner sees “practice theory” as the only theory that mediates the tension between two seemingly polarized understandings of identity in society that is discussed at the outset of this chapter (4). Building on the work of such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, Ortner critiques earlier attempts at a mediating “practice” theory for a refusal to put the workings of social power dynamics at the centre of analysis. Ortner criticizes such theorists for “missing

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<sup>4</sup> See *Involuntary Exile: Neo-Voodoo in Neo-Colonial Times* in this volume.

the point” when it comes to an analysis of “subaltern” identity. The “point”, according to Ortner, is the power imbalance between the subaltern and the dominant order (6). By extension, it is this power dynamic, constituting the experience of the subaltern both by constraining it and by positing a discursive structure that the agentic subject inevitably resists.

Yet it is exactly this centralization of power that Ortner wishes to execute within practice theory that I find disconcerting. Clearly, this theoretical framework allows for an important validation of how power dynamics affect lives and produce structures that reproduce disenfranchisement. But this framework also assumes conflict. It seems to assume that some identities (subaltern, for instance) are more likely to be “victims” of the constraints levelled by social organisation. This assumption that Africans and subsequently Caribbeans were *simply* victims of more powerful colonizers, does not always sit well with some of the “real” people “out there”. What if these underlying assumptions contradict some of the central and “identifying” precepts of the cultures we are studying? How do we account for this disagreement? Is it possible to theorize the power dynamics of identity and identification without assuming a simple and binary dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonized? Is it possible to create a framework that does not assume a continual conflict between dominant and subdominant communities and cultures? I am not sure what such a theoretical framework would look like and the creation of such a theory is certainly out of the scope of this study. However, the implications of theories that do make the above assumptions should be born in mind throughout this analysis of Vodou. What if, and it is not such a big if, these assumptions imply the idea that emergent socio-cultural entities such as Vodou are actually the result of resistance to colonial power structures? Such a conclusion not only de-historicizes and de-contextualises the Vodou tradition, but also keeps it in a subjugating (resisting) position. Vodou identity is conceptualised as a resisting identity, born out of and still reacting to the unequal power dynamics of the colonisation of Haiti. Such a conclusion serves to perpetuate a cyclical analysis; it seems to foreshadow the inevitability of the subaltern as victim of hegemony and domination.



In the previous chapter, I explored briefly the “indigenous” methodological and theoretical frameworks put forward by academics concerned, in particular, with the study of the Yoruba tradition in West Africa. Margaret Drewal examines the epistemologies of Yoruba ritual in *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*. In this ethnographic text Drewal elucidates a Yoruba way of thinking that is often quite different from the ways of thinking put forth in contemporary post-modern theory. According to Drewal, the Yoruba understand power (*ase*) as something that can be manipulated by human actors, regardless of their social positioning.<sup>5</sup> Humans learn to manipulate this generative transformative force in order to effect change on the “real” world and to enhance the quality of their lives (Drewal, 1992:27). Drewal traces this Yoruba notion of *ase* to its various incarnations in the New World, including *axe* in Brazilian Candomblé and *ache* in Cuban Santería. The term does not seem to have made the passage to Haiti and seems to have no recognisable counter part in the Creole terminology of Vodou.<sup>6</sup> There may be many reasons for this but I think, in part, this occurred because power, for the hybrid peoples of St. Domingue, moved from the external, phenomenological world, where it had previously resided in all things, to the internal realm. Power, for Vodouists, became located in the self. Granted this notion that power is at the heart of the Yoruba analytical framework (according to Drewal) is at the heart of my understanding of Vodou identity. Nonetheless, my own experience with this religion, and with a few signposts along the way, suggests that this might not be so far fetched an idea. One such signpost popped up when a very well educated houngan explained to me the difference between Vodou and some other religious traditions;

[Vodou] is very different from all other religions generally called “revealed” in respect that it is an initiatic religion. Revealed religions operate with a book written by an individual or a small group of people who have had a divine revelation which everybody has to live by. Initiatic religions, on the opposite, allow each individual to have his own

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<sup>5</sup> Yoruba ritual specialists are trained in this manipulation of power and become skilled at it. However, this agentic redistribution of power at will is not limited to specialists within the Yoruba tradition (Drewal, 1992:26).

<sup>6</sup> The closest relation I am aware of is *ason*, the term for the sacred rattle used by the ritual specialists. It certainly is not a literal or direct translation of the word power, although “taking the *ason*” does symbolize a type of social recognition and represents the attainment of a level of spiritual power and ritual expertise.

revelation through dreams, imitations, through *lwa* who come and talk to them. Hence, he may develop his strategy for his own life.(Houngan Christophe, personal communication)

It is this emphasis on personal revelation and on creating a strategy for life by negotiating the difficulties of poverty, racism and even illness—from a position of empowerment not powerlessness—that suggests a relocation of power not to the individual, but to the strategy of identification. I offer this tentative idea of identifications of power within the discourse of the Vodou tradition without making a definitive conclusion about this elusive and fluid religion, but by suggesting it as a corrective to what I see as the perpetuation of subjugation that is made manifest through the applications of theories that assume subaltern identities such as Vodou are merely and continually resisting hegemony. In the subsequent chapter of this thesis I further explore the concepts of home and identity raised here and suggest that Vodou does not only respond to the effect of colonisation that may or may not have shaped its emergence in the new world, but also practices some of the same hegemonic strategies of discursive production that are so often attributed only to dominant social and cultural identities.

## *Subtext II*

My friend Nika is leaving Montreal. She is going back to Haiti after spending 5 years here. She will be returning with more books and cds, some new clothes, collapsible Ikea furniture and a new baby and fiancé- soon-to-be-husband (although I believe Nika would object to that last term). This is the story that deterritorialized theories so often fail to tell. The story of return. And the story of who goes along on the journey back home. Nika is, I suppose, a diasporic Haitian. She has a Canadian citizenship; her sister has an American one. I suppose if you added up all the years of her life, the ones spent in Haiti, the ones spent in Miami, the ones spent in Montreal...and elsewhere, I suppose the sum and total of those added up years could well prove that Nika has spent more than half her life outside of Haiti, away from her homeland. Still, Haiti very clearly occupies an important place in her conceptualization of herself. Her last voyage of residence was 5 years ago, when she arrived in Montreal, speaking French, English and Creole, as an eighteen year old accompanied only by her 15 year old sister. She went to school here for 4 of those 5 years, and her multi-lingual abilities and multidisciplinary interests have made her an official student of no less than three of Montreal's many institutions of higher learning. She is, what many would call, an activist, involved in numerous women's and socialist organizations. I met Nika three years ago when I was hosting and producing a multi-disciplinary cabaret I had, rather spontaneously, decided to call *Legba*. Legba is the *lwa* of the crossroad in Haitian Vodou, opening up the passageway between the "real" world and the world of the *mysteres* or the invisible realm. At the time it seemed and appropriate appellation for a show that brought together disparate performance elements and "offered them up" to an equally diverse audience. Indeed, I thought the name perfect, at the time.

It was Trudy who introduced Nika and me at yet another performance event where I was shamelessly promoting my own series and drumming up support. Never one to be concerned with preamble or niceties Nika immediately asked me why my show was called Legba. I explained my reasoning feeling my explanation to be woefully inadequate. I knew Nika was Haitian and assumed she was an irate Vodouist who saw my flagrant use of the name of a *lwa* as the title of a secular show as nothing more than ignorant and troubling cultural appropriation. I was only partially wrong. Much later I learned that Nika did indeed think that I was committing a heinous act of cultural appropriation. I also learned that she was not a Vodouist. Hailing from a (fairly) middle-class Haitian family, Nika was raised in a strange mixture of agnosticism and atheism, a mixture that she still embraces today. After that first awkward meeting Nika and I continued to bump into each other at various artistic and activist events in Montreal. Gradually, her initial acrimony towards me faded. I am not entirely sure why. My work as a performance artist make public my politics, my own particular views that brand me with labels such as “feminist”, may have made Nika re-think how unaccountable my acts of cultural appropriation were. We began to talk a little about Vodou swapping stories about the *lwa*, comparing knowledge about the culture. I think Nika “found out” I was a Vodouist, I certainly never told her, but ultimately I think that it was this knowledge that changed her mind about me. We spent time in each other’s kitchens and now she laughs at me and says “I despised you before I even met you. I thought you were evil incarnate” and I laugh too “nice talk for an atheist” I tease. Nika’s agnosticism (for she is more agnostic than atheist at the moment) is hilarious and she is well aware of it. She professes not to believe in Vodou (although she is intensely proud of and knowledgeable about this aspect of Haitian culture) but when I offer, jokingly, to “cast a spell” for her in order to help out with some trivial aspect of her everyday life she rounds on me with a synergy of mock fury and self-conscious laughter and makes me promise to do no such thing. Since the birth of her first son Nika has been preoccupied with the fact that her fiancé hails from a long line of male offspring. Nika badly wants a daughter and she is worried that her fiancé is

genetically predisposed to giving her boys. As is our pattern, I offered her a charm to ensure that her next child is female. When she gets angry with me for such a suggestion I try to deflect by revealing my ineffectiveness as a spell caster; “I am not very good, you know. My spells are never very effective,” I told her. “Not a big step from an ineffective spell to one that backfires”, Nika fired back.

Nika’s “disbelief” in Vodou is not absolute. I am not sure what it is exactly, but it resonates with me. When I first encountered Vodou I loved the stuff of it. I loved the rituals and the “props” that filled the altars and sacred spaces in which Vodou was encountered. I don’t think I disbelieved the Vodou faith *per se*, but I did not believe. I held myself at a remove; I positioned myself at a distance. I was a respectful outsider, an observer. I think I felt that belief was somehow dangerous. Vodou is not a “nice” religion; it is full of dangers and pitfalls, of possible curses and of angry *lwas*, of malevolent *bokors* and the possibility of zombification or even simply losing one’s spirit or *ti bon ange* in the rigors of the possession ritual. If I did not believe in all of this “stuff” I couldn’t be harmed by it. I could safely enjoy the spectacle of ritual and avoid the responsibility of belief. Interestingly enough one of the questions I am most frequently asked by people who find out that I am studying Vodou is “does that stuff work?” When I stall, not wanting to get into what I consider a complicated topic, they invariably answer for me. “I guess it works if you believe it does”, they tell me. Strictly speaking this is not true. Vodou “works” whether or not one believes in it. Ritual specialist, *houngan* and *mambo*, frequently perform love charms and other divinations that are meant to and do “work” on non-believers. Still, belief is clearly an organizing principle of knowledge. Without getting into the technicalities of it here, I would posit that it does not do much good to approach the study of any religion from the position of disbelief. Disbelief can prejudice a researcher in immeasurable ways, severely limiting the knowledge that she can hope to glean from the examination of a religious tradition. This does not mean that every student of every religion must be a “believer”,

but rather that disbelief must be suspended. The researcher must be open to the possibility that the religion “works”, that there is veracity in not only the ideas and structures of a religion but also in the stories practitioners tell about their spiritual tradition. I think, for Nika, Vodou “works” whether she believes in it or not. It is her unique relationship with both Vodou and faith that has made obvious the importance of belief in this study of Vodou.

Nika does not want to raise her newborn son in Canada, nor anywhere else in North America for that matter. She wants to raise him in Haiti. I suppose I could make some analysis about kinship patterns, point out that Nika wants to go back to Haiti to be closer to her extended family and particularly her parents. And seeing Nika with her mother in the weeks after Marco was born, I certainly believe that being closer to family and built-in baby sitters is part of her grand plan. But it would be reductionist beyond belief to suggest that Nika is going back to Haiti simply for kinship. One of my favorite people in the world, Nika makes me laugh when I don’t think I could partly because of her refusal to be anything but self critical, anything other than brutally self aware. And she expects nothing less of those around her. In some senses, Nika should look like so many of my other friends, those who didn’t make it onto these pages and are undoubtedly letting out sighs of relief at the fact. Nika should look like a young Black Nationalist. And to some extent she does. She is certainly aware of how systems of domination in the west have marginalized and disenfranchised people on the basis of their race, gender, class, sexuality and a myriad of other factors. She is acutely aware of how these systems of domination play into economic and political factors that render Haiti one of the poorest countries in the world. Like many Black Nationalists she sees the way to undoing systemic domination as lying in the centralizing of marginal experiences and discourses. But Nika criticizes notions of purity every chance she gets, and Black Nationalism needs purity to survive. Nika is, to me, a true transnational, not simply because she moves easily from country to country, always knowing where the Haitians are in every city, but because she cannot help but question nationality, its

implications not just for her, her white fiancé and her son, but also for a globalized world. To me, that is what transnationals really are, not just victims of happenstance clinging to community and unaware of the cultural bastardizations that occur in the New World, but individuals who transcend nationalism, who realize how arbitrary borders really are. And Nika knows more about Vodou than some Vodouists.

## Chapter 4

### **Gods on the Move: An Examination of Faith, Memory, and Motion in Vodou Discourse**

*I am a Vodouist. But I am not Haitian. There are a lot of us now. Non-Haitian Vodouists. And we are an odd and uneasy race.*

The above few sentences were found buried in what I optimistically term my field notes. The copious quantities of words that are supposed to attest to the *reality* of my work. In truth, I am not at all sure that the bundles of spiral bound notebooks, stuffed with loose pages and words that I usually don't remember writing, fulfill any academic purpose. I am certainly not sure that these records of my so-called observations even come close to illuminating the Vodou tradition, its form, or its content. However, as I browse through these testaments to my uncertainty, I am occasionally struck by a word, a sentence or maybe even two. And I am struck by these phrases, not because they illuminate my field of study, but because like a buoy floating on the top of this sea of words, they signal the presence of something below. And this is the case with the few sentences above, they mark something that I have not yet seen in my journey through the realms of Vodou. So I want to take this space to explore that sub-terrain that was marked by the words above. Although, like any buoy, this one warns of the possibility of becoming marooned in shallow waters.

My analysis of the Vodou tradition has been concerned with the fluid and fluctuating nature of Vodou. In particular, the fluctuations which occur when Vodou travels, along with its practitioners, from traditional Vodou centres, or homes, such as Haiti, across North America. Since Vodou is a syncretic and aggregating religion, it "picks up" different religious and cultural characteristics and signifiers as it establishes itself on new geographical terrain, creating new Vodou centres in places such as Montreal. Vodou also picks up new practitioners as it moves



across North America. The legacy of Black Nationalism,<sup>1</sup> which has left an ever increasing interest in African and African derived spirituality, the search for “new age” spiritualities in a secular world, where religion is a choice rather than an inherited practice, and the missionistic tendencies of Vodou itself,<sup>2</sup> may all account for the growth of Vodou practitioners in North America. Regardless of the reasons, Vodou is growing in North America (Barnes 1989; Constetino 1993; Glazier 1998), and many of the new practitioners of this tradition have no direct ties to traditional Vodou centres such as Haiti. Analysis of the way in which this travel, along with the increasing influx of new practitioners, has impacted on the practice and discourse of Vodou inevitably destabilises simplistic notions of ethnic, cultural and religious identity as reified, static and bounded to a single local or, for that matter, a single “tradition”. The way in which Vodou identity is constituted and reconstituted within a climate of constant change, has become a central focus of my thesis, a means of elucidating a Vodou epistemology which insists on cultural and religious specificity while undergoing continuous transformation. While my analysis has been most concerned with the way in which the influx of new practitioners and converts to Vodou have impacted on Vodou identity, what has slipped under the discourse generated by this study, is an exploration of the way in which the identity of these “newcomers” to Vodou is constituted by the discourse of this tradition. An exploration of the relationship of those who have no (substantiated) genealogical links to the Vodou tradition, to a Vodou discourse

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Black Nationalist movement in North America see Robert Elliot Fox's *Masters of the Drum: Black Lit/oratures Across the Continuum* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996). See also “In/voluntary Exile: Neo-Voodoo in Neo-Colonial Times”, this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Most Vodouists believe that their religion comprises the best techniques possible for accessing divinity. The rituals and rites of Vodou are open to all, regardless of their race or their level of initiation into the Vodou tradition. In fact, most ceremonies are comprised predominately of the uninitiated. On the “Haiti-list”, an internet list service about all things Haitian, discussion abounds about the appropriateness of rituals and temples which are being set up to cater to “tourists”, often labeled “blans” (whites) who pay high prices for rituals and initiations. Clearly, the openness of the Vodou tradition is a complex issue, but one not central to this analysis. See *In/voluntary Exile: Neo-Voodoo in Neo-Colonial Times*, this volume for more discussion on this topic. For a discussion of missionism and conversion in Vodou, set within the context of long historical relationship with Catholicism (more than slightly missionistic) see Leslie Desmangles' *Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, (Chapel Hill and London; University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

that references the mythology, language, history and cultural specificity of Haiti, or even Africa, does much to illuminate the workings of Vodou itself.

The way in which “newcomers” to Vodou interrelate with the discourse, cosmology, and rhetoric of the Vodou tradition, is something that has yet to be examined by those involved in the study of Vodou. The cosmology of Vodou, and the realisation of that cosmology in ritual practice, is filled with the historical specificity of Haiti. Since before the inception of the nation-state of Haiti—from the Middle Passage<sup>3</sup> of the slaves and their gods to the dislocating experiences of slavery and colonialism, from the slave Revolution and independence to the American occupations, from the Duvalier regime to Aristide, Preval and the present—Vodou has always been closely linked with the political discourse of the state.<sup>4</sup> This political discourse, along with the history of Haiti is manifest in Vodou. Politicians, such as the Duvaliers, assume the names and dress of well known gods; characters from the history of Haiti, such as Jean-Jacques Dessalines, come to life in the Vodou rituals of possession; the stories of historical events, such as the slave Revolution that led to the naming of Haiti as an independent nation-state, are told in the songs of Vodou liturgy; and characters from the pantheon of Vodou gods become incarnate, participating in the very battles that have come to define Haiti. Even the most cursory examination of Haitian Vodou reveals that it is just that, Haitian. This is not to suggest that Haitian identity is any more of a reified, static or bounded identity, than Vodou itself, but simply to posit an understanding of Haitian and Vodou identities, histories and even practices, as inextricably linked. Given these links between Haitian and Vodou identity, one cannot help but wonder where exactly these growing numbers of new practitioners fit into this multiple discourse.

