

## **Exploring Contortions of the Authentic: Voodoo in New Orleans**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the nature of authenticity in a presentation of the Voodoo religion open to non-practitioners. Temple space and artifacts available to tourists for examination were analyzed to identify how/whether they contributed to a presentation of Voodoo faith deemed authentic, rather than inauthentic. Tourist voodoo in New Orleans is a designed product which is intentionally created to disseminate information or turn a profit. However, it seems to constitute a genuine representation of the religion as well because of the simulacra it perpetuates. Because this simulacrum is presented as authentic Voodoo, actual religious Voodoo may seem inauthentic because of its scarcity and suppression.

### **Keywords**

Authenticity, simulacra, Voodoo religion, visual semiotics, meaning-making

“When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart.”

*(Haitian proverb)*

The word voodoo comes from the word *voudoun* from the Fon language group and has been spelled (vaudou, voudou, vodou, vodun, etc.) and defined (spirit, mystery, dance, power, etc.) in a variety of ways, seemingly resisting any definitive standards. Voodoo practices originating from African tribal roots particularly impacted Haiti’s religious and folkloric cultures: “Vodou is a creolized religion forged by descendants of Dahomean, Kongo, Yoruba, and other African ethnic groups who had been enslaved and brought to colonial Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was known then) and Christianized by Roman Catholic missionaries in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries” (McAlister 2004). Hebblethwaite describes Voodoo as “an ancient culture thriving in the present... a religion that helped integrate slaves from a multitude of African nations and languages within a cultural system that preserved important elements of a diverse African ethno-linguistic tapestry” (Hebblethwaite 2014, 6). Voodoo practitioners generally operated autonomously in accordance with their congregation’s needs until about a decade ago when Max Beauvoir was designated as the formal leader for the faith (Lacey 2008). Beauvoir began as a biochemist whose work concentrated on steroids and hydrocortisones (notably the plant-derived hecogenin,) but later became a high-ranking houngan (oungan; priest), the Supreme Servitur (supreme servant) for Voodoo practitioners. He wrote extensively on the Voodoo religion and its capacity for resolving Haiti’s political, economic, and social problems (Beauvoir 2009) and has been referred to by many researchers studying aspects of the faith. The religion’s reputation is often saddled with negative connotations due to prohibition, exploitation, and misunderstanding of the Voodoo practice and practitioners. Bartkowski states that common American typifications of voodoo have been inspired by media, military personnel, and misinformation to include descriptors such as “(1) a religion based on black magic and witchcraft; (2) a mélange of superstitious beliefs used for deceptive purposes; and (3) a cult religion which sanctions human torture and sacrifice” (Bartkowski 1998, 559).

In everyday colloquialism, the term voodoo conjures up exotic and eccentric connotations. It has come to refer to magical or religious practices, mysterious control over

another, supernatural items that may influence one's luck, or misfortune or bad luck beyond one's control. In conversation with several tourists to the French Quarter in New Orleans, non-practitioners of the Voodoo religion expressed their understanding of it in widely differing ways. Some described it a spooky force, others as a branch of witchcraft, still others as a gimmick. Voodoo was also tacitly understood to be complicated and mysterious, making it an alluring device for many tourist venues:

Only in New Orleans. (sighs.) I don't believe in all that hocus-pocus Voodoo stuff, but there's nothing wrong with taking a couple of Voodoo dolls back to Normalville. (Judy [tourist], personal communication, 2015);  
I loved the Voodoo city tour. It's cool for people who think voodoo and witchcraft are interesting. (Sheila [tourist], personal communication, 2015).

Practitioners, unsurprisingly, describe their understandings of Voodoo in rather different terms. They explain that they create meaning from the word for themselves, which in turn reaffirms their individual beliefs and/or identities within the practice: "People worship within the Vodou system...for a multitude of reasons including the following: for the attainment of spiritual goals; for physical needs; for social bonding; for esthetic, musicological, cultural, and ritual interests; due to the inheritance of familial or temple traditions; and to give meaning to their lives" (Hebblethwaite 2014, 8). McCarthy Brown states that healing is the central focus of all Voodoo rituals: "People bring the pains, problems, crises and sore points of their lives to this system. Much of what happens in Vodou, therefore, happens in the intimate and largely inaccessible relation between the specifics of individual lives and the ritual drama" (McCarthy Brown 1987, 68-69). This foundation of interpretation is also a large part of Voodoo ceremonies, where enigmatic messages are conveyed (not always articulately) by the loa (lwa; spirits) and participants must interpret and apply what is said: "A person is 'mounted' by the loa...the actions and events which result are the expression of the will of the rider. Since the conscious self of the possessed person is, meanwhile, absent, he cannot and does not remember the events; he is not responsible, either for good or for bad" (Deren 1970, 30). Participants thus celebrate the

idiosyncratic, metamorphic elements of Voodoo: the freedom to change and incorporate, to decide what works best for the individual, and to create symbols and signs that resonate with identity:

You do not choose Voodoo, it chooses you. I know people who have always known that they have an ability to see and understand past what we see. They can interact with the spirits when not everyone can. A lot of the time they don't want it. But they were chosen. (J. Gandolfo, personal communication, 2011).

Despite the varied interpretations of Voodoo, most people seem to agree that New Orleans Voodoo is unique. It is both like and unlike its Haitian counterpart and significantly different from Santeria. There is a sense that the faith is somehow also rooted to the identity of the city—that New Orleans is a physical and spiritual crossroads between old and new, past and present, a crucible for both ancient loa and their ongoing (re)incarnations: “The Crescent City is a natural crossroads. And in voodoo, as in most forms of shamanism, the crossroads is a sacred space” (Bookhardt 1998). That there exists a symbol which could be interpreted as a New Orleans veve (symbolic line drawing of a loa) indicates the impact of the uniqueness and greatness of the Big Easy upon the religion.



This veve meant to represent the “spirit of New Orleans” appears to have the initials of Marie Laveau and Dr. John above a rudimentary line grid of the city, the foundation of which is a snake. (Figure 1)

In 1998, the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* exhibition (organized by the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, Los Angeles) opened at the New Orleans Museum of Art and showcased a variety of Afro-Caribbean artworks including dolls, flags, and

altars. Co-curator Donald Consentino stated that “the Big Easy is the North American beachhead of vodou” and explained that New Orleans is one end of a spiritual tether that is linked to Haiti and Africa “where the religion was born and where it leads a vigorous parallel life” (Bookhardt 1998). There is a sense amongst the locals that voodoo is “in the air”—an elusive but accurate way of describing a relationship that seems difficult to pinpoint despite its ubiquity. This sentiment was echoed by David Mayo, designer for the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* exhibition, hours before the exhibition opened at the Fowler: “I am acutely aware that this is not merely a presentation of art objects, attractively arranged and well lit. This is a presentation of a life style which will be reviewed by individuals who live this life and will be the final judge of authenticity and sensitivity” (Mayo 1996, 71). Because Voodoo remains primarily an oral tradition with few records, “all most people will ever see of it are the outer signs and trappings of a mysterious yet familiar culture” (Bookhardt 1998).

## The Voodoo Spiritual Temple

The Voodoo Spiritual Temple was established in 1990 by Priestess Miriam and Priest Oswan Chamani. At the time of this essay, Priestess Miriam remains the only practicing priestess or leader for the Voodoo Spiritual Temple community, as Priest Oswan passed away in 1995. Priestess Miriam was a bishop in the Angel Angel All Nations Spiritual Church in Chicago before relocating to New Orleans and opening the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. The temple (hounfor) which this essay is based upon no longer exists, as the original location of the temple on North Rampart Street directly across from Louis Armstrong Park was destroyed by fire on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 and was relocated further east along the same street to a less prominent location at 1428 North Rampart Street.

The website for the temple states that it is the “only ‘formally’ established Spiritual Temple with a focus on traditional West African spiritual and herbal healing practices currently existing in New Orleans” (Voodoo Spiritual Temple, n.d.). Descriptive information available on the web site defines the temple’s focus as one of balance and alignment: “The Purpose of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple is to train and develop the spiritual and mental powers lying dormant

[sic] in each one of us” (Voodoo Spiritual Temple, n.d.). Paper brochures available in the temple list a variety of services that are offered such as card readings, voodoo weddings, and the preparation of potions for success or love. The temple has been incorporated into the tourism of New Orleans as it welcomes visitors and is a scheduled stop on several of the various tours throughout the French Quarter.