### ***Homeward Bound***

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<sup>3</sup> The terms Middle Passage refers to the horrific voyage of African born peoples as they were transported, as slaves, to the Caribbean.

<sup>4</sup> See Micheal-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

In Montreal there exists no clear distinction between “new” and “traditional” Vodou practitioners. Vodouists of many nationalities can be detected at Vodou ceremonies held by Haitian-Vodou priests and priestesses, and, perhaps more significantly to this analysis, at various gatherings within the Haitian community. In fact, in my experience, non-Haitian Vodouists are rather knowledgeable about Haiti, both its history and its contemporary political climate. In contemporary practices of Vodou in North America, Haiti is certainly recognised as a seminal aspect of knowledge about Vodou. In part, knowledge about Haiti is generated simply by the structure of Vodou practices which insist all practitioners return to the Caribbean island to perform even the most elementary of initiation rituals. *Mambo* and *houngan* are usually paid to conduct these ceremonies (although they will only do so if they believe a person is ready for initiation) and in addition to this payment, most initiates are expected to pay the *mambo* or *houngan*’s airfare back to Haiti (the priest or priestess usually arranges lodging). The fees for initiations vary but can be quite expensive. As one *mambo* explains:

*Asogwe* is the most expensive . Three thousand Haitian dollars was a standard fee for *asogwe* in the year 1995 in Port-au-Prince, but costs are now higher, some *houngan* ask as much as \$20,000 Haitian. This is because the person is making an investment in a profession, it's like going to college - once someone has credentials they are free to go to work and earn money. *Hounsi kanzo* usually costs less than \$200 U.S. (Mambo Maxine, personal communication)

Given the Haitian economy, being as instable as it is, it would be difficult to suggest that it could not benefit from this monetary exchange between Westerners and Haitians. Nonetheless, it is clear that the rigors of Vodou initiation insists on an active engagement with Haiti and Vodou communities and institutions in that country, and this may be the reason that Vodouists are so aware of and interested in the conditions of that country. However, I think that the awareness of the specificity of Haitian culture within the Vodou community is not simply a result of the transcontinental travel undergone by initiates. Most Vodou ceremonies are attended largely by non-initiates and although initiation is valued, many practitioners never undergo the arduous process. There is something deeper about the motion between Vodou and Haiti than simply the

literal journey to the “homeland”. Vodou does not have a recognisable hierarchy of religious authority that is recognised by all practitioners, it does not have a universal creed or religious text, and it doesn’t even have a consistent dogma. To be a Vodouist (in Haiti or in North America) is to make a choice, not to identify with any particular creed, but to identify with the fluidity of Vodou itself. To be a Vodouist is to choose to immerse oneself in an acculturation process that transforms one’s understanding of self. To be a Vodouist in North America is to be what many call “a friend of Haiti”. It also assumes a certain awareness of the political and economic plight, the social conditions and even the history of the country that spawned the *Iwas* the new practitioner now serves. In a way, this is deterritorialisation in reverse.

Contemporary anthropological discourse has become increasingly concerned with the development of theoretical tools which can account for what many see as the “deterritorialisation” of the bounded nation state, and for the increasing rate of global movement amongst peoples. Deterritorialisation has implications not only for those moving from homeland to “new” lands, but also for the long-term residents of these new lands. As Arjun Appadurai explains in “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology”, deterritorialization applies

not only to obvious examples such as transnational corporations and money markets, but also to ethnic groups, secretarian movements and political formations, which increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities. Deterritorialization....affects the loyalties of groups (especially in the context of complex diasporas), their transnational manipulation of currencies and other forms of wealth and investment, and the strategies of states. The loosening of the bonds between people, wealth, and territories fundamentally alters the basis of cultural reproduction. (1991:192)

I would suggest that cultural reproduction is altered both for transnationals and for nationals, that the process of acculturation move both ways. For immigrant Haitians, the processes of deterritorialization, the method by which their diasporic identity is constituted (in no small part through their relationship to the “home country”), is, like all else Haitian, influenced by the political discourse of Haiti. In *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation States*, the authors explore how the contemporary

political discourse of Haitian presidents such as Jean-Bertrand Aristide has served to emphasise the boundlessness (versus the boundedness) of national identity;

This definition of Haitians in the United States as part of the population of the Haitian nation-state had been popularized by Aristide when he named Haitians abroad "the 10th Department" *Dizyem Departman-an* of a country that has 9 geographical divisions called *Departman*. In their national discourse, Aristide and many persons in his government who had lived abroad for many years and maintained transnational networks were rupturing the territorial definition of the state and creating a deterritorialized nation-state. Their construction of the identity of Haitian immigrants reflected the emergence of Haitian transnationalism. At the same time these leaders were shaping the manner in which Haitians are coming to understand their migration. (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994:147)

Clearly, the deterritorialization of national identity must shape the processes by which identity is constituted and re-constituted by ever varying political, social, and religious climates. However, while Aristide may have been one of the first to articulate a political discourse which emphasises the transnational element of Haitian identity, it should be noted that Vodou identity is no stranger to change and flux, nor to travel and migration.

It could be posited that Vodou identity has been constituted in motion. The horrific Middle Passage which brought the predominately West African slaves (Yoruba, Ibo, Asante, Dahomean, Mandango, and Wangol, to name a few) onto the island, as well as the experiences of slavery itself, (experiences which, as will be explored later, may have been bounded to a single geographical local, but still served to perpetuate *dislocation*), certainly shaped the discourses of Vodou. In fact, the effects of the migration and immigration of Vodou practitioners within the discourse of Vodou, can be read as an extension of the motion that has constituted Vodou identity since its inception. So, while new theories of deterritorialized nation-states and transnational experiences may be arising to deal with the seemingly new conditions of globalization, they can be applied equally well to the disruption of boundaries and the subsequent re-constitution of ethnic and cultural identity, that occurred in a previous epoch of globalization—the era of

colonisation.<sup>5</sup> While the processes of creolization that occurred in the “new world”, on and off the plantation, have been understood in a variety of ways (Burton, 1997:2), the end result, that of a so called creole culture, exhibits many of the characteristics of transnational societies. In many ways, creole cultures are transnational societies, although perhaps not in the way we are used to conceptualising these mobile social groups. In his introduction to *Transnational Connection: Culture, People, Places*, Ulf Hannerz explores some of the questions that shapes his (and that of others’) coming to consciousness about the issues and concerns of transnational theories. Speaking about his anthropological work in contemporary Nigeria, Hannerz wonders; “How do you understand and portray, a culture shaped by an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and the imported” (Hannerz, 1996:5)? And, certainly, this is one of the central concerns of transnational theories. However, as the globe has transformed, and as globalization has led to shifting and permeable borders, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine just who is indigenous, and who is imported. In Canada, where dominant society is itself the result of imports to this land, the result of multiple colonial efforts, it seems ironic to label Haitian immigrants imports. Even more difficult is the status of those Vodou takes back to Haiti, importing an ever shifting population of Vodou initiates and “friends of Haiti” who identify with that land and culture with varying degrees of “righteousness”. It is similarly difficult to separate peoples into the imported and the indigenous in the historical specificities of Haiti, a land where both the whites and the blacks, the slave-masters and the slaves, pledged allegiances to other nations, and the “truly” indigenous peoples of that island, the Caribs, soon ceased to exist as a recognisable people. While these examples may seem to serve to make Hannerz’s question almost irrelevant, they seem, to me, to serve the purpose of pointing to an issue which underlies all of Hannerz’s text, the issue of nationality (Hannerz, 1996:6). It seems futile to speak of transnationalism without comprehending, on at least some level, the national allegiances that are

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion about the specific brand of “globalization” mediated by the practices of the slave trade see Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History*, (Berkeley, Calif; University of California Press, 1982).

held, and have historically been held, by the diversity of peoples who are criss-crossing this globe. My goal is not to examine, in depth, national rhetoric, but to explore what such rhetoric can signify for peoples dislocated and relocated by the forces of globalization. More specifically, this is an analysis of how national rhetorics collide and elide within the discourses of Vodou. In other words, this is an examination of what Vodou does to national discourses, how it appropriates them, how it constitutes and reconstitutes them, and, perhaps most significantly, how it re/members them.

Vodou does not posit a simplistic or romantic memory of Haitian history. Instead, it allows sometimes competing stories to surface within the rituals of the religion. The stories of slavery, colonisation, missionism, the Haitian Slave Revolution, and the American Invasion, as well as contemporary history that includes the reign of the Duvalier dictatorship, are made apparent in the possession rituals of Vodou religiosity. It is in the rituals of possession that Vodou practitioners are able to *visit* the multiple and conflicted identities that exist in the matrix of Vodou discourse. It is in possession rituals that new practitioners *learn* about Haiti and become acclimated to an epistemology, which does not see identity (national or otherwise) as an undisputable thing. The methodological approach of historical materialism<sup>6</sup> allows for the varying histories and identities of Vodou to be tapped, not to arrive at definitive and conclusive narratives, but to trace the movement of stories, the different meanings they incur, and the way in which they function as part of the symbolic and discursive currency of contemporary Vodou. In the collapse of past and present that manifests in rituals of possession, characters form the history of Haiti (and Vodou) surface in contemporary practice. One such character is Jean Jacques

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<sup>6</sup> Like all else in this study, what is being used here is a qualified historical materialism. Borrowing from theorists such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx I concur with the premise that societies are productive entities that are intent on growth and that this growth is mediated by social relations of production which form such cultural institutions as nation and state, religion and aesthetic production. I think historical materialism and its understanding of social relations are well suited to a study of transnationalism. However, the emphasis of historical materialism applied to the study of culture has shifted from the hoped for overthrow of capitalism (especially evident in Marx) to a realization of the historical and material conditions which govern social systems.

Dessalines, the first monarch of Haiti. This monarchy was established after a thirteen-year revolution against French colonial powers. At the time of the revolution, Saint Domingue was one of the most profitable colonies and played an important role in the economy of France. Led by a general by the name of Leclerc, who was sponsored and directed by his brother-in-law, Napoleon, the Revolution, lasting from 1791 to 1804, was bloody and arduous, and both sides were depleted. On January 1st, 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed the independence of the island now named Haiti, and the victory of the slaves and “free coloured”<sup>7</sup> people of the island over the military forces of the French colonists. Folklore tells that this victory was secured, in part, by the *lwas* of the Vodou pantheon, who were invoked by the escaped slave and *houngan*, Boukman in a Vodou ceremony at *Bois Caiman* in August of 1791. At this moment the inextricable relationship of Vodou to the history of Haiti becomes visible. The cosmology of Vodou has become populated with the characters of the Revolution, and similarly, the events of history are populated with the *lwas* themselves. Dessalines story<sup>8</sup> illuminates the complex relationship between history and cosmology.

### ***The Hiss of History: Strategies for Becoming an Emperor***

Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a former slave and leader of the successful Slave Revolution, reigned for a short while as the heroic first emperor of Haiti. The task of building a national discourse fell to Dessalines and, realising the need for cohesion and unity, he declared, in Haiti’s first constitution, that all Haitians, regardless of their skin colour should be called “black”

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<sup>7</sup> The definition of race and racial identity in Haiti differs significantly from the models used in the United States. Prior to the revolution the illegitimate offspring that resulted from the sexual relations between masters and their slaves were accorded a “middle status” somewhere between the subjugated status of the slaves and the exalted and privileged position of the whites. These “free coloured” people or *affranchis* were allowed freedom, access to education, and the right to own property. They fought, in the Revolution, on both sides of the conflict, both for and against the independence of the island. For a discussion of this racial categorizations see David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> See also Chapter 6, “I Shake My Shackles, Raise Every Hackle With My Tongue Loose”, for more discussion on Dessalines.

<sup>9</sup> An earlier version of this section appeared in “Bittersweet Victory, Bittersweet Defeat: Strategies of Identification in Vodou Cosmology” (*The Journal of Religion and Culture*, Vol. 13, 1999).



(Nicholls 1979, 36). Today in Haiti, all outsiders, even blacks from other lands are called *blan* (white), a poignant reminder of Dessalines' legacy. By positing blackness as a culturally and politically defining concept, Dessalines effectively inverted the hierarchy of colonialism that had been used to justify the subjugating of blacks during slavery. There existed in colonial St. Domingue no love loss between *bossal*, or African born slaves, and creoles, some of whom were called *affranchis* (and who had enjoyed freedom and privileges during colonial rule). Dessalines quickly made enemies of the political and social *mulatto* elite. Dessalines was assassinated on October 17, 1806, on the road to Port-au-Prince, at the juncture called Point Rogue. The assassination was orchestrated by a group of *mulatto* elite, including Alexandre Petion, a former comrade of Dessalines, who was to become the first elected president of Haiti. Dessalines' body was dismembered, the pieces distributed to a crowd gathered in Port-au-Prince. From hero to enemy of the state, Dessalines story was quickly re-written by his successors to paint him as a vicious dictator whose militant vision of Haiti was fuelled by violence. Stories still circulate in Haiti that, illustrating Dessalines' hatred for all things French, tell of Dessalines asking members of the populace questions in French and then ordering their death if they responded in French rather than Creole (the official language of Haiti as declared by Dessalines) on the grounds that they were not "true" Haitians (Dayan 1995, 23). These stories proliferated after Dessalines' death, eroding his status as a Haitian historical hero. Perhaps because of Dessalines' conflicted depiction in historical documents, as either redemptive hero or vicious dictator, any attempt to create a historical reconstruction of Dessalines is a task immersed in ambiguity and conflict. However, the purpose of my analysis is not to uncover the "truth" of Dessalines, the historical figure, but to come to an awareness of how this figure and the events associated with him circulate in Vodou discourse, cosmology and contemporary Vodou practice. Dis-membered in death, Dessalines was eventually re-membered as a *lwa*.

The re-memberment is often said to correspond to Dessalines' gradual reintroduction into the rhetoric of Haitian politics. In *Haiti, History and the Gods*, Joan Dayan suggests that

Dessalines was reintroduced as a means of “pacifying” the peasant majority who found themselves in a position of economic and social subjugation similar to that of slavery. Gradually, the liberation of Dessalines from his former status as dictator came to be a substitute for the liberation of the “masses” from the shackles of poverty. It was during this period (from approximately 1845 to 1904) when Dessalines was resurrected and monumentalised in the new emerging narratives of Haitian nationalism, that Dessalines began to make his appearance as a *lwa* (Dayan 1995, 28). If the reconstruction of the historical figure of Dessalines is a next to impossible task, the reconstruction of his history as a *lwa* is certainly out of reach of this analysis. Nonetheless, touching a history that extends beyond the boundaries of written, or official, history is integral to an understanding of the concurrence of seeming conflict that is so characteristic of Vodou discourse, cosmology and identity. It could be argued that the second coming of Dessalines, as divine being, is a stretch on the journey towards the moments at which the disparate threads of Vodou narratives coalesce. Dessalines, re-membered, seems to represent the ambiguity of the Revolution.

In the blend that is the Vodou tradition, Creole *lwes*, born in Haiti, such as Dessalines, become associated with African gods who belong to the various African *nations* (for example, the Rada nation or sect, descendant from the Dahomean tradition in west Africa) included in Vodou. Dessalines is associated with the African gods, Ogou – warrior gods in traditional Yoruba practice. Because of this association Dessalines the *lwa* is referred to as Ogou Dessalines. The Ogou family of spirits, associated as they are with war and, implicitly, the political and social ramifications of war, come to represent the ambiguities of power relations in Vodou communities. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains:

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

By conceptualising Ogou as a tool of memory, Brown suggests how the structures of the “possession-performance” collapse the meta-narrative of history into specificity, a specificity that becomes applicable and understandable in the everyday lives of Vodou practitioners. As a member of the Ogou family, Dessalines is an ambiguous character, not unlike the character he has come to represent in the historical narrative of Haiti. Dessalines the *lwa* illustrates the ambiguity of “holding” power in Vodou discourse. Clearly, power can be both redemptive or resistive, but also destructive. Dessalines embodies both these aspects of power concurrently. He also embodies the military and political power of Haitian history while simultaneously embodying the power dynamics specific to the everyday life of Vodou practitioners. Through Dessalines, possessions, like the possessions of other Ogou *lwas*, allow practitioners to *visit* the identity of the warrior. However, these warriors are not romanticized ideals, but characters who have ingested the bittersweet taste of both victory and defeat and have generated knowledge, understanding and story from the realisation of the concurrence of these two events. Dessalines and the practitioners who meet him in the ritual of possession disseminate this ambiguity. As Dayan explains:

Called by the literate elite “the Great One,” “the Saviour,” “the Lover of Justice,” and “the Liberator,” the Dessalines remembered by Vodou initiates is far less comforting or instrumental. They know how unheroic the hero-turned-god could be. The image of Dessalines in the cult of the people remains unequivocal and corruptible: a trace of what is absorbed by the mind and animated in the gut. How inevitable are the oscillations from hero to detritus, from power to vulnerability, from awe to ridicule: a convertibility that Vodou would keep working, viable, and necessary. (1995:28)

While vital to his character, the concurrence of victory and defeat, past and present, history and cosmology, Creole and African, are not the only concurrence that Dessalines embodies.