Sandwiched between aging apartments, the bright yellow building of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple had religious symbols painted on its external walls and door. Bells on the door chimed as one entered to a view of tapestries and stuffed alligators, a smell of roots and sweet earth. The entrance led one directly into the gift shop, where a variety of Voodoo gifts and products could be purchased, from mugs to special herbs, to roots, oils, and incense. Staff indicated that tourist traffic through the temple on a yearly basis was steady. Tourists milled about in the small gift shop, handling shells, bottles, candles, cord dolls, and books. Although a partially curtained hallway leading out of the shop towards the back of the building was not marked “No Access,” few ventured in that direction. There was the sense that this hallway was not necessarily open to wandering visitors. One could ask to see the temple and some (but not all) were invited through that narrow hallway, lined with jars and bottles. They then passed Priestess Miriam’s office/consultation room on the right and then went through a back door into a small courtyard which was completely hidden from the street. To the left of that back door was another door, another narrow hallway, and at last the shrine room or temple proper.

The temple was a large, high-ceilinged, open room with a concrete floor. The sunlight that filtered through the few windows was muted and softly glowed different colors as it passed through draped cloths that adorned the windows. While the entire room appeared to serve as an offering table with every conceivable gift and offering tucked into every conceivable nook and cranny, there was a main altar as well as many smaller altar areas that were designed to focus on specific loa (See Figure 2). For example, one of the smaller altar areas was entirely decorated with blue and white materials, marine images, small model boats, sea shells, and a veve that was used to represent the loa Agwe (i.e., Shell of the Sea, Captain of the Seven Seas) who evinces intuitiveness and deep thinking. Initially, an observer might think that this altar was constructed to worship the phenomenon of the sea, but it is not the concrete in Voodoo that is worshipped,

but rather the divine spirit that is manifested in the concrete and the relationship that is cultivated with this spirit: “To worship the loa is to celebrate the principle, not the matter in which it may be momentarily or permanently manifest...A loa is an intelligence, a relationship of man to matter” (Deren 1970, 89-91). The main altar was larger than the smaller altar areas and there was an ornately painted and carved wooden chair behind it. Although the main altar was also covered with a variety of offerings, it was not difficult to notice the predominance of even-armed crosses (some plain, some intricate) that covered the surface of the flat altar top and adorned many of the objects placed upon that altar. An observer might be tempted to associate these crosses as symbols of Christianity which the Voodoo religion had acquired as it adapted to a European, colonial culture that recognized only their own religious forms. The cross however represents a crossroads, where interaction between two worlds occurs: “The sign of the crossroads is ...where the communication between worlds is established and the traffic of energies and force between them is set up. It is at this point of intersection that the food for the loa is placed; and here also that they emerge to act upon the material world” (Deren 1970, 36).

## **Data Collection and Methodology**

The methodology of this study was based on the model of the intrinsic single case study; the 'exploration of a “bounded system” or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context' (Cresswell 1998, 61). Researcher generated field notes of ceremonial observations, transcriptions of structured individual interviews, and researcher generated photographs were the different forms of data collected to obtain rich description and seat the research in a thick bed of knowing (Geertz 1973). As each type of data was collected, I sorted it according to its type, carefully thought about its content in terms of my research interests, and wrote myself analytic memos to pose questions for forthcoming visits to the temple (Cresswell 1998). In addition, this study used semiotic analysis of visual artifacts (Mitchell 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen 1996) to interpret the type and quantity of various artifacts found in the temple space.

Interviews with Priestess Miriam Chamani were requested, granted, and subsequently conducted on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using grounded theory methodology to facilitate the coding of dominant themes that emerged from the discourse data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). With grounded theory methodology, the interview data is chunked and examined by turns, to code for participant perceptions and ideological orientation of the visual artifacts. I also generated reflective memos for every interview transcription (Cresswell 1998). These memos helped to summarize the interview, create preliminary codes, and note the range of discussion topics.

While I conducted the first interview, an assistant took photographs of the temple with a digital camera. Although of course no intentional action can be considered completely random, the assistant took multiple photographs in all directions of the room from different observational points in the center space of the temple, which was open and presumably for participants. The goal was to attempt to capture a random yet representative selection of the possible presentations of Voodoo that an observer could potentially witness while standing in the central area of the temple intended for participants.

Both distant and detailed photographs were taken. In some cases, composite photos were created by putting together photographs of the same area to create one panoramic image. Of the one hundred photographs that were taken, fifty were analyzed in terms of content (Mitchell 2011). Using techniques described by Kress and van Leeuwen, I analyzed the photographs by delineating and coding the items in each one. Modality cues are “motivated signs” in particular contexts that evoke certain “truths” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 159). These cues reflect and recreate what a particular social group regards as questionable and credible. Not only do modalities function within a particular social group but they also function across groups to comment on competing truths. These orientations indicate certain ideological assumptions on the part of the maker and the society surrounding them, for the maker draws upon the things around him or her to create a picture with modality cues that can be socially understood.

It is important to consider that while many of the items in this space were intentionally (and perhaps presumably) placed there by Priestess Miriam or other practitioners (such as altars to different loa, religious images, or special cakes for ceremonies), many other items in these



images were left in the temple space (again presumably) by participants, observers, and tourists (such as cigarettes, dollar bills, or plastic Mardi Gras beads). The temple's presentation was thus a combined effort between practitioners and observers and it seems unlikely that a dividing line can be drawn between them. Even the earlier assumption about who placed what where is inconsistent as it is impossible to know the origin and placement of every item.

However, the temple was ultimately the property of the Priestess and her associates, who (once again, presumably) spent the greatest amount of time in this space and had the most agency when it came to its presentation or arrangement. It is possible, that if they wished, they could have altered the position or placement of certain items or removed other items altogether, whether or not these items were initially introduced by them. The design presentation of the temple, whether it was actively constructed by the Priestess and associates or whether they actively just left it to accumulate items as they were left there by the different participants that engaged with the space, was ultimately an intentional presentation by the practitioners, despite the great overlapping influence of observers. If we consider that modality cues need to be socially understood, then the selection of items and orientation(s) with which Priestess Miriam (and her associates) chose to render the temple would be indicative of how they approached and understood the temple and faith.

Finally, I was invited to attend a ceremony in the temple on the evening of April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015. During the ceremony, I watched as Priestess Miriam, garbed entirely in white, sang, danced, and performed ceremonial rites with water and fire. Beautiful cakes decorated with frosted flowers, unopened bottles of liquor, bowls of fresh fruit, a bowl of clean water, cigarettes, dollar bills, and other new gifts were meticulously laid out on embroidered cloths upon the altar that sat in front of Priestess Miriam's chair. Candles as well as all the strings of colored lights within the temple were lit. The temple was quite warm and dark and felt almost like a cave, especially the corners, the ceiling, and other areas where there were less lights and the darkness was more pronounced. Two drummers sat on the floor (with their backs to the altar space pictured in Figure 2)



and kept a steady beat in accompaniment to the Priestess' songs. I also sat on the floor near three other participants, off to the drummers' lefts, with my back to the temple entrance and faced the main altar that was covered with offerings for the loa. As I observed the Priestess' dancing and chanting, I experienced a disorienting shock as she executed a slow counterclockwise turn and her head came to face me and the participants near me. There was a black and white patterned snake coiled around the top of her head, its head seated at the center of Priestess Miriam's forehead, very much like an ancient Egyptian pharaoh's headdress. Priestess Miriam did not begin the ceremony with a snake on her head and I did not see her place the snake there, although I had been intensely focused on watching and listening to her, almost to the exclusivity of other things around me. I do not know where the snake came from, but it was very much alive and remained on the Priestess' head for the remainder of the ceremony although she continued to dance and sometimes flung her head from side to side. After the ceremony had concluded and I went to say farewell to Priestess Miriam, she placed the snake into a cage that was tucked in

amongst the many items along the shelves which flanked the right-hand entry wall of the temple. I generated reflective memos after this experience (Cresswell 1998), which helped me to summarize and clarify what I had observed. For example, I did not realize until days later that the word “Damballah” often ended or began some of the repetitive chanting throughout the ceremony. Damballah is the loa of the serpent spirit (sometimes identified with Saint Patrick of the Christian saints).

That this study only examines one altar design is a significant limitation of the study. I recognize that additional study and research needs to be done to strengthen the nascent observations in this work. This study would be improved with additional studies of other Voodoo altars using the method described in this paper: a semiotically-based, mixed-methods approach that attempts to map and interpret the contents of these altars. With additional such studies, the impact of this study would merit greater consideration. In addition, although I made every attempt to be meticulously attentive with regards to my data collection and analyses, my role as an observer may limit the scope of my claims: “Whose interpretation, then, of the sense and experience of a religion is to be preferred in the name of science; that of the one who has been touched and psychologically transformed by the rites, or that of the one who has not?” (Campbell 1970, xiii). In studying the Voodoo religion as a non-practitioner, there may be much that I have overlooked, misidentified or misunderstood and if so, I beg the reader’s patience and indulgence with regards to this essay.