In addition to being both a Creole and African god, Dessalines, like many of the Ogou, is related to Saint James the Elder, a Catholic saint who is depicted riding into war on a white horse. Catholicism has instigated a troubled relationship with Vodou, often deriding it as superstitious and primitive. Despite this troubled history, or perhaps because of it, Vodou embraced the Roman

Catholicism of the French colony, not as a mask behind which the “true” nature of Vodou hid from the prohibitive laws of the colony, but as another concurrence, another strand in the narrative of both Vodou and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. The Haitian flag, like the Haitian nation, was born in a reshaping of all things French, and all things colonial. Upon victory, a possessed Dessalines tore the white strip out of the French flag: a symbolic removal of whiteness from Haiti. Many stories circulate about what spirit possessed Dessalines in this moment, no doubt because many spirits would like to take credit for this powerful symbolic act. However, it has been suggested that Dessalines was possessed by the Virgin Mary herself and in this possessed state cursed the whites in *langay*, the secret language of Vodou (Dayan, 1995:52).

This complex inter-play of human and divine, *lwa* and saint, speaks to the character of Vodou, a character that not only understands the concurrence of conflicts, but also uses it to generate knowledge, identity and experience. In the discourse of Vodou, a person, a place, or an event can be many things, places, and times simultaneously. While this concurrence of seeming contradictions appears to render the cosmological world of Vodou vague and insubstantial, it also renders it distinct. By layering meanings onto single entities, the description necessary to depict becomes as thick as any Geertzian recipe. The narrative that starts with the historical figure of Dessalines does not end at Dessalines’ possession by the Virgin Mary, nor at his re-memberment as a Vodou *lwa*. Instead, in this narrative, Dessalines, undergoes even more transformations, acquiring even more contradictions and ambiguities – and specificities.

At the moment of Dessalines’ death another character enters this narrative, a woman by the name of Défilée (Dayan, 1995:39). Like Dessalines, Défilée is shrouded in ambiguity. *Common knowledge* tells that Défilée was a madwomen, or perhaps a prostitute, who accompanied Dessalines’ army on its final and bloody march to Cap Haitien, the site of the last battle of the Revolution. Like Dessalines, Défilée has acquired layer upon layer of meaning. Her story becomes most important to the multiple strands of Vodou narratives after Dessalines’ death, whereupon she gathered the undistributed remnants of the dismembered leader and buried them

in what remained for a long time a humble grave. This burial of Dessalines is a necessary component of the narrative that witnesses the resurrection of the first leader of the freed colony. In the African cosmologies with which Vodou is syncretic, burial of the dead is necessary to insure that the dead can rise again, either as *lwa* (gods), or ancestors. It is also a necessary act to forestall the resurrection of an “unquiet” dead, a creature who, disallowed a proper burial, resurfaces uncontrolled, threatening to harm the living. Défilée’s insistence on burial for Dessalines’ remnants is a moment in this Vodou narrative where the contradictions that formulate Vodou discourse coalesce and reveal, not a definitive picture of the religious tradition, but a gap through which the constitution and dissemination of knowledge about Vodou is visible. The story of Défilée backlights the concurrence of Vodou and Roman Catholicism, for her attention to Dessalines’ remains does not only concur with African cosmology, but also with Christian devotion. Défilée, like Dessalines attained the status of *lwa* after death and as such, belongs to the Erzulie family of spirits. Erzulie, and consequently Défilée, are syncretic with the Virgin Mary in the various manifestations she has come to take in contemporary Christianity. Although at the moment of Dessalines death, Défilée’s actions are reminiscent of other Marys, her divine form encompasses the same Virgin Mary that Dessalines is said to have been possessed by at the creation of the Haitian flag. Dayan explains the complexity of Défilée’s narrative:

She alone touches the befouled remains. Like Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary,” and varying unnamed women who appear in the resurrection scenes in the Gospels (later known in medieval traditions the “two Marys” or the “three Marys”), Défilée mourns and cares for the body of the Liberator. Though Catholic emblems of love, penitence, and devotion pervade the story of Défilée and Dessalines, other elements under gird the national narrative. If Défilée summons the tale of a republic, fallen and then resurrected through transformative love, she also remains an image that goes beyond this blessed conversion. (1995:45)

Défilée’s narrative undercuts any notion of purity, and any simplistic and dichotomous understanding of identity. Défilée the madwoman is also Défilée the restorer of a national hero. Défilée the prostitute, the Magdalene, is also Défilée the Virgin Mary. And Défilée the *lwa* is also Dessalines the *lwa*. In the cosmology of Vodou the narratives of Dessalines and Défilée have

become inextricably intertwined so that the human who once was possessed by the Virgin Mary, Dessalines, becomes the divinity who is sometimes supplanted in possession by the incarnation of Défilée. For in the rituals of possession, Défilée sometimes appears in place of her lover, Dessalines. Whether or not Dessalines and Défilée were lovers in their human (historical) forms, their relationship as *lwa*s has been firmly established. The spirits of Ogou and Erzulie, who encompass Dessalines and Défilée, are also lovers (Brown, 1991:235).

There exist multiple manifestations of Erzulie in the Vodou pantheon, all of which are syncretic with various aspects of the Virgin Mary. One such *lwa*, Erzulie Dantor, illustrates a reversal of the movement from human to divine suggested by Dessalines and Défilée. Dantor, syncretic with a representation of the Virgin Mary from Poland—a black Virgin named Mater Salvatori, or Our Lady of Czestochowa—is depicted in Vodou cosmology as a single mother with an unconventional sexuality. She represents motherhood, and she is quick to anger. When angered Dantor is a difficult and occasionally violent spirit. While the Erzulies are understood (by both Vodouists and academics) to be *lwa*s that arrived in Haiti from Africa, this particular manifestation of Erzulie, Erzulie Dantor, is a member of the volatile and fiery Petro nation of Vodou. This nation unlike other nations (the Rada and Congo, for example) does not recall a former pre-colonial African nation but was created on the soil of Haiti. The Petro nation carries the remnants of the Carrib spirituality that existed on the island before colonisation. The indigenous peoples of Haiti, ‘wiped out’ by the forces of colonisation, live on in the Petro rites and sects of Vodou. And it is to this nation that Erzulie Dantor belongs. It is this lineage that led Dantor to assume a human form in order to fight in the Revolution to free her country from the powers of colonialism.

As Karen McCarthy Brown and her “informant,” Maggie, explain:

Ezili Danto fought fiercely beside her “children” in the Haitian slave revolution. In Maggie’s words: “That lady is from Africa, and during the time we had slave back home in Haiti, during the eighteen hundred, or seventeen hundred... she was the one that helped my country to fight the white people. She helped them to win that war.” She was wounded, Haitians say, and they point to the scars on Our Lady of

Czestochowa's right cheek as evidence. But those are not the only scars Danto bears. Again, in Maggie's words: "in that war, she was going to talk, to tell something, and then they go over and cut out her tongue because they don't want her to talk." It seems that Danto was rendered speechless by her own people, people fighting on the same side, people who could not trust her to guard their secrets. When Ezile Danto possesses someone these days, she cannot speak. The only sound the spirit can utter is a uniform "*dey-dey-dey*" (Brown, 1991:229)

Unlike Dessalines, whose mortal form was restored when he assumed the status of divinity, the divinity of Erzulie Dantor was mortally wounded in the Revolution. The act of betrayal that led to her wounds is constantly remembered in contemporary possession rituals, where Erzulie Dantor is unable to speak to practitioners and must find some other means of communication. Like Dessalines, Dantor the *lwa* does not offer a comforting or romanticized version of resistance and revolution. Instead, her form re-embodied in possession insists on the ambivalence of the Revolution. Like Défilée and Dessalines, Dantor's narrative is bittersweet. Fighting alongside "her children" she gained independence for her "people," a people who carry with them the remnant of Carrib spirituality in the vessel of the Petro nation. It seems significant that Dessalines, upon gaining the seat of the first monarchy, chose to name the newly freed island 'Haiti', a name he took from the name given to the island by its first occupants, the Carribs, who called the island *Ayiti*, meaning mountainous land. In so doing, Dessalines re-membered these occupants, acknowledged their legacy, and their continued presence in the blood of the Haitian people and in the pantheon of the Petro nation, and created a name for the new nation that would forever be a testament to both the terrors and horrors of a colonial force that could exterminate a people, and to the impurity and hybridity of this new nation and its people.

### ***Grafting Hybrids***

And it is hybridity that is at the heart of the deterritorialization of Haitian Vodouists and the re-territorialization of non-Haitian Vodouists in the complex movements of the Vodou religion. In a way, Vodou constitutes hybrids, transnationals or creoles, individuals who have a

complex and multifaceted understanding of identity and home. Once again, I find myself back at the insider/outsider debate that informs so much of this thesis. Terms such as hybrid and creole (like the term syncretism discussed earlier) carry with them a discourse of power inequities and the legacy of colonialism. While colonial ideology was concerned with developing theories, which maintained the separation of the races, it was the point of interracial contact that became the site of the formation about theories of hybridity. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Robert J.C. Young explores how the etymological and ideological roots of hybridity have been buried in contemporary postcolonial and post-modern theories:

In recent years a whole range of disciplines have been concerned with the question of the exclusion and representation of the 'Other', of inside/outside notions of otherness or of the difficulties, negotiated so painfully though not powerlessly by anthropologists, of self-other relations. Our talk of Manichean allegories of colonizer and colonized, of self and Other, mirrors the ways in which today's racial politics work through a relative polarization between black and white. This remorseless Hegelian dialectalization is characteristic of twentieth-century accounts of race, racial difference and racial identity. I want to argue, however, that for an understanding of the historical specificity of the discourse of colonialism, we need to acknowledge that other forms of racial distinction have worked simultaneously alongside this model. Without any understanding of this, we run the risk of imposing our own categories and politics on the past without noticing its difference, turning the otherness of the past into the sameness of today. The loss that follows is not merely one for the knowledge of history: as with the case of hybridity, we can also remain unaware of how much that otherness both formed and still secretly informs our present. (1995:179)

Perhaps that is what the epistemologies of Vodou get at, a way of knowing that is not totalizing, that doesn't force knowledge of the self, of identity, into predetermined categories that offer logical but often problematic explanations. Instead, identity (national and religious) is allowed to be indeterminate, assumed even, should the need present itself. New practitioners often "find" Vodou late in life, making a conscious and agentic choice to identify with the religion. But there is something in Vodou, a remnant of the colonizer perhaps, that doesn't only expect to be found but that "goes forth" and seeks out these practitioners. This is not a literal missionism, an actual attempt to recruit new members, but an implicit insistence on a way of knowing—an unspoken Vodou vernacular. As one Haitian born houngan explained to me:

Let's say that each one of us has to search for what will make us feel good about



ourselves. If religion is our problem, we should get into it, work, search, ask and eventually get initiated, if we ever feel the call for it. Nobody has ever taught us anything to make us feel proud of who we are. In school, I remember learning that Mackandal was a terrible sorcerer, criminal as well as Boukman and Dessalines. Later I learned that they were our liberators! Often times as innocent babies, we are baptized Catholic, for our good. Yet, as we become adults, we should start searching who we really are, to which society we really belong. Only then, can we acquire dignity. As far as health is concerned, you may be surprised to hear that the *houngfo* have been recognized long ago to be a place where western medicine should learn basic skills.  
(Joseph, personal communication)

Whether religion or science (and the healing arts<sup>10</sup> of Vodou *are* extensive), Vodou always has something to offer, not by “reigning supreme”, but by insisting on a dialogue, inside and out, between elements (such as science and religion) that seem to be in opposition.

Vodou truly is a hybrid religion, not simply because it is a blend of religious elements, but because it embraces hybridity (as well as transnationalism and creolization) in the way it comes to know and understand the world and the people who populate it. Vodou’s ability to adopt and transform elements of other religions and cultures is simply a symptom of a larger epistemological structure –a Vodou way of seeing the world and the self in the world.

Haitian Vodou isn’t pure. To my mind that is one of its strengths. Haitian Vodou takes whatever comes down the road and turns it into whatever it needs it to be. For example, when I see, in a *houngfo* near Jacmal, an image of the spirit of Damballah and Ayida Wedo, I don’t even register it to be an old movie poster of Nastasya Kinski dressed in a snake. (Peter, personal correspondence)

In Vodou seeing is not simply believing, it is not “blind” faith, but a way of knowing that simply defies other ways of knowing. The poster mentioned above is not both Nastasya Kiniski and Ayida Wedo, it is not even a “revisioning” of Western paraphernalia. Instead, it is a different way of seeing, a way of seeing that recognises the deification of a Hollywood actress and manipulates this already elevated status for the purpose of disseminating knowledge about the Vodou tradition. The analytical framework embedded in Vodou cosmology allows for an identification with this hybrid way of seeing and understanding the world. Perhaps it is this self

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, “Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study” by Karen McCarthy Brown in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World’s Religious Tradition*, edited by Lawrence E. Sullivan (N.Y.: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989).

perpetuating analytical framework that makes it so easy for non-Haitians to identify with a religion that recalls the social and historical specificity of a nation to which they initially have no affiliation.

### ***Final Words***

What becomes clear through this analysis of Vodou cosmology and history, is that the genesis of Vodou, a religion distinct from, but existing simultaneously with both the African spiritualities and Roman Catholicism with which it is syncretic, is in some ways indistinguishable from the genesis of Haitian nationality as it emerged from the confines of French colonial power. It is this symbiosis between Haitian nationality and the discourses of Vodou that renders the cultural and historical specificity of Haiti so present in contemporary Vodou communities in North America. Conversely, it renders Vodou equally present in the “psyches” of diasporic Haitians who do not practice Vodou (witness my friend Nika whose narrative opens this chapter). It seems even belief is ambiguous within the global ecumene of Vodou. In the same way Haiti that pervades the discourse of Vodou, Vodou pervades the discourse of Haiti, the two are inseparable. It is difficult to discern if the symbiosis between Haiti and Vodou is an example of globalization or of what Hannerz calls de-globalization. It may in fact be an example of the interaction between these two forces. Vodou thrives in North America because it insists on cultural specificity while encouraging cultural diversity. And in all this motion an incredible pride in the histories of Haiti is formed. Whether practitioners are Haitian born or not they learn to take pride in the narratives of Haiti, narratives that are always infused with Vodou, and are always “bittersweet”.

Characters such as Jean-Jacques Dessalines resurface in the ever-shifting pantheon of Vodou gods, insisting on, if nothing else, memory of the events that surrounded his rise to position of deity. Many who witness Vodou ceremonies must be struck with the disparate

elements that emerge in ritual. Vodou altars may house whips, and even shackles, potent icons recalling the horrors of slavery. Vodou gods who traditionally smoked tobacco and drank spirits, now have their own favourite brands of cigarettes, soft drinks, and even perfume. Vodou liturgy tells the story of Haiti's history, often filling in gaps left in "official" historical discourse. In this way Vodou "bears the hybrid history of the Caribbean, including in its practices not only the succession of local beliefs, but the fragmented devices of those who came to colonize" (Dayan, 1997:27). Once again, what becomes sharply evident is the way in which Vodou is inextricably tied to the histories, politics and economics of Haiti. As I have said before, Vodou *is* Haitian. What this analysis of the way in which transnationalism operates within the cosmology of Vodou reveals is how history functions, not as an authoritative or unified cultural entity, but as a fluid and dynamic component of religious practice and a means of not only maintaining but promoting cultural continuity between the discourses of a nation and the discourses of a religion. The multiple histories found in the rituals, liturgies and philosophies of Vodou have the active role in invoking memory in the processes of the constitution and reconstitution of Vodou communities. And this "memory" is, like the histories which invoke it, a dynamic entity. Memory, within Vodou, is not simply the practice of recalling the past; it is the act of realising, even actualizing the past in the present. It is also the practice of recalling Haiti itself, the homeland of the *lwa*. Vodou provides an epistemological framework that undoes, literally reverses, the forces of colonisation, not in the past but in the present, insisting on a connection with an impoverished "third world country" in a process of "anti-globalization which is in a dialectical relationship with globalization itself" (Hannerz, 1996:18). This collapsing of past and present (as well as the collapse of other dichotomies like human and divine, and male and female) is difficult to account for with theories that rely on the maintenance of binary oppositions.

The opening lines of this text point to an unease, or a dis-ease. It is the dis-ease of the New Ager who is not at all sure whether she found Vodou in the North American religious

market place, or it found her. It is a sense that it may, indeed, be the latter of the two that has led to the quest to elucidate a theory which validates the knowledge generated by religion, not simply as being the product of historical and cultural discourses, but as an active agent in the generation of knowledge. Arguably, the Vodou tradition points the way to such a theoretical framework, positioning history and memory as tools that constitute community and identity, and allows for the generation of a knowledge that can subvert dominant discourses of binary opposition. And so, when those who have no genealogical link to Vodou enter the tradition, these “new” practitioners are theoretically provided with an alternative cultural system distilled into the rituals and liturgy of Vodou practice. While transnationalism is creating new rhetorics and discourses of motion, informing new and increasing numbers of people about this alternative cultural model, Vodou simply absorbs, even cannibalizes, these new discourses (and potential practitioners too), using them to reconstitute its own parameters and borders, regardless of the shifts of globalization. After all, for the *lwa*, motion is nothing new, and as for globalization, I think they have their own agenda.

### *Subtext III*

Once, I gave a paper on Vodou and spoke long and hard about the particularities of the religion, its historic specificity and the shape of its ritual and ceremonial practices. At the end of this speech an intelligent and well-versed academic, far more experienced than I in the study of contemporary religion, raised her hand. I acknowledged her, anticipating her question with pleasure; “what does all this have to do with Rastafarianism?” she asked blithely. I sputtered into my water glass before explaining, as civilly as I could, that really Vodou has very little to do with Rastafarianism, having originated in a different geographical plain, colonized by a different colonizer, in a different historical period and exhibiting radically different cosmology, rituals and beliefs. It is true, in many ways, that Vodou and Rastafarianism are diametrically opposed. But in North America, where black religions and religions practiced by blacks (Islam for instance) are often viewed with and submitted to a rhetoric of suspicion, differences between the two can be erased even by learned academics.

Nika, Trudy, Kaarla and I sometime laugh at a young man we know. He is of Haitian origin, second generation born to a fairly prominent Haitian family in Montreal. We laugh at him because at varying points in our acquaintance with him he has adopted not only the speech patterns commonly associated with Rastafarianism<sup>1</sup> and the clothing (dreadlocks) but also the accent of those who hail from Jamaica. This descendent of Haiti has adopted a monotheistic tradition and speaks volubly of it with a *patois* accent. Trudy, who didn’t know the history of this man, nor our scorn for his “cultural appropriations” when she first met him, but who does hail from Jamaica herself thought, upon hearing this unique *patois* and the accompanying accent that

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<sup>1</sup> There exists within Rastafarianism a language structure referred to as I-ric. In this language structure I is put in front of English words or parts of English words to form words such as I-rit (from spirit) or I-brations (from vibrations). Velma Pollard in “The Speech of the Rastafarians of Jamaica, in the Eastern Caribbean: The Case of St. Lucia” (International Journal of Social Language, 85: 81-90, 1990) suggests that the I is a symbol for Rasta (spirit) or for Jah (God) and is meant to imbue speech with the power of the sacred. In Rastafarianism the divine is conceptualized as being everywhere, particularly in the self, or the “I” of the practitioner.

his young man was simply “maintaining”. Maintaining being the term used for people who came over from the islands sometime ago and in the natural course of things may well have lost their proficiency with *patois* and the accompanying accent—which both marks them as Jamaican and distinguishes them from the rest of the immigrant and Canadian population—except for a deliberate and conscious attempt to maintain this accent. Not all make a conscious effort to maintain or keep their accent and native language. This poor young man became the object of all of our humor when we gleefully enlightened Trudy with the news that he was not “maintaining” at all, but, as we termed it, “posing”. Then we felt bad. At least we felt a little bad. I felt quite bad and more badly still when I write it all down. Clearly, despite our rhetoric to the contrary we have definite ideas about what constitutes authentic identity. We may withhold these ideas, may reserve judgment, we may, in fact, have the ability to live those ideas that we hold dear. We may believe that identity is a choice and religious identity (and even the cultural factors that accompany it) is a difficult choice to make in the face of forces which do their best to divorce us from our religious and cultural heritages. But every so often, for reasons that we are reluctant to explain, notions of authenticity and purity push their way in, rear their ugly heads, as it were, and provide us with fodder for criticisms of identities that we feel are assumed with something less than integrity.

And this is the uniqueness of our experience...we judge others on the authenticity of their identity and then we feel bad, we draw boundaries and then disrupt them with our uneasy consciences. I know little of this man’s life but I know enough to realize that the external pressures on him as a black man and Haitian in Montreal and the internal pressure on him from a Haitian community split in its support of either polytheistic Vodou or monotheistic Christianity (Catholicism *or* Protestantism) must be immense. Some days the story of this young man and his wholehearted embracing of a religion other than the one(s), which could have been his birthright, breaks my heart. I see in this story the disenfranchisement faced by black men in North America in general and Montreal in particular, I see the valuation that pervades the Montreal black

community that too often can posit Jamaican and Haitian culture against each other, that too often can lead to one or the other identity being more desirable in the market place of cultural identities; identities that are sold not only via the transmitters of mainstream media but also via an underground railroad of more marginal expectations and commodities.

This story and the reaction of my friends and I to it... doesn't break my heart because I see this young man as a victim of institutionalized and systemic racisms and disenfranchised identities but because I see him as a "choice-maker" making a choice that leads him to the place of greatest strength (and least disenfranchisement) and perhaps even greatest fulfillment. And while I think this choice is necessary and good, I cannot help wishing that the act of choosing led to a different goal. For many North American black men and women Rastafarian represents a return to "roots", a desire "to separate from what is perceived as a corrupt, depersonalized, and money-driven 'world'" and toward "a simplification of reality through a return to a natural way of life" (Van de Berg, 1998; 164). Rastafarian also represents, for some, resistance to Babylon, the white hegemony, which has subjugated blackness for so long on this continent. For many choosing, or finding Rastafarian is an empowering and resistive act. For some, choosing or finding Vodou is a similarly empowering and resistive act, a likewise return to "roots" that do not lie within the personal history of the converted individual but within a larger collective memory which extends past the experience of one lifetime. For this young Haitian man Vodou was not his choice, Rastafarianism was. What is it that makes one so called black religion a viable choice over another, what is it that leads some Haitians "back" to Vodou and some "back" to other religions? I don't have an answer to this question and whenever I think I do I make sure I remember this story.

## Chapter 5

### In/voluntary Exile: Neo-Voodoo Rites/Rights/Writes in Neo-Colonial Times

For a short period in 1987, Matigari, the fictional hero of the novel, was himself resurrected as a subversive political character. The novel was published in the Gikuyu – language original in Kenya in 1986. By January 1987, intelligence reports had it that peasants in central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice. There were orders for his immediate arrest, but the police discovered that Matigari was only a fictional character in a book of the same name. In February 1987, the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel.

Matigari, the fictional hero, and the novel, his only habitation, have been effectively banned in Kenya. With the publication of this English edition, they have joined their author in exile.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o From "A Note on the English Edition" of *Matigari*

There exists within the complex discourses of Vodou a poignant relationship to conceptualisations of "home". The historical specificity of Vodou gave rise to the centrality and importance of Africa or *Ginen* to the religion. The slaves that were brought to the French colony naturally conceptualised Africa as both a geographical and spiritual homeland. In the discourse of Vodou, Africa has retained the status of home, but this home is no longer a geographical location. Instead, *Ginen* has taken on a mythological stature. Both the *lwa* and the ancestors are said to reside in the pluralistic state of *Ginen*, which is home to the realms inhabited by these spirits and home to an African history and legacy to which Vodou practitioners in the "new world" have, arguably, tenuous connections. From this already abstracted understanding of Africa, issues of homelessness are magnified by transnationalism. When Vodou practitioners leave established centres such as Haiti and New Orleans, this sense of dislocation is magnified. These centres are also homes of the Vodou tradition and are symbolic repositories of the political, social, and religious elements that form the historical foundation on which many contemporary narratives about Vodou are based. The "newcomers" to Vodou, who are so central to this text, are even further removed from the cultural and historical specificity of home in the Vodou tradition. These practitioners often have different connections to conceptions of home and



different understandings of Africa and Haiti as components of Vodou discourse. Such differences and disparities heighten an already uneasy relationship to the notion of home and belonging within the Vodou tradition. Perhaps it is precisely this uneasy relationship that feeds the aggregating and syncretic nature of Vodou, lending it an instability that heightens its receptiveness to other religious and cultural discourses.

Vodou is not only receptive to diverse religious and cultural discourses, it is receptive to people from diverse backgrounds. Despite a long history of religious persecution both in Haiti and in the West, Vodou is not as secretive as is often implied. One *mambo* of white European ancestry (who came to the Vodou tradition seven years ago and rose quickly within the hierarchical structure of Vodou's initiation rituals to become *asogwe*, the highest rank of Vodou initiation that enables one to practice as a priest or priestess) is convinced that the idea that Vodou is a secretive religion is all in the mind of the researcher:

The so-called "stigmatized, secretive" status of Haitian Vodou is only so to those coming in from outside with those stigmas firmly in mind. To the average Vodouisant, we are not stigmatized, we are respected! We are not secretive, we have big dances right out in the open in peristyles where everyone can see us.  
("Mambo Maxine", personal communication)

Mambo Maxine is speaking of her experiences working in Haiti where she performs initiation ceremonies that can only take place in Haiti, the home of Vodou. But even in Montreal Vodou ceremonies are more accessible than one might assume. In October of 1999 members of Montreal's Haitian community held an open-invitation ceremony to celebrate the *lwa Gedeuh's* birthday and the "Day of the Dead"<sup>1</sup>. This fête brought together not only a startling number of local *houngan* and *mambo*, but also members of Montreal's Haitian community and non-Haitian

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<sup>1</sup> Gedeuh is known as the spirit of the dead in Vodou. He is a "trickster" spirit in that he likes to have fun with, tease and even trick his servitors during possession rituals. In addition to death, Gedeuh also presides over sex and children's well being. Unlike other *lwa* who are divided into nations or *nanchon*, Gedeuh *lwa* are a family of spirits unto themselves. They are amongst the most popular spirits in the new world and possession by a Gedeuh seems to come more easily than by other spirits. Gedeuh "season" coincides with the Day of the Dead, or Hallowe'en and, in Haiti, lasts several weeks. For a more in depth discussion of this *lwa* and his New World connections see *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* by Karen McCarthy Brown (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Vodou practitioners. Similar public events are held in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Miami. Haitian ceremonies are also “presented” as components of lecture series at community centres and universities across North America. *Houngan* and *mambo* advertise their services in community newspapers. And as I have already mentioned, the internet is an open source for information on Vodou, for supplies needed for Vodou ceremonies, and even for some limited divination services. In North America, Vodou is accessible. This accessibility certainly draws individuals to the Vodou tradition and members of Vodou communities are generally welcoming to newcomers. Needless to say any newcomer to a Vodou community is submitted to a few moments of wary observation, but in a religion that understands “conversion” and initiation to be a matter best left up to the gods these moments do not usually last long. Most Vodouists believe that if one seeks out a Vodou ceremony, one does so with some knowledge of the religious structure of Vodou. As one practitioner explains:

Now for the question, “Do you consider a passer-by who enters a *houngan* to buy a *wanga*, a Vodouisant”, I would answer yes. The person who pays a *mambo* or *houngan* to make *wanga* for them is not just an ignorant passer-by who tripped and fell into a peristyle! That person has a spiritual belief that tells them the outside world can be influenced by magical means. The person best qualified to do this magic is a *mambo* or *houngan*, and they should be paid cash for their time. ...Of course this is not the entire definition of a Vodouisant, far from it! Vodou is not exclusive - the same person who paid for *wanga* may go to mass, sometimes even to Protestant services. Sometimes even Protestant pastors want *wanga* to increase their enrolment.<sup>2</sup> (“Alixi”, personal communication)

The lack of “exclusivity” embraced by Vodou practitioners allows this religion to open its doors to a diversity of people. I would also suggest that Vodouists encourage this open door policy. As is alluded to above, *mambo* and *houngan* benefit monetarily by performing services (giving divination readings, making charms that guarantee love or success, and creating talismans or

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<sup>2</sup> Both In Haiti and in North American centers there seems to be a war of words developing between Protestant Haitians and Haitian Vodouists. An increase in Protestantism in Haiti and a rise in Haitians practicing Protestantism in places like Montreal have led to a resurgence of anti-Vodou rhetoric in both places. Vodouists, both Haitian and non-Haitian have a unique response to the negative rhetoric leveled at them by Protestant ministers. They claim that these ministers uses the magic of Vodou to ensure that their congregation grows and remains faithful. I have never been aware of a Protestant minister attending a Vodou ceremony, but then, I doubt they would announce their identity.

other spells which ward off evil and provide protection are amongst the most common *wanga*). Clearly, it is in their best interest to encourage “business”. However, there is an elusive but prevalent missionary quality to Vodou. As one practitioner of Haitian origin explains, many Vodouists believe that Vodou has a very magnetic quality:

Some of the efforts to popularize Yoruba religion strike me as dubious, though others are doubtless sincere (and powerful). I think Vodou has a greater potential. In fact I think it could be a magnet for spiritual pilgrims in the same way that the ashrams of the east have been. But it will win new servants by remaining itself. (“Jospeh”, personal communication)

Perhaps because Vodou allows for the concurrence of other religious beliefs, many Vodouists think that the *lwa* should be served regardless of religious conviction. It is common knowledge, again that illusive term, which Vodouists are excited by and actively work to promote the growth of their religion within North America. One of the most telling instances of the promotion of Vodou in North America can be found within the rhetoric and discourses of Black Nationalism. This primarily African American movement is a component of a holistic matrix of symbols, political ideology, and social practices. These cultural signifiers comprise a rhetoric that not only resists the contemporary phenomenon of neo-colonialism and a resurgence of right wing racism(s), but also celebrates the “memory” of cultural roots. It is this movement that has spawned the controversial term “neo-voodoo”, which posits a new Vodou practice reclaimed from “traditional” Vodou but purified by removing (or ignoring) elements that are understood to be clearly Western. The rhetoric of neo-voodoo is about belonging. More specifically, it is about consciously seeking out and creating communities of belonging based on identifications with specific religious and cultural practices, symbols, and ideas. In a way, neo-voodooism attempts to “remember” where one belongs. Since, cultural lineage for African - American people has been fragmented, this memory is not necessarily concerned with historical accuracy. Consequently, it is an elusive factor in the analysis of Vodou identity. This section will examine neo-voodooism and cultural memory in relation to Vodou to reveal how such a complex

relationship destabilises concepts of authenticity and purity and explodes any simplistic understanding of identity.

The crest of this burgeoning neo-voodoo movement is occupied by postcolonial literature and postcolonial literary criticism. These discourses are a fitting mode for the transmission of this elusive rhetoric. In contemporary times the orality of many African-American cultures has been merged with what Robert Elliot Fox terms "lit/oratures."<sup>3</sup> This emergent genre is not simply a translation of oral material into written text. Instead, lit/orature bridges the gap between myth and history, recalling rather than recreating the rhythms of storytelling, dancing, drumming and song. Vodou has no canon of religious texts, no bible, no written creed. Instead, the ethos of Vodou is passed on through a host of oral and non-verbal discourses, including storytelling, dance and song, as well as complex ritual performance. It is discourses such as these that are made textual in the writing of many contemporary postcolonial writers. Lit/orature is part of a practice of identity in which the use of certain cultural signifiers acts as a catalyst for the transmission of cultural values. These transmitted values simultaneously celebrate the contributions of marginalized cultures (black, African-American, Haitian, Voodooist, Rastafarian, ect.) while resisting hegemonic erasure of difference. This erasure of difference is often metaphorically conceptualised as forgetting. The celebration of culture is, then, an awakening of memory.

It is in the vein of awakening memory that the Vodou tradition is transmitted through lit/orature and literature. While there has long been a taboo on utilising fiction as data or documentation, contemporary critics have called this taboo into question. Both autobiographical and postcolonial theorists have critiqued conventional understandings of truth<sup>4</sup> and have suggested that any historical truism (or data) is contextual and subjective. For African-American literary critics concerned with uncovering aspects of a culture almost destroyed by systemic

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Elliot Fox, *Masters of the Drum: Black Lit/oratures Across the Continuum* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, "Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority" by Leigh Gilmore in *Autobiography and Post Modernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley et al (Amherst: The university of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

domination, the use of fiction as data presents itself not only as a viable option, but as a resistive practice. Fox, drawing on the critical work of Trinh Minh-ha, explains that:

Storytelling must also be truer than history. Truer in an important sense, for what is true in history depends on documentation and a “fixed” narrative. Art’s claims are different; There is an understanding that “Truth does not make sense; it exceeds meaning and exceeds measure”. This truth is nothing less than the truth of fiction. (1995:25)

For contemporary African-North Americans, including some first and second-generation diasporic Caribbeans, the rhetoric of neo-voodooism and Black Nationalism throws suspicion on established discourses of history. Fiction is often understood as providing a “corrective” to what is seen as a false history that erases the “reality” of black contribution to North American society and perpetuates racism and neo-colonialism. By analyzing certain fictions in order to illuminate aspects of history, a critical lens is turned on the discursive structures that validate, represent and constitute identity. These “fictions” become a site from which an understanding of how identity is generated in a given context may be reached.

Within the rhetoric of “neo-voodooism” there exist many claims to and desires for continuity and legacy. The quest for the historical accuracy of these claims, as they are articulated in fiction, is a redundant one. Reading certain fictions through the critical lens of autobiographical methodology allows for an understanding of continuity and legacy as components of community, and by extension, identity. Through a discussion of how cultural valuing of identity functions as a component of genre, Leigh Gilmore explains that constructs of identity are inextricably linked to the vehicle of their representation:

The limits of value in autobiography are demonstrated by the conflation of the value of the text with the value of the autobiographer. That is, the notion of what autobiography is, which involves a judgement rendered within a network of identity-constructing discourses...is historically bound up with what we understand to be identity itself. Insofar as any notion of autobiography is necessarily enmeshed with the politically charged and historically varying notions of what a person is, we can focus on autobiography as a way to understand how (self-)representations and authority get linked up with projects that encode gender and genre. (1994:17)

By extending this critical analysis beyond encoded gender identity and the autobiographical genre, it becomes possible to understand how any discursively constituted identity is validated

and bound with issues of authority and authenticity. The genre of postcolonial literature, like autobiography, is located in a matrix of identity-constructing discourses, which differently authorize individuals based on their race, nationality, and religious or cultural affiliation. Evaluating how these identities are authorized is a central concern for postcolonial theorists. Inevitably, the discourse of post colonialism occasionally posits notions of authenticity, citing some literature as more (authentically) representative of the postcolonial experience than others. "Authenticating" represented experience or identity runs the risk of perpetuating *a priori* assumptions about what the "real" or "true" or "authentic" identity looks like. Such assumptions reinforce the notion that a given identity is a static entity, rather than a fluid practice of constituting self or community. If Gilmore's analysis is applied to textual representation of Vodou identity, what emerges is a two pronged understanding of both the discourses, which differently authorize Vodou practitioners (a marginalized identity within dominant western discourse), as well as a critical understanding of how the act of representing religious experience impacts on the discursive constitution of identity. These two factors are an essential component of an analysis that seeks to utilise postcolonial literature to comprehend the impact of "neo – voodooism" on Vodou identity.

Black Nationalism is a generic term for a diversity of theories and ideologies that were formulated and articulated in North America during the 1960's. This movement corresponded with a sudden "granting" of independence to many previously colonized African nations. This spurred the widely publicized nationalism of the black cultural movement in America.<sup>5</sup> This movement embraced and still espouses a number of ideas including the (literal) back to Africa movement and "Afrocentrism", both of which arguably posit problematic assumptions about authenticity and purity of identity. This contentious and much criticized aspect of a complex cultural movement has received much attention from within the movement and from without.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1988) and *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) by Molefi Kete Asante.