### *Analysis*

Analysis of the photographs began with organizing and creating an item inventory for each one. All items in each photograph were counted and described. Items that were not clearly discernable were not counted (as when the photo was out of focus), as well as items that were more than half cut out of the photograph’s frame. For example, if it was clearly discernable that an item was a packet of cigarettes despite missing part of the image, that item was counted. Similarly, if fifty percent or more of a packet of cigarettes was visible along the edge of a photograph, that item was also counted. Codes were then created inductively that would encompass groups of like or related items.

Tallies were then generated for each of the codes and were arranged hierarchically according to total numbers of items in each code. This created a small sample overview of the visually presented items that the temple contained. Ultimately, eighteen different categories of temple objects were inductively identified. Of these categories, the top three types of items found in the temple were: 1. Money (n = 134); 2. Religious Voodoo images (n = 56) and 3. Non-Voodoo statues and figurines (n = 38).

The Voodoo Spiritual Temple billed the temple space as the true back room as opposed to the front room or the false back room. Tourist destinations have at least three levels: the front room that presents a certain façade to the public, the true back room where this façade is created, and the false back room that is shown to the public, to satisfy the desire of many sightseers to catch a glimpse of the “truth” behind the “playacting.” This staged authenticity (Goldberg 1983) implies that there is a reality under the façade of the front room that is a more genuine aspect of the experience and one that would remove the romantic and mysterious nature of the performance if shown. The false back room masks certain aspects of the experience so that a certain degree of privacy can be maintained with regards to the true back room, which is generally hidden from public view. It was in the Voodoo Spiritual Temple’s and its related practitioners’ best interests to present an authentic version of Voodoo and whether this space was the front room, false back room or the true back room was impossible to determine from a layperson’s examination. However, what is possible is an analysis of the visual and symbolic presentation of this temple space and how this resonates with regards to its claims of authenticity.

Hebblethwaite asserts that the Voodoo temple is “an expertly planned space” (Hebblethwaite 2014, 14) that is well maintained both inside and outside. The outside of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple seemed minimally maintained. The exterior of the temple was differentiated from nearby homes, as it was painted yellow and decorated with religious symbols, but it appeared that had been done some time ago. The interior courtyard initially appeared abandoned. It did not appear particularly well-maintained and some areas of vegetation were overgrown. If there was expert planning underlying the layout of the exterior of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, then it was not immediately apparent or recognizable to Western organizational systems.

The interior of the temple proper was initially overwhelming because of multi-layered perspectives that each vied for attention. Bookhardt stated that the original Voodoo Spiritual Temple space was “classically Caribbean in appearance; in fact, the viewer may imagine himself in Haiti. But the overall content is fairly similar in either case: a welter of candles bottle, crucifixes, pictures, shells, food or fruit, dolls or doll parts and the inevitable statues of Catholic saints” (Bookhardt 1998). Consentino describes this as *weltanschauung*, a particular world view or vision that imbues each symbol with meaning: “To look at a Vodou altar cluttered with sequined whiskey bottles, satin pomanders, clay pots dressed in lace, plaster statues of Saint Anthony and the laughing Buddha, holy cards, political kitsch, Dresden clocks, bottles of Moët and Chandon, rosaries, crucifixes, Masonic insignia, eye-shadowed kewpie dolls, atomizers of Anaïs-Anaïs, wooden phalluses, goat skulls, Christmas tree ornaments, and Arawak celts is to gauge the achievement of slaves and freemen who imagined a narrative broad enough and fabricated enough to encompass all this” (Consentino 1996, 67). Voodoo altars and ceremonial spaces are also constantly augmented through use and “their aesthetic is improvisational. They are never ‘finished’” (Consentino 1996, 67). McCarthy Brown states that altars are the nexus between practitioners and spirits and serve to precisely focus healing energies: “Altars happen. Altars must be awakened. Altars wax and wane in potency. Altars breathe. Altars tell stories... Altars places where the living and the dead, the human and the divine, meet” (McCarthy Brown 1996, 67). This is particularly true in this case, as the original Voodoo Spiritual Temple altars no longer concretely exist, but their existence remains an unbroken one as they continue in their new set-up and location.