Black Nationalism has always been perceived as a threat in the United States and has received much media attention. When black nationalists began adopting the Islamic religion as a component of the “back to Africa” movement, the hegemonic American subject<sup>6</sup> was presented with what it perceived as multiple threats emanating from a single subject. Historically, as well as within the confines of contemporary systemic domination, the African-American identity is both implicitly and explicitly conceptualised as “otherness”, which “normative” identity is measured against. Islam has long been perceived as an outside threat to America.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting, if not surprising, that the conversion of blacks to Islam has received disproportionate media attention. In fact, Islam is growing as fast amongst North American blacks, as are African and Caribbean religions like Vodou, Santeria and Yoruba. As Robert Elliot Fox explains:

Paganism (emphatically a nonpejorative, let us once more insist) re-enters our discussion appropriately here because the pre-Islamic, pre-Christian African religious experience has been and continues to be so basic an ingredient in the black cultures of the diaspora. The rhetorical appeal of Louis Farrakan or even the late Malcom X notwithstanding, Islam never has had a widespread appeal among African-Americans, and its influence is marginal in comparison with the burgeoning presence of religions such as Voodoo and Santeria, a major factor in what one might call the re-Africanisation of the United States via...transmitters like Haiti and Cuba. (1995:36)

Certainly, there is little attention paid to the “burgeoning presence” of Vodou in North America. Subsumed by a climate of fear and concern over the growing presence of Islam, the growth of the Vodou tradition is not only marginalized within dominant western discourse, it is rendered virtually invisible. This is not to imply that Vodou, should it surface, is not submitted to subjugating rhetoric, but simply to point out that Vodou, conceived of as barbaric and primitive,

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<sup>6</sup> While western discourse is by no means a unified entity, it certainly can spew unifying and universalizing rhetoric through the mouthpiece of media. In “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’” (In *Feminists Theorize the Postmodern*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, N.Y.: Routledge, 1992), Judith Butler details how during the “Gulf War” the media and the military uniformly “championed a masculinized Western subject” (10) while positing a degrading and feminized image of the “Arab” (12). This analysis of the war illuminates the working of a dominant western discourse that constitutes experience and identity through a simplistic model of self and other. However, there always exists a threat that the other may rupture the (projected) image of the dominant self.

<sup>7</sup> This is not simply a metaphoric threat. Witness the “jumpin’ to conclusions” in the aftermath of the bombing of an Oklahoma government building in the United States. Few members of the media seemed able to perceive the irony behind their unfounded assumption that “Muslim extremists” committed the atrocities. When it became apparent that the perpetrators were home grown American “nationalists”, prior accusations were simply forgotten, no longer a component of media rhetoric.

is not as much of a threat to hegemony as Islam is understood to be. This climate permeates an academic realm that seems relatively uninterested in neo - voodooism. Perhaps this is also because little documentation or analysis concerning this contemporary movement exists. Stephen Glazier laments that:

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

However, the discourse of neo-voodooism constitutes serious implications for Vodou religiosity. It becomes necessary to tap aspects of this discourse in order to trace the intricate manoeuvres of Vodou identity as it intersects with, appropriates, constitutes and is constituted by, neo-voodooism.

Blurring the boundaries of fiction and documentation (not to mention the boundaries between fiction and autobiography) African - American authors, amongst others, explore not only the changing nature of traditions such as Vodou, but the way in which Vodou intersects with other identities. These texts draw together the diverse components of Vodou and re-vision them, giving rise to new signifiers and significations. Texts by American authors such as Ishmael Reed and Paula Marshall not only trace this re - visioning process, but also turn a critical eye to the structures of the dominant western socio - economic culture which subordinates Vodou identity. Authors such as Ishmael Reed situate their work in this dual practice, creating what Fox describes as a "semiotics of Neo - Hoodoo"<sup>8</sup>:

The aesthetic preoccupations of Neo-Hoodooism, Reed's rubric for his work and his methodology, adapted from the African-American occult/folkloric tradition and essentially describing a return to the magical possibilities of word and object, like-

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<sup>8</sup> Hoodoo is often used in place of Vodou or voodoo in North America. "The word hoodoo as a synonym for voodoo entered the English language at an undetermined moment, for although the supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary quotes an example from 1875 as the earliest - known literary use in the United States, one assumes that the term was current in the spoken vernacular for some time prior to this date" (Fox, 1995:58).



wise work toward a “rupture of plane”, in the sense of exploding ridged linear patterns of thought and creativity. (1995:51)

Fox maintains that African-American authors such as Ishmael Reed provide an alternative methodological and analytical approach to understanding identity, an approach that disrupts notions of identity as bounded while still “playing” with notions of authenticity, purity and tradition. Ishmael Reed’s novels articulate the practice of reinstating or reconstituting an identity that has been, or is threatened to be, subsumed by dominant culture<sup>9</sup>. In so doing Reed draws into his narrative recognisable elements of Vodou in a conscious effort to “awaken” the memory of those who have been spiritually, historically, and culturally separated from their “roots”. Reed uses *vévé*<sup>10</sup>, lit/orature techniques, and characterizations to achieve his aim. His narratives are filled with characters who are recognisable manifestations of the *lwa* of Haitian Vodou. However, these newly manifested spirits take on a slightly different character as they migrate across America, transmitted through Reed’s text. Reed’s reoccurring character of Papa LaBas is clearly a version of Papa Legba, the Haitian *lwa* who guards the gate separating the realm of the spirits and the realm of the living. This *lwa* exhibits notable characteristics that make him a recognisable component of Vodou discourse. For instance, he is often represented with a disability, one leg shorter than the other, as a physical manifestation of his having one foot in the realm of the spirits and one in the “real” and everyday world of humans. It is characteristics such as this one that make Legba a recognisable spiritual figure in the texts of Reed and Paule Marshal. However, Reed’s Papa LaBas is not the only manifestation of Legba’s attributes; in Reed’s novels Legba also manifests as the Loop Garoo Kid and Raven Quickskill (Fox, 1995:51). Each of these characters, while still recognisable incarnations of Legba, are variations on what is generally held to be the archetypal version of this *lwa*. Reed is acutely aware of the syncretic

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<sup>9</sup> Specifically the novels *Mumbo Jumbo* (N.Y.: Bantam, 1972) and *Yellow Black Radio Broke Down* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969). Reed also publishes critical work on his semiotics, see, for example “Neo - Hoodoo Manifesto” in *Conjure* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> *Vévé* are sacred drawings usually executed in sand or cornmeal on the floor where ritual is to take place. Ishmael Reed translates these drawing from their temporary state to permanence in his novels.

nature of the Vodou tradition. Within his texts he manipulates this syncretism to draw attention to the fallacy of notions of purity and authenticity. Reed creates hybrids. His characters are racially, spiritually, and culturally miscegenated. Reed's representations of Vodou lwa are equally hybrid. Raven Quickskill, as an "Amerindian" manifestation of Papa Legba, mirrors the author's consciousness of his own hybridity. Reed's ancestry includes the Cherokee nation and he incorporates this "impurity" into his representations of Legba and other Vodou spirits. When authors such as Ishmael Reed become transmitters of the Vodou tradition, the complex issues of purity, authenticity, and authority are accentuated. This process of variation and transformation has a significant impact on Vodou identity as it travels across North America.

The structures of neo-voodooism seek out a rhetoric that will awake ancestral memory and trace the fragmented legacy of the black sub-nation subsumed by dominant culture. Vodou becomes a component of this process. However, the elements of change infiltrating the Vodou tradition via the rhetoric of neo-voodooism can incite radical changes within the discourse of Vodou. Fundamentally, neo-voodooism rhetoric is a missionary rhetoric. It seeks converts. These new converts are often engaged in a conscious attempt to resist the structures of neo-colonialism. As Fox explains: "To proclaim oneself a pagan, to practice 'mumbo jumbo', is a strategy of reclamation and reversal" (1995:27). This strategy inevitably transforms the cosmological structure of the religious tradition that is adopted by the rhetoricians of "neo – paganism". The Vodou tradition becomes a component of "memory", a reclamation of a lost lineage, of an identity and culture that was irreversibly altered through the ravages of racism, slavery, and colonialism. This ideological positioning of Vodou can be a destabilizing one.

In *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Karen McCarthy Brown gives voice to her own fears concerning the influx of new members to the Vodou tradition:

The separation between those who have active memories of Haiti and those who do not at times feels like a fault line running deep and dangerous beneath the united surface of New York Vodou families, threatening to divide them. The majority of participants have lived in Haiti, and they come to ceremonies to activate former parts of themselves. And yet, I remind myself, they are also activating memories carried only in the "genetic"

structure of their culture, memories of Africa passed on through many generations of people who had no lived experience of that place. I remind myself of this when I start to think that Vodou in New York might disappear when the responsibilities of leadership pass on to the generations born in this country. (1991:282)

It is precisely this “genetic” memory that neo-voodooism seeks to awake. Brown fears that the continuity of the New York Vodou community will be disrupted when Haitian born practitioners are no longer the leaders of the community. Implicitly, this anxiety is peppered with notions of authenticity. For many who practice Vodou, authority is derived from a proximity to Haiti, the home of the tradition. Initiates are expected to “return” (whether or not they are Haitian) to Haiti to undergo initiation. Many *mambos* replicate, as closely as is possible, the ritual details that they observed in Haiti, either as residents of the island, or as initiates. Identifying with the practices of Haitian Vodou is a method of securing a continuity of identity. For these practitioners, the North American Vodou identity becomes inextricably linked to a Haitian ethos. In a sense, they adopt a Haitian identity in order to justify and authorize their claim to a North American Vodou identity. While neo – voodooists are also seeking a continuity of identity they are not necessarily invested in maintaining links with Haitian Vodou communities. Instead, they are concerned with reclaiming a lost identity, community, or home. In so doing, they frequently invest themselves with authority, claiming that their “genetic” memory authorises and authenticates their spiritual practices. This shift in emphasis is drastically reconstituting Vodou identity in North America. Many fear that this process will dilute the Vodou tradition to such an extent that it becomes unrecognisable.

These are valid fears. Nonetheless they are grounded in notions of purity that threaten to reify the fluid entity that is Vodou. Doctrinal inconsistencies are not unique to any one religion. And it is not unusual that statements of identity are made and subsequently patrolled by identity groups, even by those members who most fervently insist on the instability of identity.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on policing the borders of identity and home see “Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority” by Leigh Gilmore in *Autobiography and Post-Modernism*, ed by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore et al (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

However, since identity is bound with concepts of home, it is not surprising that neo-voodooists may seem to represent a threat to those who emanate from the homeland of Vodou. In my experience it is academics who are most concerned with this perceived threat. This fear of unauthorised participants also invalidates the very claim of neo-voodooism and the concurrent possibility of accessing a memory that operates beyond the boundaries of lived experience. And yet, Vodou, like many religious traditions does just that. The complex interplay of drumming, dance, and orature that is an integral part of most Vodou ceremonies is designed to circumvent the boundaries of time and permit the memories of ancestors, spirits, slavery and revolution, and Ginen (or Africa) to become part of the communal activity. In the discourse of Vodou, rhythms, songs, stories, foods, and rituals all function as mnemonic devices, meant to trigger not the experiences of one's lifetime, but the experience that reach beyond the boundaries of a single life. It is this ritual movement into sacred time, where linear history has no meaning, which authors such as Ishmael Reed and Paula Marshall replicate in their texts. Theirs is a rhetoric of "neo – paganism". However, it is grounded in an understanding of what ritual can accomplish for those who seek lost continuity and legacy.

Paula Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) is a text that has been embraced by rhetoricians of the neo-voodoo movement. Like Reed, Marshall's narrative strategy is two – pronged. She critiques the structures of domination, (primarily assimilation) while reconstituting an identity that can resist these forces of domination. In Marshall's text this reconstituted identity is achieved through a spiritual awakening and the spirituality that is awakened is Vodou. The central character of Marshall's text, Avey Johnson, is a black woman who has lost her ancestral legacy and has become disassociated from her roots. Marshall evokes aspects of the Vodou tradition that function within the narrative as mnemonic devices for Avey, triggering her "memory", drawing her into a spirituality, and, ultimately, providing her with continuity. Tracing Avey Johnson's journey through the narrative of *Praisesong for the Widow* illuminates the

pathways imposed on the fluid motion of Vodou identity by the discourse of "neo - paganism". Examining these pathways does not illuminate a single image of North American Vodou identity. Instead, it generates an understanding of a practice meant to create a sphere of belonging that is celebratory and affirmative. By looking at this methodology of belonging it becomes possible to fathom, in part, the complex network of socio-religious discourses that constitute and reconstitute Vodou experience and identity. What emerges is a fleeting glimpse of the moving and shifting nature of the Vodou tradition.

While this seems like an illusive, if not futile, task it is only through this process of examining the motion of the Vodou identity that any knowledge about the tradition itself can be generated. Paula Marshall's knowledge about Vodou is generated from what many see as an ambiguous position. Marshall is an American author, born and raised in Brooklyn. Vodou was not a recognisable component of her upbringing. By embracing this tradition, Marshall is what many would term a neo - voodooist. It is not surprising, then, that her central character follows a path similar to her own. In a blurring of fiction and autobiography, Marshall puts her own experiential material into the characterization of Avey Johnson. Like Marshall, Avey is an American. At the start of the narrative, Avey and her husband reside in black Harlem, where Avey is able to maintain a black cultural and spiritual legacy. However, the spirituality and continuity represented in this portion of the text does not allude in any way to the discourse of Vodou. Instead, continuity is found in the resistive and celebratory poetry of the Harlem Renaissance<sup>12</sup> poets and musicians. This valuing of the signifiers of black culture provides a continuity in identity, and allows Avey Johnson to situate herself clearly within a community implied through poetry and song.

Marshall uses the orality of black (often secular) words and music to invoke cultural and

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<sup>12</sup> The Harlem Renaissance is the name given to the black cultural movement originating in the 1930's that, amongst other things, explored the links between poetry and jazz. Marshall evokes the voices of Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka from this era.

spiritual continuity. It is this identity, based in African - American traditions and discourse that Avey initially embodies. Gradually, as Avey and her husband, pursue their dream of middle class status, this identity becomes fragmented and eventually lost. Textually, this loss of continuity is attributed to the forces of cultural assimilation that Avey falls victim to. Marshall's narrative methodology clearly critiques the intersection of capitalism and racism that conditions Avey to believe that material gain is only possible if the cultural signifiers of blackness are renounced. Assimilation to the dominant ideology, which values materialism and capitalism, ravages the central characters of the novel. For Avey's husband these forces completely destroy his own identity; "On occasion, glancing at him, she would surprise what almost looked like the vague pale outline of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure....[a] strange pallid face, whose expression was even more severe and driven than Jay's"(131). This pale and pallid self is clearly representative of Jay's (Avey's husband's) assimilation to dominant ideologies that are equated with whiteness. These ideologies feed and perpetuate Jay's views of "his own people" as lazy and uppity. This discourse of cultural imperialism effectively distances Jay and Avey from the community of black poets and musicians that frames their lives at the beginning of the text. Jay and Avey no longer belong anywhere. The colour of their skin is a barrier to complete acceptance in the white middle class community of North *White* Plains (where they moved after leaving the black community of Harlem) and they do not seek acceptance from or resonance with their black cultural heritage from which they have effectively themselves. After Avey is widowed she embarks on a journey that reunites her to the spiritual and cultural community from which she was estranged.

However, the cultural roots that Avey rediscovers in the later part of the narrative are distinctly different from the black culture represented in Harlem. Avey embarks on a cruise to the Caribbean, on a ship significantly named *Bianca Pride*, without any conscious desire to recoup a spiritual or cultural legacy. Instead, Avey's experience with Vodou awakes a memory that extends past her own memory of her younger years in Harlem. Initially, Avey Johnson's

return to a cultural and spiritual identity is non-cognitive, her unconscious surfacing in ways that she often finds disquieting. This emergent spiritual identity gradually provides Avey with access to those components of herself she does not know. Evoking the cyclical time of ritual, Marshall merges Avey's own self with one of Avey's ancestors, Avatar, for whom she is named. In Vodou the separation between ancestor worship and spirit worship is almost non-existent. The sacred discourse of Vodou moves seamlessly between ancestor and spirit (Brown, 1991:285) and equally seamlessly between the realms of the spirits and ancestors and the realms of the living. Marshall evokes this fluidity in her text, creating a mythic context where "improbable events" are part of every day experience; there is no sharp dichotomy between 'supernatural' and 'real'" (Fox, 1995: 28). By evoking a series of "improbable events" Marshall immerses her reader in the spiritual milieu of the Caribbean, and more specifically of the Vodou tradition. Although initially resisting this milieu, Avey is embraced by the community she encounters:

The indignation that swept her in a rush of heat felt almost like the hot flashes she had suffered at the change. What was the matter with these people? It was as if the moment they had caught sight of her standing there, their eyes immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of those homemade cotton prints the women were wearing, whose West Indian colours as Tomisina Moore called them seemed to add to the heat. Their eyes also banished the six suitcases at her side, placing a small overnight bag like the ones they were carrying in her hand, they were all set to take her along wherever it was they were going. (Marshall, 1983:72)

This passage describes a community of people who are embarking on an annual pilgrimage to the small island of Carriacou, where ritual celebrations of ancestral legacy occur. Clearly, this community embraces Avey as a member and strips away the identity she so carefully constructed in the process of cultural assimilation. Before Avey accepts this new identity she encounters a manifestation of the Haitian lwa Legba, incarnate in the character of Joseph Lebert. In Vodou, Legba is a trickster character and true to his namesake Joseph tricks Avey into making the rough passage from Grenada to Carriacou. On this passage Avey literally purges herself of the rich food she had been consuming on the Bianca Pride. She symbolically purges herself of the values imposed on her by cultural imperialism. Avey then becomes progressively more receptive to a

climate in which the “supernatural” is an integrated component of every day life. Gradually, for Avey, time becomes a fluid entity merging her present journey with the historical specificity of the middle passage. Still suffering from sea sickness, Avey describes this merging of historical and contemporary time:

She was alone in the deck house. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering - the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space - made hers of no consequence. (Marshall, 1983:209)

By evoking the image of a slave ship, Marshall draws attention to the way in which the spiritual awakening that Avey Johnson experiences allows her to access memories beyond her own lived experience. These memories imbue the Vodou spirituality that is awakening in Avey with the power to resist the fragmenting effects of capitalism, cultural imperialism, and assimilation.

This relationship between the Vodou tradition and a “strategy of resistance and reversal” characterises the neo-voodooism movement. It is significant to note that Avey’s spiritual awakening occurs in a geographical and cultural location to which she has no literal blood ties. Direct genetic lineage to a given Vodou community is not valued by most neo - voodooists. Instead, what is valorized is an abstract spiritual connection to the “folk” beliefs that were carried across the middle passage to the “New World”. The later half of Paule Marshall’s narrative is filled with the connections that Avey Johnson makes between the structures and rituals of the Vodou tradition and her own memories of the southern Baptist spirituality she encountered as a child. While the final goal of Avey’s journey to a holistic spiritual identity is realised within the discourse of Vodou, the implicit connections made between Vodou and other forms of black spirituality illuminate Marshall’s concern with the reclamation of pluralistic but universal black experience. In the face of ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism, and racism, this reclamation is the central focus of neo - voodoo discourse. The rites and rituals of Vodou become mnemonic devices that aid the processes of remembering and reclaiming. While this could incite concerns



that the Vodou tradition will become disassociated with its own traditional “roots”, this concern remains un-addressed at the end of Marshall’s novel as Avey Johnson, having reclaimed her own spiritual identity, returns to New York to practice, one can assume, a version of Vodou very different from that she encounters in the Caribbean. Marshall’s characterization invests individuals with the authority to map out the path of their own spirituality. This authority is based on the integrity of that which is reclaimed. The spiritual reclamation that is such a central component of “neo – pagan” discourse authenticates itself in a spiritual rather than a historical realm. While this reclamation is founded on historical events, these events are imbued with spiritual and cultural significance. Consequently, the ever changing discourse of Vodou religiosity in North America becomes increasingly invested with both a cultural and historical rhetoric specific to African-American (rather than Haitian) experience.

The apparent intersection of neo-voodoo and Vodou religiosity adds another wave to the already undulating motion of the Vodou tradition. New practitioners who (re)discover the Vodou tradition via the transmitters of the “neo-pagan” rhetoric come to imbue this syncretic tradition with the symbols, practices and discourse of a diversity of African-American religions and cultures. While this incites concern over the maintenance of the authenticity of the Vodou tradition, the syncretic impulse of Neo - Voodooists closely mirrors one of the central attributes of the Vodou tradition. Vodou is sometimes characterized by its apparent lack of concern for historical authenticity. McCarthy Brown observes that history frequently misrepresents and omits attributes of subjugated identity groups (1991:19). She notes:

Memory apparently works for those who do the remembering, even for the professional remembers, in ways more self - serving than generally admitted. Haitians acknowledge this quality of memory more directly. Whereas we are anxious that our history not be false, their anxiety centres on the possibility that their history might become lifeless or be forgotten. Whereas in our eyes truthfulness is the paramount virtue of any historical account, in theirs what matters most is relevance and liveliness. We write history books to remember our ancestors, and the Haitians call on Gede, the playful trickster who is the spirit of the dead. Mercurial Gede [whose]...special talent lies in viewing the facts of

life from refreshing new perspectives. (19)

It is this spirit of memory, which Brown attributes to the Haitian culture, which is so closely mirrored in the rhetoric and practices of neo-voodooism. Neo - voodooists “remember” Vodou in a unique way, they also bring their own experiential relevance to the discourse of the tradition. While this contemporary discourse is concentrating the rate of change experienced by the fluid identity that is Vodou, it does so in a way that is congruent with the recognisable ethos and impulses of the tradition. Neo-Voodooists create a realm of belonging for themselves that embraces the diverse components of their experience. For these practitioners, Vodou identity signifies their reconnection to a cultural history and celebrates the resistive nature of that reconnection. However, Vodou is not simply a victim of what some may see as neo-voodooism’s appropriation of its discourses and symbolic potency. Instead, Vodou “talks back”, again recalling the call and response techniques of oral traditions, with its own discursive construction of a memory that extends beyond the lived experience of an individual. The rituals of Vodou and the language that is used in these rituals insists on a cultural continuity that cannot simply be underwritten by the forces of neo-voodooism.

## *Chapter 6*

### **I Shake My Shackles, Raise Every Hackle, With My Tongue Loose: An Exploration of Slavery, Language and Faith in Vodou Discourse**

Like the scenes evoked in Paule Marshall's neo-voodoo novel, the dislocating experiences of the Middle Passage, of slavery itself, and the eventual slave Revolution which led to Haiti's independence in 1804, have become part of the intertwined cosmology and history of Haitian Vodou. Slavery, as an event, a practice, an institution, and a memory has become embedded in the discourses of Vodou that constitute and reconstitute the identity of its practitioners. The language of Vodou discourse constantly references the symbols of slavery. The words and phrases that are used to describe the rites of Vodou, refer both directly and implicitly to slavery, as do the iconographic tools that are used in the rituals of Vodou. A Vodou altar may house shackles and chains, Vodou rituals make use of rods and whips, and Vodou "language" speaks about servitude. This "phraseology" of Vodou, the discourse that is used as signifiers of Vodou practice, carries the terminology and symbols of slavery to generations of Vodou practitioners who never experienced the institutionalized slavery that is being referenced. Terms and ideas such as master and slave, freedom and captivity, servitude, shackles, zombification, possession, and a whole range of other signifiers combine to create a language that "remembers" the dislocating experiences of slavery in contemporary practice. An exploration of this interaction between the terms and phrases which recall slavery and the way in which Vodou practice is named or understood, reveals how the legacy of slavery informs present day practice, both for diasporic Haitian Vodouists and for neo-voodooists. This analysis of Vodou "language" also reveals something of the fluidity of Vodou itself, the ability of the religion to transcend geographical and temporal boundaries and realise history in the present. The remnants of slavery are a potent marker within the discourse of Vodou. By tracing these "remnants", these threads of history connecting the present, the way in which the signifiers of slavery and the subjugation of a

colonial past function for contemporary practitioners, is illuminated. In other words, what I am attempting to move towards is an analysis of how memory functions within the discourses of Vodou.

Often, “new” practitioners also have what could be characterized as an unstable and uneasy relationship to the legacy of slavery that is manifest in the discourse of Vodou. While “new” Vodou practitioners are by no means a homogenous group, they are generally removed, both genealogically and generationally, from the cultural specificity of slavery in Haiti. How, then, do these practitioners interact with the words, symbols and metaphors of slavery that are embedded in the everyday discourse of Vodou? Do they recognise the references to slavery that are made during ritual practice? Do the discursive structures of the Vodou tradition explain these references, or is the terminology of slavery simply a “remnant” of the past, the meaning of which will become increasingly inaccessible to new practitioners? And how does the meaning of this Vodou “language” inevitably change when it is spoken by those with whom slavery resonates so differently than it did for those who have practised closer to the inception (and the geographical home) of the Vodou tradition? This is an examination, not simply of linguistic patterns, but of the meaning carried by linguistic and discursive signifiers, and the ways in which that meaning is altered by the ebb and flow of what we now call transnationalism.

It has been observed that, while concepts such as globalization and transnationalism have a high academic currency at the moment, globalization is not simply a contemporary phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the effects of colonisation and the slave trade can be understood within the same theoretical framework that is used to examine contemporary patterns of immigration and the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion about the specific brand of “globalization” mediated by the practices of the slave trade see Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley, Calif; University of California Press, 1982. In his introduction to this text, Wolf explores how not only territories constantly shifted their borders, and peoples constantly moved from one territory to another, but also that these movements are generally interconnected. In this discussion, Wolf critiques methodologies that view cultures and cultural history as bounded (or linear) entities. Wolf wonders; “if there are connections everywhere, why do we persist in turning dynamic, interconnected phenomena into static, disconnected things (5)”. Also see Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 222-237.

“deterritorialized” nations that are subsequently created. While colonisation was, for the colonizers, a method of expanding the boundaries of the empire, the effects of colonisation on the colonized, especially those uprooted by slavery, resulted in discursive structures that have an ambiguous relation to concepts of “home” or “homeland”. This ambiguity, not unlike that found in the discourse of transnationalism, is manifested in the “phraseology” of Vodou where terms such as *Ginen* mythologize an African homeland.<sup>2</sup> This mythologized homeland, while a central cosmological concept, does not supersede Haiti as the home of Vodou. Indeed, many of the *lwa* (or gods) are indigenous to Haiti, and Haiti is the birthplace of the Petro nation, a militant faction of Vodou that is often said to have resulted from syncretism with the Carrib spirituality that was practiced on that island before the arrival of either the colonists or the slaves.<sup>3</sup> The dislocating experiences of slavery have, it could be argued, given rise to an ambiguity that pervades the rhetoric of Vodou, an ambiguity which recognises both the “new” roots that were formed through the coming together of diversity within the confines of the adversity of slavery, while still recalling the “homeland” that existed before the horrors of the Middle Passage. This ambiguity of multiple homelands, is only one example of a wide reaching ambiguity that infuses not only the discourse of Vodou and Haitian nationality, but also seems to pervade the entire Caribbean (Burton 1997; 91). In fact, this ambiguity has been noted by many theorists engaged with a study of the processes of creolization that have occurred on the fragmented landscape of the Caribbean islands. In his introduction, “Within the Shady Hold of Modernity: A Preface to Creolization”, to his text *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature*, Chris Bongie, with the help of Edouard Glissant, describes the processes of creolization as

the entering into complex new relations of formerly isolated peoples under the sign of our ever more interdependent world economy - an entering into what Glissant defines ...as “a completely new dimension that permits each and every one of us to be both

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the concept of *Ginen* in Vodou liturgy see “The meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou” by Serge Larose in *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, (I.M.Lewis ed., London: Academic Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> See Leslie Desmangles’ *Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

here and elsewhere, rooted and exposed, lost in the mountains and at liberty under the sea, harmoniously at rest and restlessly wandering". (Bongie, 1998:8)

This description touches, through its poetics, the ambiguity and multiplicity of creolization as it has manifested and continues to manifest in the Caribbean and the diaspora. And, once again, theories of creolization can be applied, with startling success, to the processes of transculturation which are occurring in the diaspora, as the markers of cultures such as Vodou begin to enter the spheres of people formerly isolated from these cultural values.

However, in order to understand this phenomenon of globalized creolization and the way in which Vodou is altered and affects alterations through transnational and transcultural occurrences, it is necessary to understand something of the nature of the creolization that took place during that former era of globalization, that earlier epoch of slavery. When looking at the ambiguity that is manifest in the cultural discourse of many Caribbean societies, many scholars have come to understand this ambiguity as a result, not only of cultural mixing, but also of the way in which slavery has shaped these discourses. In *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean*, Richard Burton attempts to map out how the particular processes of creolization specific to the Caribbean were historically influenced by the slaves', and the newly born creoles' attempts to resist the subjugating conditions of slavery. In so doing, Burton maintains that the slaves, and subsequently the members of the newly formed creole cultures, appropriated the symbols and signifiers of domination, "re-signifying" them into symbols that represent resistance or emancipation. However, Burton suggests that this appropriation of the tools of domination is "double - edged";

Afro-Creole cultures are themselves a paradoxical amalgam of the radical and the conservative that...simultaneously challenges and confirms the dominant order by turning the latter's resources against it in a complex double game of oppositionality – a game that can lead into, but also often militates against, the possibility of actual resistance, in the more circumscribed sense in which I am using that term. In short, an oppositional culture, precisely because it opposes the dominant order on the dominant order's own ground, is always likely, sooner or later, to be "recuperated" by it. (1997:18)

Burton, who defines resistance as something that can only occur from outside a system of

domination(6), fails to sufficiently acknowledge the impact of the processes of creolization on dominant cultures. While the appropriation of the symbols of slavery and the signifiers of domination may be double-edged, or ambiguous, this appropriation inevitably changes the meaning these signifiers hold. A tool of domination, in the hands of the dominated cannot mean exactly what it means in the hands of the dominators. Consequently, any “recuperation”, must mediate the changed and changing meaning of these potent signifiers. This passing back and forth of signifiers, this transculturation, fundamentally alters not only the new and emerging creole cultures, but also the “dominant order” of which Burton speaks. Any analysis of creolization in the Caribbean must guard against understanding cultural appropriation or syncretism as one sided. Such an analysis leads to a perpetuation of bounded identity categories, giving the impression of creole cultures of the Caribbean are essentially African cultures concealed under the cover of superficially assumed European signifiers. Or as Burton suggests; “many African cultural forms not merely were preserved in the New World but flourished there, often concealed beneath a European shell. The African - derived Vodou spirits of Damballa, Legba, and Erzilie, for instance, are conventionally represented as Saint Patrick, Saint Peter, and the Virgin Mary” (1). While it is true that the above mentioned spirits are syncretic with Catholic saints, it is problematic to assume that Catholicism was adopted simply to obscure the reality of African religious practices. Such an assumption maintains the notion that Vodou is “truly” an African religion, and that the Catholicism that manifests within Vodou cosmology is nothing but a remnant of colonial conditioning. This analysis denies the veracity, not only of the Catholicism practised in conjunction with Vodou, but also of the blending, the hybridization that occurs during creolization. Karen McCarthy Brown suggests that while the adoption of Catholic symbolism and doctrine may well have been a strategy of resistance on the part of the slaves, it is a strategy that was born out of the ethos of African spirituality, a strategy that was based on religious practice and understanding, as much as it was motivated by a desire to survive the subjugation of slavery. As Brown explains, the reasons that led to the incorporation of

Catholicism are complex as African slaves appropriated the religion of the slave master in a strategic move to achieve an understanding of the power that resided in this religion (Brown, 1989:237). Brown speaks of a “cultural judo” which is not enacted in order simply to mask a “true” or essential African culture that can survive beneath a “veneer” of Catholic religious practice, or colonial discourse. Instead, it is enacted in order to bring about change. These changes were embraced as essential to empowerment, resistance, and ultimately emancipation. And these changes, these transculturations, are part of a creolization process, a process which is at least partly indigenous to the spiritual ethos that has manifested itself on the island of Haiti, and which undoes any reified notion of bounded or static identity categories.

Looking at the way in which slaves appropriated the symbols of Catholicism, and the way in which these symbols not only became embedded within the emerging discourse of Vodou, but the way in which they were used to access power, can provide insight into the rhetoric of slavery that is prevalent in Vodou discourse. Like Catholicism, which was the master’s religion in colonial St Dominigue, the slaves appropriated the symbols and discourses of slavery. It should be noted, that while this is an examination of the language of slavery embedded in Vodou discourse, it is not simply an analysis of linguistic creolization which occurred, as it has been argued, earlier than cultural creolization (Burton, 1997:25). Whether or not linguistic and cultural creolization are separable processes, this analysis is concerned with not only the creolization that occurred in the past, but with the continuity with this past that becomes evident in contemporary invocations of these terms. And while slavery, it must be observed, may be embedded deeply within the ethos and cosmology of Vodou, it is never far from the surface of Vodou practice. The “phraseology” of Vodou, words and phrases such as *monte chwal* (the *lwa* mounts the horse), *mét tèt* (master of the head), *m’ sevi lwas* (I serve the gods), *sérvis* (ceremony), reveal, with minimal etymological analysis, the connection between the language of Vodou ritual and the memory of slavery. However, before embarking on this etymological excavation I would like to return to the cosmological discourse of Vodou in an effort to demonstrate that these words are far more than



linguistic remnants of the past, but are a means of actualizing history in the present. This actualisation of history in the present could be understood as a characteristic of the possession ritual, a central and defining rite of Vodou. In the possession rituals of Vodou, the *lwa* “descends” into, or “mounts”, a practitioner so that the congregation may converse with that *lwa*. Possession rituals can be understood as rituals of memory, the *lwa* must be remembered in order to survive, so as much as the “servitors” of Vodou need the *lwa* for protection and healing, the *lwa* need the practitioners of Vodou in order to survive, in order to be remembered. In these moments of re-membling, the past becomes the present within the sacred space of the ritual. And, like all things Vodou, memory is complex, the *lwa* that are remembered through ritual are not simply the ancient African spirits, but also “new” creole spirits, and characters from Haitian history reincarnated as gods. And these reincarnated historical figures often carry in their very names, names that are used to evoke them in ritual, the legacy of slavery, a legacy of torture, subjugation and resistance. Joan Dayan explains this concurrence of past and present within the ritual of the *lwa* in *Haiti, History and the Gods*:

gods that bear the names of revolt, the traces of torture and revenge, like Brise Pimba, Baron Ravage, Ti-Jean-Dantor, Ezili-je-wouj (Ezili with red eyes), and Jean Zombi, recall the strange promiscuity between masters and slaves; white, black, and mulatto; old world and new. These rituals of memory could be seen as deposits of history. Shreds of bodies come back, remembered in ritual. (1995:36)

It is this realisation of the past within the present, the spirit of memory and recall embedded in the rituals of possession, that makes the “trope” of slavery such a potent metaphor within the discourse of Vodou. In part, the way in which the past becomes manifest in the present, the “shreds of bodies” of which Dayan speaks, is through the very language that is used to articulate these practices, and through the names that are given to these “new” creole born gods.