Based on the amounts of money, religious Voodoo images, and non-voodoo statues and figurines found in the temple, we can surmise that these items/offerings must be considered important to the religion, practitioners, and participants. If quantity can in some ways indicate value and/or authenticity, then these items may have greater value to the faith than others because of their sheer numbers, whether placed there by practitioner, participant or observer.

Money is a common offering to many religions and not unique to Voodoo in particular. Without going so far as to say that many religions encourage the donation of money as a religious offering, without it many faiths would not be able to maintain religious structures, hold



services, or provide for the basic needs of their practitioners. The faith may be alive and well in the participants' minds and hearts, but without concrete monetary offerings the force of its presence in the external world may weaken and diminish. Money is often offered in exchange for a more personal religious service in different faiths (i.e., the purchase of indulgences, currying the favor of Mamam Brigitte) and may also be the lingua franca for visitors who are not of the Voodoo faith, but wish to convey their respect or leave an offering that is easily understood by many religions.



It seems reasonable that the second most commonly found item in the temple was religious Voodoo images. Though of course it can be argued that all images in the temple are religious, the intentional or recognizable religious images that have been or have become a part of Voodoo were coded separately. For example, images and symbols of the loa or spirit intermediaries of the Bondye, (Bon Dieu; Good God) and loa that have long been syncretized with Roman Catholic saints to appease European authorities (i.e., Papa Legba/ Saint Peter) are recognizable as religious images particular to the Voodoo faith (Herskovits 1965).

Figure 3. Currency (predominantly United States one-dollar bills) was an item that was frequently observed throughout the temple interior.

Historically, it is well known that Catholicism was imposed upon Haitian slaves during early colonial times and many elements of the Roman Catholic religion became incorporated in parts of the Voodoo religion, which was carried over to the Americas (Wilmeth and Wilmeth 1977). However, Mc Carthy Brown argues that unlike the Catholic saints whose names they use, the Voodoo loa possess characters which are contradictory and conflicting, rather than beatific and unwavering (McCarthy Brown 1991, 98). Images of loa (such as Papa Legba, Agwe, Erzulie Dantor, and Damballah) as well as Catholic spiritual figures (such as Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint James, and Saint Patrick) were among the different religious Voodoo images found within the temple.



Figure 4. Veve for Papa Legba, the loa who serves as an intermediary between humanity and the loa, high up on the temple wall behind the main altar.

In addition, some religious Voodoo items were layered behind non-voodoo items, almost as if constructing a buffer between them and the non-practitioners and/or tourists. For example,



accouterments symbolizing Papa Legba (his straw hat, broom, cane, and pipe) were placed in a far corner of the temple behind Priestess Miriam's chair. Her chair (in addition to a drum and a long table alongside the wall), created a small area effectively cut off from the rest of the space open to non-practitioners. The Papa Legba accoutrements were also effectively screened by multiple candelabra, statuettes, and layers of draperies as if to minimize their importance or mask their presence. Layers of items, layers of meaning... Whether the observer is in the presence of the true back room or the false back room is difficult to determine; yet it seems indisputable that they are in the presence of a version of Voodoo authenticity. (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. In the upper right of this photo, behind Priestess Miriam's chair (she is seated in it), note the hanging straw hat (brim visible only) and broom. Behind the author (standing) was a cane tucked in amongst draperies and a pipe hidden under a shell. The straw hat, broom, cane and pipe are artefacts which are sacred and concrete symbols/accoutrements for Papa Legba in the temple and were removed from the casual observer's points of view in the centre temple space.

Finally, non-voodoo statues and figurines were the third most commonly found item in the temple. Again, while all items in the temple may be considered religious items, any statue or



figurine that did not represent a recognizable figure in the Voodoo religion was coded separately from recognizable Voodoo figurines and statues. The non-voodoo figures were eclectic and diverse. A hasty glance through the photographs revealed a porcelain Native American maiden with a grey wolf for an escort, a red-cheeked gnome holding a lantern, a brass Mongol warrior on his horse with his sword upraised, and a skeletal interpretation of Marilyn Monroe complete with her iconic white dress in full updraft.



Figure 6. A gnome figurine holding a lantern, amidst cigarettes, a beer, a bell, a feather, beads, scarves, money, and other items.

Voodoo has a capacity to absorb diverse influence without losing its essential mystique. It has had an ecumenical evolution which has been widely inclusive and tolerant of other faiths: “It has been noted that Voodoo has always been able to ‘ingest great quantities of alien cultural material’ without losing any of the basic patterns and values of the religion” (Wilmet and Wilmet 1977, 34).

In Voodoo, the loa are supplicated to intercede on the participants’ behalfs so that through their intercessions, the participants may be better able to deal with or change matters of their lives, such as family, love or justice. The loa have distinct personalities with specific likes and dislikes, preferred attire, food and drink, and favored symbols, songs, dances, phrases, and actions: “Almost every detail is specified for the aspects of the loa, and these serve both to identify him and to guide his ritual service. Postures, voice level, attitudes, epithets, expressions, etc., are formalized for each aspect; and each has specific colors, days of the week, dress, beverages, diet, etc., sacred to him” (Deren 1970, 95). Viewed objectively, they do not appear so

very different from the participants themselves or humanity in general: “Vodou spirits are not models of the well-lived life; rather, they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside... Vodou spirits are larger than life but not other than life” (McCarthy Brown 1991, 6). Because Vodou is not about attaining perfection but about living (in all its complexities), it is often maligned by being described as a religion without morality where its participants serve demons. Maintaining an honest and giving relationship with the loa helps its participants “deal with the suffering that is life... minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts” (McCarthy Brown 1991, 10).

These elements make the Voodoo religion one that is eminently practical and grounded, easily understandable because its focus is on ameliorating the very real and common trials and tribulations of life. Perhaps the reason that these three types of items (money, religious items, non-religious items) were the most numerous in the temple space was because in their authenticity of function, they best served the Voodoo faith and its participants: “In Haiti, all relationships are exchange relationships. They are defined in terms of gifts and counter-gifts of tangibles (food, service, shelter) and intangibles (respect, love, fidelity). In Vodou, healing begins by repairing and reactivating the exchange networks between the living and the spirits. Then the spirits are properly fed and honored, they will bestow protection and good luck on their children” (McCarthy Brown 1987, 69). The items share the quality of functional practicality that directly relates to the basic premise underlying the Voodoo religion: application, in whatever formulation is deemed appropriate, to spiritual intermediaries to preserve and/or change aspects of the participants’ everyday lives and problems.

Thus, it is relatively easy to comprehend the practicality of money in such a practice. Whether it is given to appease particular loa or to support the Voodoo practice, practitioners, and community, it is a practical necessity in modern life. Its preponderance amongst the varied items in the temple certainly belies its significance, but also its ordinariness. The religious Voodoo images likewise serve a practical function. As in other faiths, religious images provide a visual focus for participants’ energy, requests, and supplications. They are a means by which to attempt to represent that which is intangible, mysterious, and supernatural. They are human interpretations of the divine, as well as attempts to harness the divine in a manner that can be

humanly understood. While the religious Voodoo images served to focus and crystallize the sacred, the non-voodoo figurines and statues can be understood as reflections and magnifications of the participants. The figurines appeared to be as varied and diverse as humanity itself, yet at the same time conveyed a familiarity and ordinariness that made them approachable and accessible. While the figures were varied, overall most were easily recognizable. They may convey a sense of understanding and belonging, especially to participants who are already steeped in the icons and images of popular culture. Their presence in the temple could be interpreted as a means by which to create a space in the temple for the practitioners and thus bring them closer to the practice. By making space for the everyday things, it grounds the Voodoo religion closer to the everyday lives of its participants. It ties the practical to the practiced, the mundane to the mysterious. It authenticates the ordinary.

## Discussion

In contrast to the position of practitioners, Voodoo “has been imbued with overtly negative imagery by white Europeans and Americans for the better part of the last several centuries” (Bartkowski 1998, 559). Historically, many authentic elements of Voodoo have been forgotten or subsumed because they were not recorded in some durable format, not publicly or willingly shared (especially amongst non-practitioners) or not valued by European colonists who witnessed them (Leyburn 1966). For example, 18<sup>th</sup> century African slaves (in the colonial settlements that would eventually become Louisiana) practiced medicine, but only the material/kinesthetic aspects of their practices were collected or recorded by scientifically-minded Europeans at the time. Although Europeans were cognizant of the placebo effect, they were not interested in the spiritual or cultural aspects of the African cures they recorded: “What they diagnosed as ‘imagination’ in Europeans they judged as ‘superstition’ in Africans. Europeans did not collect the cultural practices that came to be called the *Obeah*, or in the French holdings what came to be called *voudou*” (Sponsel 2011, 103). Thus, inauthenticity of a sort (in the form of missing elements, guesses, and suppositions) or a simulation of authenticity, has been and is part of Voodoo’s history and evolution. This simulation, regardless of whether or not what is