Naming, and re-naming, have long been potent tools for those facing the subjugation of institutionalized slavery. This act of naming, similar to the assimilation of Catholic doctrine into the cosmology and rhetoric of Vodou, harkens back once again to the era of slavery. As Burton explains;

When slaves were baptized, they commonly took as their surname either that of their owner or that of the missionary who baptized them - not, I suggest, in a spirit of servility, and still less as recognition of ownership or patronage, but as a quasi-magical attempt to arrogate some of the white man's manna and power by taking over his name. (1997:106)

Once again, this appropriation of the master's name can be understood as a strategy of resistance, resistance that led to emancipation in Haiti. Without become engrossed in the specifics of Haitian history, I would like to observe how the Haitian Slave Revolution (1791-1804), a moment in history, is made continuous with the present through the rituals of possession. After a long and arduous revolution, Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed the independence of the island now named Haiti, and the victory of the slaves and "free-coloured" people of the island over the military forces of France. Jean-Jacques Dessalines also proclaimed himself the first emperor of Haiti. His story illuminates the complex relationship between history and cosmology, and the significance of naming in the discourse of Vodou. Jean-Jacques Dessalines was a slave who became emperor. Occupying these two roles, roles that could be positioned at the extremes of the continuum of subjugation and privilege, perhaps facilitated Dessalines in the development of a rhetoric of national identity that rejected French and European idealisms. The first constitution of Haiti was founded on the abolition of slavery. Since slavery had long been justified through a biological determinism that equated blackness with savagery and whiteness with civilisation, it is hardly surprising that the redefinition of a nation and its people became concerned with racial identity. As David Nicholls explains:

The first constitution of Haiti proclaimed that all Haitians no matter what their shade of skin were to be called "black"; this included even those German and Polish groups in Saint Dominique who had fought with the liberation movement and had become citizens...Furthermore, the constitution stated that no white man, whatever his nationality, should set foot in Haiti as a master or property owner, and that he was unable to acquire property in the future (Art. 12). Just as colonial Saint Dominigue had been based upon a system of white superiority, so Haiti became a symbol of black power (1979:36).

Dessalines' attempt to reconstitute the identity of Haiti through this first constitution was an attempt to reorganize the categorisation of racial identity on which colonisation was founded. By referring to Haitians as "blacks", Dessalines employed linguistic as well as political methods in

an attempt to diffuse the legacy of race relations left by colonial institutions. After the Revolution the relations between the former slaves, predominately black like Dessalines himself, the “free coloured” peoples or *mulattos* who had enjoyed freedom and privileges during the era of French colonisation, and the whites who remained on the island, continued to be strained. By positioning blackness as the rhetorically and politically defining category of Haitian identity, Dessalines inverted the hierarchy of colonialism. As Joan Dayan succinctly explains, “Dessalines took the “lowest rung and made it a synecdoche for the whole” (1995:25). In part, this was a reaction to the potential continued subjugation of the Haitian people carefully disguised in aspirations to attain the status of a civilised nation by emulating the social, political, and ideological structures of France and Europe. In his speeches Dessalines made it a practice to conflate the distance between slave and emperor. He frequently referred to himself as Duclos, the name of the man who had owned him, in an attempt to instill a continued disdain for the French and to disrupt any continuity between France and the former colony by recalling the disenfranchisement and horrors of slavery. Joan Dayan explains how Dessalines used whatever tools available to him to resist what he may well have seen as the new and subtle servitude of internalized racism that threatened to emerge at the birth of the Haitian nation:

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

However, the heroic and redemptive status of Dessalines was short lived. And his undoing may well have been related to issues of property. As Dayan implies in her analysis, Dessalines’ status as a former item of property may have allowed him to develop a particularly “militant” rhetoric in reference to property issues in the developing nation. Shortly after rising to power, Dessalines, in an attempt to redefine land ownership, rescinded transfers of property made after October 1802. This date coincided with the last year of the Revolution, when the defeat of Leclerc’s army became more probable, and many of the white land owners were fleeing Saint Dominigue. These

landowners turned over the deeds to their land to their offspring, the “free coloureds” or *affranchis*. By rescinding these transferred deeds, Dessalines quickly made enemies of the political and social *mulatto* elite. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that Dessalines was assassinated on October 17, 1806, on the road to Port-au-Prince, at an junction called Point Rouge. In death, Dessalines was dismembered, the pieces of his body distributed to a crowd gathered in Port-au-Prince, rendering the former slave property once again.

Although denigrated at the moment of his death, Dessalines rode to prominence again, this time as a *lwa* of the Vodou pantheon. Today Papa Dessalines is invoked, by name, in rituals of possession where he converses with practitioners. An ambiguous character, Dessalines is a Creole born god whose status as a historical figure allows for the incarnation of history within the cosmology of Vodou. Dessalines, both the historical figure and the *lwa*, also carries with him the legacy of slavery, and the practices of naming and renaming, of re-membering the past, that have created a continuity between the conditions of (and resistance to) slavery in the past and the signifiers of ritual practice in the present. As Dayan explains, “the terminology of Vodou repeats or enacts the experience of slavery but allows the speakers to hold on to a freedom that goes beyond such intentional signification” (1995:70). The rituals of Vodou, despite their fluidity, insist on the repetition of the experiences of slavery or, more generally, the specificity of Haitian history. And while there are many possible reasons for this repetition of the “terminology of constraint”, it does not seem implausible to suggest that this language was adopted, during the genesis of Haitian Vodou, as a means of resisting, on the level of spirituality and cosmology, the subjugation perpetuated by slavery. However, this resistance did not occur in the realm of “reality” (although there was a great deal of “real” resistance to slavery throughout the Caribbean, including Haiti, as Richard Burton explores in his text *Afro-Creole Power*), but in a spiritual realm where the language, ideas, and practices of slavery were turned on their head. In this spiritual realm the physical property of the slave master appropriates the culture and religion of the master, imbuing it with new signification. This is not so much an inversion of the subjugation

of slavery, but a reflection of this subjugation, a strange and magical reflection that changes the meanings of words and actions in subtle but potent ways. As “real” time passes, what was the present for the slaves in colonial St. Dominigue becomes history. However, in the sacred and liminal time of Vodou ritual, the past continues to be reflected and refracted in a sort of magical mirror.

My own *mambo*, or Vodou priestess, has spoken often to me about the “magick mirror”, a tool of divination in her spiritual practices.<sup>4</sup> When I asked her to explain the purpose of this tool she told me that the mirror was a “thin crust”, the place where the dividing line between two worlds is the most permeable, the place where the “Waters” have risen above and below the earth and now rest, creating an illusion of solidity, a place where this illusory solidity is, in fact, time frozen. When my *mambo* speaks of two worlds she is usually referencing the “invisible” world, a mythological place where the *lwa* reside, and the visible world, the place I call “reality”. The “Waters” separate these two worlds. These waters signify an ambiguous realm. *Ginen*, the home of the *lwa*, is often said to be “under the water”, however many spirits, such as Simbi and Agwé, seem to reside within the water itself. In addition, water, in Vodou cosmologies, as in many other traditions, symbolises rebirth. However, the rebirth symbolized by the “Waters” in Vodou seems to recall, once again, the Middle Passage, with *lwa* such as Agwé being the guardians of this historical journey. What is most significant about the “magical mirror” to this analysis of the history and cosmology of Vodou is how it is used within ritual practice. The magick mirror is a point of access into the “invisible” world, and this access is accomplished through the *will* of the

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<sup>4</sup> “Vodou is Voodoo”, or so say many of the Vodou practitioners I meet. However, for these academic purposes, I should note that I practice a “brand” of Vodou that is very concerned with the reclamation of the magical and mystical powers of Vodou spirituality. These practitioners see magic as a discipline that requires dedication, sacrifice, and perhaps even talent. However, study and patience are rewarded with spiritual powers, such as the ability to access the realm of the *lwa*. Not all “brands” of Vodou (if one can even speak of such a thing) are similarly concerned with the magical nature of the Vodou religion. In the sixties and the seventies a movement arose in Haiti that was predominately concerned with dismissing the magical aspects of Vodou, while valorizing the teachings of Vodou that emphasize reciprocity, community and love. This “Ginen” movement, arose in conjunction with the “musik racine”, or roots music movement which sought to celebrate the power and culture of the “masses” or the lower class in Haiti, and may well have been a response to the “corruption” of Vodou for political purposes by the Duvalier regimes.

“magician” who is able to disrupt the illusory solidity of the mirror’s reflection. Once the surface of the water/mirror is broken the “Waters” can be used to carry a mambo on an expedition to seek information or magical powers. This watery realm, accessed through the mirror, is one of the places where the past and present collapses, where the *lwa* interact with humans outside the realm of reality. The knowledge generated through access to a world where chronological and linear histories no longer function does much to destabilize dualisms between past and present that exist in conventional understandings of history. Mirroring is also significant in other Vodou rituals. Vodouists often mirror each other’s actions within ritual. This mirroring can either signify unity, a doubling up of the power being invoked through ritual, or it can signify a contest of wills between two rival priests (seldom does this occur between mambos, or priestesses). What is significant to note, in these contemporary practices of mirroring and mirror work, is the importance of *will* in the ritual context, this is especially significant within the context of slavery, where the individual was literally shackled, his/her will constrained. Clearly, the mirror, and acts of mirroring, has significant cosmological meaning within the discourse of Vodou. Louis Martiné, a New Orleans Vodou priest, does little to dispel the ambiguity inherent in the practice when he explains that “mirroring serves to acknowledge and ritualistically evoke the doubled nature of visible existence and the invisible spirits so aptly displayed by the twins, the Marassa. This doubling is a great mystery; to experience its essence is to have the underpinnings of one’s “reality” shorn through” (Martiné, 1992:77). And it is precisely this shoring through of reality that occurred/occurs in the rituals and discourse of Vodou when the language and experience of slavery is invoked. When slaves repeated, or mirrored, the terminology, and even the ideology of constraint (Dayan, 1995:71) that confined their lives, within the sacred and magical space of Vodou ritual, they shore right through the everyday “reality” of their subjugation. And this subversion of the horrific dichotomy of master and slave (as well as the dichotomies of past and present and human and divine) was ultimately accomplished through a complex and careful manipulation of human will, or agency.

In *Afro-Creole Power*, Burton suggests that the empowerment of the individual within the cosmology of Vodou is both temporary and, ultimately, circumscribed, in much the same way empowerment was circumscribed for slaves in the history of St. Dominigue. Burton endeavours to:

link the phenomenon of possession to the experience of slavery, colonialism and the politics of the postcolonial Caribbean, to see what goes on in *hounfo*, *palais*, or balmyard as some kind of microcosm or “magical mirror” of the relation of the powerless to power, and of power to the powerless, in the Caribbean experience as a whole. For whether it is the power of the slave master, the colonial apparatus, or the charismatic political leader in the “independent” Caribbean, power, as we have seen, always *descends*, like the spirits, onto the powerless below. It may empower them for a time, but it does so only by dispossessing them of themselves and filling them with a power that, since it is other and originates elsewhere, can be taken away as easily as it was bestowed. (1997:223)

In this analysis Burton conflates the spirits, or *lwa*, with the slave master, as entities who can arbitrarily grant power. However, in so doing, Burton perpetuates the dichotomy between victim and victimiser, and effectively ignores the role of agency in the ritual of possession. What is needed, in this exploration of the interconnections between Vodou and slavery, is an understanding of power that goes beyond simple dichotomies. Chris Smaje calls for this undoing of dichotomies when, in his exploration of race in the Caribbean he suggests that

thinking about race in the Caribbean can allow us to go beyond wearying oppositions between race as either an invented ideology of exploitation or a cultural code of difference, between either the cultural or the economic as privileged modes of explanation, and between sociological analysis as either critical or complicit with extant social categories. (1998:152)

What Smaje calls for in a reading of race in the Caribbean, can be applied to a reading of race relations, or an analysis of slavery in colonial St. Dominigue. Such an analysis restructures the reading of cultural and religious difference, positing an understanding of this difference as multiply constituted by both dominant ideologies of exploitation and not so dominant codes of cultural expression. Refuting this either/or system of analysis allows for an understanding of the role of agency in the Vodou rituals of possession. Possession, like the magic mirror, refracts the power dynamics of slavery by invoking a cosmological world where the binary of master and

slave is deconstructed. Within the cosmology of Vodou an individual consists of multiple but intertwined elements. The *ti bon ange*, literally the “little good angel”, constitutes the self, the personality, and individual will or agency; the *gros bon ange*, which can be read as an equivalent of the Christian concept of soul; and the *gros cadavre* refers to the physical body. During possession, the *ti bon ange* is supplanted by the spirit of the lwa who embodies a human in order to converse with the rest of the community. However, this supplanting of the self does not, according to most academics on Vodou (Brown 1991; Desmangles 1994; and Dayan 1995), erase the self. Rather the self is transplanted to a new realm. Although little is remembered of this realm after the possession has passed, this experience expands the limits of the individual, allowing the borders between humanity and divinity to be blurred. What occurs in the ritual of possession is not simply the manifestation of the god in the “real” world, but also the manifestation of the human in the world of the divine. And although the experience of the human in this alternative reality remains vague and often unarticulated, the effects of this cosmology undeniably alter the constitution of experience and identity. As Dayan explains:

to be ridden by the *met tèt*, to be seized by the god, is thus to destroy the cunning imperial dichotomy of master and slave, or coloniser and colonized. Submission to the god thrives on the enhancement of ambiguity, which could be described as follows: you let yourself be taken over by something outside of you, a force you want and don’t want, control and don’t control, and you get a sense of yourself that you did not have before. And spirits unfold their potential in the lineaments of the human, getting what they did not have before, the material envelope through which they experience life on earth. (1995:72)

This symbiotic and mutually beneficial, relationship between the lwa and the practitioner illustrates that possession does not result in a loss of identity, but rather, expands the limits of experience, and consequently, expands the knowledge that comes to constitute the identity of the Vodou practitioner. Possession, within the cosmology of Vodou, subverts the dichotomy of master and slave, not by replacing the plantation owner or slave master with another master (the *mèt tèt*, or master of the head), but by leading the way back, by re/membering an identity subjugated and denigrated through the dislocation of slavery. It should also be noted that while



the lwa might descend onto the practitioner, this form of possession, unlike the possession of slavery, does not depend on ownership.

By looking at the cosmology of possession rituals and the use of the “magick mirror”, it becomes clear that mirroring or mimicry occupy complex positions within the discourse of Vodou. The practices of reflection and subtle refraction that have been described above illuminate how slaves present at the inception of the Vodou tradition may have found an alternative reality that not only allowed them to escape the subjugation of slavery, but also provided them with a space in which, or a knowledge out of which, they could constitute their identity, experience, and community in powerful and empowering ways, regardless of the conditions of their “reality”. It seems possible to suggest that the so called “remnants” of slavery that exist in the language and practices of slavery are part of this process of mirroring or mimicry, a process which absorbs the tools of the coloniser in order to subvert not simply the physical power of the coloniser, but the power to generate a knowledge that relegates the slave to a denigrated position. However, this re-constitution of identity through the knowledge generated by faith is not bound to the past, or to historical encounters. It is necessary to come to an understanding of how this cosmology of re/membering functions in contemporary Vodou practice. Clearly, the language of slavery is still used in contemporary liturgy as are the physical symbols of slavery, including whips, rods and shackles. However, it would seem difficult to suggest that these symbols could possibly carry the same meaning for present day practitioners as they did for practitioners of the past. Although identity is constituted by social and cultural experiences that differ over time, there exists within the constant change and flux of the Vodou tradition a type of continuity. While it would be problematic to suggest that the experiences of slaves in St. Dominique could parallel the experiences of contemporary Haitian Vodouists, or the experiences of practitioners in the Vodou diaspora, an analysis of the way in which signifiers accrue meaning in Vodou discourse cannot ignore the continuity that exists with this fluid tradition. In part, this continuity is achieved through the evocation of memory. This is memory

that extends beyond individual experiences, providing a continuity with the experiences of the past, and creating a context in which the signifiers that re/member this past can be understood. This understanding of memory as extending beyond the boundaries of the individual can be described as “one of the ways our consciousness connects items and experiences in the net of language, for...we “remember” not only things that have actually happened to us personally, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, we “remember” events, language, actions, attitudes, and values that are aspects of our membership in groups” (Singh, 1994:4). In this analysis, memory becomes a central factor in the constitution of communities such as those generated by Vodou discourse, and by knowledge of the past. However, as has already been suggested, the discourse of Vodou does more than simply remember the past, it actualises it in the present. That elusive historical figure Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first leader of independent Haiti, illustrates how this actualisation of the past in the present constitutes and re-constitutes the discourses of Vodou in the present.

Although initially viewed as a hero, the liberator of the slaves, Dessalines' story was quickly re-written by his successors to paint him as a vicious dictator whose militant vision of Haiti was fuelled by violence. Stories that illustrate Dessalines' hatred for all things French still circulate in Haiti that, telling of Dessalines asking members of the populace questions in French and ordering their death if they responded in French rather than Creole (the official language of Haiti as declared by Dessalines) on the grounds that they were not a “true” Haitian (Dayan, 1995:23). These stories proliferated after Dessalines' death, eroding his status as a Haitian historical hero. Perhaps because of Dessalines' conflicted depiction in historical documents, as either redemptive hero or vicious dictator, any attempt to create a historical reconstruction of Dessalines is a task immersed in ambiguity and conflict. However, the purpose of this analysis is not to uncover the “truth” of Dessalines, the historical figure, but to come to an awareness of how this figure and the events associated with him circulate in Vodou discourse, cosmology and contemporary Vodou practice. Although dismembered at the moment of his death, Dessalines

became prominent again, this time as a *lwa* of the Vodou pantheon. The re-memberment is often said to correspond to Dessalines' gradual reintroduction into the rhetoric of Haitian politics. In *Haiti, History and the Gods*, Dayan suggests that Dessalines was reintroduced as a means of "pacifying" the peasant majority, who had found themselves in a position of economic and social subjugation similar to that of slavery. Gradually, the liberation of Dessalines from his former status as dictator came to be a substitute for the liberation of the "masses" from the shackles of poverty. It was during this period (from approximately 1845 to 1904), when Dessalines was resurrected and monumentalised in the new emerging narratives of Haitian nationalism, that Dessalines began to make his appearance as a *lwa* (Dayan 1995; 28). If the reconstruction of the historical figure of Dessalines is a next to impossible task, the reconstruction of his history as a *lwa* is certainly out of reach of this analysis. Nonetheless, touching a history that extends beyond the boundaries of written, or official, history is integral to understanding the concurrence of seeming conflict that is so characteristic of Vodou discourse, cosmology and identity. It could be argued that the second coming of Dessalines, as divine being, is a stretch on the journey towards the moments at which the disparate threads of Vodou narratives coalesce. Dessalines, re-membered, seems to represent the ambiguity of the Revolution.

In the syncretic blend that is the Vodou tradition, Creole *lwas*, such as Dessalines, who are born in Haiti become associated with African gods who belong to the various African *nations* (for example, the Rada nation or sect, descendant from the Dahomean tradition in west Africa) included in Vodou. Dessalines is associated with the African Ogou, a sect of warrior gods in traditional Yoruba practice. Because of this association, Dessalines the *lwa* is referred to as Ogou Dessalines. The Ogou family of spirits, associated as they are with war and, implicitly with the political and social ramifications of war, come to represent the ambiguities of power relations in Vodou communities. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains:

Through the countless Ogou possession-performances that occur in Haiti and in Haitian immigrant communities each year, many around Ogou's feast day in late July, Haitians remember their paradoxical military and political history. They preserve and analyse its

lessons and apply them to the places in their own lives where power is the issue.  
(1991:96)

By conceptualising Ogou as a tool of memory, Brown suggests how the structures of the “possession-performance” collapse the meta-narrative of history into specificity, a specificity that becomes applicable and understandable in the everyday lives of Vodou practitioners. As a member of the Ogou family, Dessalines is an ambiguous character, not unlike the character he has come to represent in the historical narrative of Haiti. Dessalines the *lwa* illustrates the ambiguity of “holding” power in Vodou discourse. Clearly, power can be redemptive or resistive, but also destructive. Dessalines embodies both of these aspects of power concurrently. He also embodies the military and political power of Haitian history, at the same time as he embodies the power dynamics specific to the everyday life of Vodou practitioners. Through Dessalines, possessions, like the possessions of other Ogou *lwas*, allow practitioners to *visit* the identity of the warrior. However, these warriors are not romanticized ideals, but characters who have ingested the bittersweet taste of both victory and defeat and have generated knowledge, understanding and story from the realisation of the concurrence of these two events. Dessalines, and the practitioners who meet him in the ritual of possession, disseminate this ambiguity. Clearly, the rhetorics of power, the stories of history, and the components of memory, are inextricably interconnected within the cosmology of Vodou, and the pantheon of *lwa* of which Papa Dessalines is a representative.

It is easy to understand the Vodou religion as the response of the slaves to the horrific conditions of subjugation they faced in pre-independence Haiti. What is less easy to comprehend is how the rituals of Vodou continue to resist, appropriate, and reconstitute the extremes, represented by Dessalines the emperor and Duclos the slave, of powerlessness and empowerment. When coming to understand how the language of slavery carries significance for contemporary practitioners it is necessary to occupy an intermediary space where traditionally held dualisms of past and present, human and divine, history and cosmology, no longer have the power to explain

and order “reality”. The knowledge that is generated in this intermediary space emphasises not only the fragmented and fluctuating nature of the Vodou tradition, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the way in which Vodou discourse mediates these seemingly conflicted concurrences. By creating an alternative space from which to generate what can only be understood as alternative knowledge (of, for example, history), for the dissemination of a Vodou narrative to practitioners, who may have no direct link to the history of the genesis of Vodou, is enabled. This Vodou narrative constitutes and reconstitutes the identity of new practitioners, in part, by providing them with a context for the language of the past embedded in the practices of the present. When these new practitioners enter into an engagement with the discourses and practices of Vodou they are theoretically provided with an alternative cultural system distilled into the rituals and liturgy of Vodou practice. While transnationalism is creating new rhetorics and discourses of motion, informing new and increasing numbers of people about this alternative cultural model, Vodou simply absorbs, even cannibalizes, these new discourses, and uses them to reconstitute its own perimeters and borders, regardless of the shifts of globalization. By generating its own epistemological systems, Vodou transforms not so much itself (although it does do that) but how Vodou is known and understood. As one practitioner explains; “Vodou is one of the world's great religions, but if it gains more followers outside Haiti, I hope it will do so not by imitating the world we have to live in already, but by transforming it... which is its nature to do”(Alix, personal communication).

This analysis traces some of disparate elements of the Vodou narrative, including the language, and memory of slavery that is inextricably tied to both the form, and the content of Vodou, in order to elucidate and validate the knowledge generated through the faith. This knowledge is maintained and “updated” through the rituals of Vodou and the discursive structures these rituals insist upon. The forces of neo-voodooism that seem to insist on a de-historicized approach to an appropriation (or “reclamation”) of the Vodou tradition are themselves destabilized as they encounter the historical specificity of Vodou and the *lwa* who lecture newcomers on their

ignorance about the narratives that shape this religion. Such an analysis does not simply seek to validate and authorize the experience of Vodou practitioners, both past and present, it also suggests a theory which validates the knowledge generated by religion, not just as the product of historical and cultural discourses, but as an active agent in the generation of knowledge. It is this theoretical framework which allows the academic to stand at least tentatively on an intermediate ground that doesn't accord agency only to the practitioners of Vodou, but also to those most enigmatic of knowledge producers, the gods themselves, according them the power to generate their own discourse. In Vodou it is the gods who demand service, who call an individual to be initiated, and, ultimately, who instruct and educate, passing on knowledge of the tradition and their own history. In this conflicted and reflexive intermediate space, gods, such as Papa Dessalines, conjure and insist on a powerful ideology of reference and recall.

#### *Subtext IV*

I am writing my thesis. Kaarla is writing a business proposal. We are both feeling guilty as we watch the scenes of protest that filter across the drift of the t.v. screen. We did not go and protest the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. We did not lend our voices to those who are concerned with what this particular brand of globalization will do to the already disenfranchised. We stayed home. It is a surreal moment for both of us. This realization that without really thinking about it we made a decision to forsake our friends, who risk tear gas and arrest to make their point, and stay home to write a thesis and a business plan. When did it happen, we wonder, when did we go from being part of the unruly mob to part of what looks suspiciously like the establishment? What happened to those convictions that we could change the world? What happened to that sense of righteous indignation that surged through us when we saw things like a concrete and chain linked fence erected to keep out protesters in a democratic country. What we saw on the t.v. did not look like Quebec City to us. It looked like another world. And try as we might, we couldn't shake the feeling that there was something wrong with watching these anti free trade protests unfold on a t.v. screen. I lamented my decision not to travel to Quebec. I sat on my couch and evaluated and re-evaluated my decision. I weighed my guilt and my responsibility. I questioned my convictions. I drove Kaarla crazy until she turned to me and said; "We *are* part of the establishment, there is no getting around it, but that doesn't mean we can't bring the unruly mob with us".

## Chapter 7

### *Shifting Foundations or Infecting the Academy with Vodou Dis-ease*

They thought that by fumigating the Place Congo in the 1890's when people were Doing the Bamboula the Chacta the Babouille the Counjaille the Juba the Congo and the Voodoo that this would put an end to it. That it was merely a fad. But they did not understand that the Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague.

*Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed

Sometimes, when I walk the halls of the ivory towers, I have the impression of movement. A silent and barely perceptible shaking that runs through me as I wander from class to library and back again. It is as if something is moving way below me, shifting in the foundations of the tower. Or maybe it is more like the tremors that occur on the inhalation just before a sneeze, that desperate attempt to rid oneself of infectious agents. Bless you, I whisper. Bless you, that remnant of days when a sneeze could mean the plague, which could mean death. Bless you, an invocation, a miniature prayer meant to remind the divine of one's existence and to politely suggest that one may need assistance. But I can still feel that almost imperceptible shiver. I can feel it in my bones.

Having spent the past three years studying the "ins and outs" of Haitian Vodou at an institution of higher learning, I have become gradually, but fully, immersed in an exploration of the ethical and epistemological implications of studying Vodou within the academy. It is difficult to study the complexities of Vodou without looking at the ways in which academic discourse intersects with a religious discourse that does its best to counteract and resist some of the *a priori* assumptions on which academic disciplines are founded. This text has attempted to situate an examination of how the epistemological structure of Vodou is made visible in the way that Vodou discourses constitute and reconstitute the identity of its practitioners. In particular, I have been concerned with the identity formation of those who some see as peripheral to Vodou practice, those new-comers to Vodou whose relationship to the religion, its cultural and historical



specificity, its language and its discursive rhetoric. The constitution of identity takes place not simply within the discursive structures of Vodou, but within a dialectical space in which Vodou *answers* back to some of the things it has been *called* throughout its history.

In part, Vodou generates and disseminates knowledge within the space and structure of ritual, through the ritualization of everyday life<sup>1</sup> and within the religious and cultural structures of Vodou itself. Knowledge is also generated through the practice of identification, the means by which Vodou discourse allows for a constitution of identity and experience that is fluid and fluctuating and which in turn allows practitioners to transform the structures of that discourse. Looking at contemporary theories of syncretism, identity, and transnationalism, clearly situates the knowledge generated by Vodou within an academic discourse. But what happens when the epistemologies of Vodou are brought into the academy not simply as data or through ethnographic description, but as analytical frameworks with the power to transform how Vodou is known? When occupying the space of the academy, the knowledge generated by Vodou discourses comes to be apprehended within an institutionalized space that circumscribes and classifies knowledge. This classification of knowledge has long posited such lofty concepts as reason, logic, and proof, against the faith, magic, and belief of religions such as Vodou. While post-modern theories seek to “deconstruct” the epistemological structures on which the aforementioned concepts are founded, they do so within a system which uses itself, its own history, as the sole field of reference. In my examination of Vodou in the context of such academic concepts as syncretism, identity and transnationalism I have shown how Vodouists themselves call into question some of the concepts posited by these contemporary theories. Whether it is Vodouists

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<sup>1</sup> Although Vodou is understood primarily as a religion, it is a religious practice in which all aspects of life are ritualized. Specific rituals may serve specific functions, including healing, protection, cursing, etc. However, the access to the divine, the gods, *lwa* or spirits of the Vodou pantheon, is not limited to the space or time of a specific ritual. One is as likely to meet a god on the street corner as one is to meet a god in the *honfour*. In “Vodoun, or Voice of the Gods” In *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria and Obeah and the Caribbean*, ed. M. Fernandez Olmos et al, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997, Joan Dayan points to the everydayness of Vodou, a religion intrinsically tied to the political, economic and social conditions facing its practitioners...everyday.

who are studying their tradition, Vodouists who question the motives and practices of the academics they encounter in the field, or me just worrying about how those who have given me their worlds will take this, Vodouists, are insisting on a presence within the academy—a presence which sometimes disquiets the quiet halls of the academy. And so, the space that Vodou occupies within the academy is fraught with a dis-ease that, as I have explored, some theorists<sup>2</sup> suggest is created and perpetuated by the epistemological structures of late modernity that lie at the foundation of such disciplines as anthropology and religious studies. These foundational epistemological structures, it can be argued, make up the very tools that advance and define the study of culture and/or religion in the humanities. There is a dis-ease which shapes the space Vodou occupies within institutions of higher learning, a dis-ease with the ways in which Vodou is known combined with an uncertainty as to how to proceed with this business of knowing. What seems necessary to me, as one engaged in the study of Vodou within the academy, is an exploration of the ways in which Vodou generates and disseminates knowledge that deliberately transforms and undoes the structures and forms of academic discourses—and how the academy does up these structures and theories again. It may seem as if I am according Vodou, its discourses and practitioners, far too much influence in the halls of the ivory tower. However, I believe that a growing discontent from within these walls with the ways in which marginalized groups and subaltern identities are understood and an increasing insistence from outside these walls that the knowledge produced within be both representative of and accountable to those the academy purports to study, is a significant factor in the re-examination of the knowledge at the foundation of the academy.

Knowing Vodou requires the concurrent knowledge that sometimes the discourses of

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, anthropologists, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Henrietta Moore and Sherry Ortner, post-modern autobiographical theorists including Sidonie Smith and Betty Bergland, and theories of creolization and hybridity perpetrated by Richard Burton and Robert Young. My own reflexive methodological approach to this study has implicitly posited reflexive anthropology as a method of enacting an epistemological shift which would undo the dichotomous and problematic foundational ideology that underlies so much of the methodology and pedagogy of studies in the humanities.

Vodou are in opposition with the discourses of the academy. The academy towers over a submerged foundation. Buried in this foundation are the epistemologies of the very disciplines that seek to elucidate an understanding of Vodou, an understanding that still tends to romanticize, exotify, denigrate, or subjugate, not because of the ignorance or racism of the academics themselves, but because of analytical structures that circumscribe knowledge. Through the rituals of possession, the divination of the magic mirror and the ritualization of everyday life, Vodou sprawls across histories, dredging up the past, making it present. If Vodou were fully to enter the space of the academy it would have to dredge up the very foundations of academic space. It is this act of dredging up the past that may account for the dis-ease of the academy with the knowledge generated by Vodou discourse, knowledge generated within a cosmographic space where gods not only converse, but disseminate theory.

While it seems clear that what is required for a knowledge of Vodou to circulate freely within the academy is a fundamental epistemological shift, a reworking of the ideas which shape the academy, a rebuilding from the foundation up, the implications of such a shift are not slight. The knowledge disseminated and generated in the cosmographic and ritualized spaces of Vodou is not dependant on truth, or on authority, or accuracy, or on “reality”; this knowledge, not only contradicts, but is often *meant* to oppose the knowledge of “standard history”, knowledge on which the academy rests. In order for the academy to apprehend Vodou, both its discourse and its practitioners, in all its complexity, fluidity, and historicity, a discursive space must be opened in which the epistemologies of a faith can circulate as freely as Enlightenment reason, where deconstruction is understood to have originated long before Jacques Derrida, and where multiple narratives coalesce not into a unified and chronological story, but into a hybrid and fluid entity. The knowledge generated by Vodou cannot enter the academy without transforming its structures or shifting its foundations. The movement towards a reflexive method of study, where the result of intellectual inquiry and research is much more concerned with an understanding of the self than with an understanding of the “other”, is encouraging in that it allows for seemingly

conflicted and irreconcilable discourses to overlap. Perhaps what is best illustrated by this overlap is the way in which the self and the other, the practitioner and the academic come to occupy the same space in a symbiotic effort to know and be known.

What has been elucidated in this examination of Vodou is not a simple picture of the Vodou tradition or its practitioners. Instead, this is a fragmented account. I have loosely strung together bits and pieces, narrative and method, story and ethnography, literature, theory and conversation, creating a tenuous fabric which flutters, buffeted by the fluid motion of the epistemologies of Vodou and the shifting of academic discourses. And sometimes these bits and pieces come together to form a fleeting glimpse of something like Vodou. Perhaps that is all that can be known. Perhaps Vodou dis-ease is infectious. *Ayibobo* [Bless you]!

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## GLOSSARY

<b>Affranchis</b>	People of mixed racial heritage who were accorded freedom and property in Haiti before the Haitian revolution.
<b>Agwe</b>	God of the sea, safe journey.
<b>Ason</b>	Sacred rattle accorded to priest or priestess after final initiation.
<b>Asogwe</b>	highest rank of Vodou initiation.
<b>Ayibobo</b>	A salutation; Amen; Bless you; Praise.
<b>Bois Caiman</b>	A sacred place in Haiti; the site of the Vodou ceremony that sparked the Haitian Revolution.
<b>Bossal</b>	African born slave.
<b>Couche sur pwen</b>	Literally lying down on point; a level of Vodou initiation.
<b>Erzulie/Ezili</b>	The first name of several female lwa, Erzulie Dantor, Erzulie ge rouge, etc.
<b>Guedeh/Gede</b>	God of death.
<b>Ginen</b>	Africa; mythologized world of the gods; afterlife.
<b>Gros bon Ange</b>	Literally big good angle; has many meanings, sometimes related to the spirit, the essence of an individual.
<b>Gros Cadavre</b>	Body.
<b>Hounfo/Hounfor</b>	Temple.
<b>Houngan</b>	Vodou priest.
<b>Kanzo</b>	First level of Vodou initiation.
<b>Langay</b>	The “secret” language of Vodou; A mixture of Creole and African words.
<b>Lav tèt</b>	Literally, head washing; part of the first initiation in Vodou.
<b>Legba</b>	God of the crossroads.
<b>Lwa</b>	Vodou divinities.

<b>Mambo</b>	Vodou priestess.
<b>Mét tèt</b>	Literally master of the head; refers to the specific lwa that a person “marries” during a Vodou initiation ceremony, for example, Erzuli is Alexi’s mét tèt.
<b>Monte chwal</b>	Literally mount the horse; term for possession in Vodou.
<b>M’ sevi lwa</b>	I serve the lwa.
<b>Nachon</b>	Nation.
<b>Ogu</b>	Warrior god; family of gods, for example Ogu Ferraile, etc.
<b>Peristyle</b>	Vodou temple.
<b>Petro</b>	A nation of lwa reputed to have originated in Haiti.
<b>Rada</b>	A nation of lwa reputed to have originated in Africa.
<b>Sévis</b>	Service; ceremony.
<b>Ti bon ange</b>	Literally little god angle; has many meanings, often refers to the personality of an individual; the part of a person that is displaced by lwa during possession.
<b>Vévé</b>	Sacred drawings that “call” the lwa to a place.
<b>Wanga</b>	Spell; the physical results of spellwork; talisman.
<b>Zombi</b>	An individual who has lost both his/her ti bon ange and gros bon ange; an animated body without spirit of personality.