presented is truly authentic, can provide a simulacrum of reality authentic enough for most non-practitioners and/or tourists. Because this simulacrum is presented as authentic Voodoo so repeatedly in so many different guises (museums, shops, souvenirs, etc.) actual religious Voodoo practices and accoutrements may seem inauthentic or deficient because of their scarcity and suppression. The tourist voodoo simulacrum (presentation and representation) thus becomes the real and in some ways, is real enough for its observers.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the varied understandings of the religion, both practitioners and non-practitioners implicitly express (in their descriptions) an inherent tension surrounding Voodoo. Gelder's analyses of postcolonial voodoo trace approaches to the faith that "produce an unstable combination of enchantment and disenchantment, belief and skepticism" (Gelder 2000, 93). Voodoo seems to traverse different categories, fall in between categories or create unlikely connections between things seemingly unrelated. There appears to be a layering of opposites (whether intentional or not) that puts the practitioner in a position to consider both as present and viable in the same space. This position can be an uneasy one, as it conjures up questions such as how to assert the nature of authenticity, how to sketch the lines between reality and necessary fictions, "how to articulate the point at which skepticism and enchantment touch and affect each other, how to figure the place of the fatal in the midst of the banal and vice versa" (Gelder 2000, 97).

If we consider one of the semiotic functions of the grotesque as being able to serve as sign bordering disparate things, then understandings of Voodoo can be likened to the grotesque because they too seem to serve as symbols that bridge incongruences. It is likely that many tourists visiting New Orleans hope to witness something that straddles two seemingly disparate sensations simultaneously—frightening and humorous, devout and kitschy, authentic and inauthentic—when they choose to go on a voodoo city tour, browse through museums and shops dedicated to voodoo or enter The Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Tourism too is then grotesque, as it balances the need for a reproduction of a cultural experience in a safe environment with the search for the exotic where the "native...serve[s] the needs of the tourist; he is himself 'on show' a living spectacle to be scrutinized, photographed, tape recoded and interacted with in some particular ways" (Van den Berghe and Keyes 1984, 345). In the tourist's search for authenticity

(MacCannell 1999) it is often hard to distinguish between what is authentic and what is merely part of the show, as peddlers of culture know what tourists are seeking and produce products that promise to be well worth the money spent: “Most of the new Voodoo entrepreneurs are white, cashing in on the desire of outsiders to experience what they consider exotic, titillatingly sinful, or comical” (Long 2002, 95). It is also difficult to determine which part of the false experience is merely the perpetuation of stereotypes in the effort to show tourists what they came to see.

To the tourist, the word voodoo may seem a type of advertisement for the city of New Orleans itself, as it is easily found emblazoned on all manner of souvenirs, in shop names, on beers and dishes served in restaurants: “It is through symbols and meanings that tourists develop a particular perspective...that is fundamentally different from the way non-tourists see them” (Graburn 1983, 26). There are voodoo tours and museums, novelty shops and supply shops. These latter two are particularly intriguing with regards to the question of authenticity. The voodoo novelty shop sells items that can be found in almost any American souvenir shop—shot glasses, keychain rings, mugs—in addition to items that are particularly associated with the city of New Orleans—masks, strings of beads, voodoo dolls. The Voodoo supply shop purportedly sells items that are related to the practice of the religion and often have altars set up in the shop as well as specialists to help you with your purchases. What is intriguing is that many of the exact same wares that are sold in the novelty shops can be found in the supply shops (and vice versa). Bags of gris-gris, statues of loas, and ceremonial candles from the same manufacturers in China grace the shelves of both shops with an apparent lack of self-consciousness. Using semiotic analysis, tourism is a system “whereby a set of signs marks the object as authentic, both with respect to the markers themselves and to the outside world (Harkin 1995, 653). These markers (i.e., the word “voodoo,” gris-gris bags, statues of loas) are more important however than the sights themselves because “the tourist’s first contact with a sight is often not the sight itself, but a representation of it, a marker” (MacCannell 1999, 110). And this first contact determines the tourist gaze—the particular perspective with which tourists characterize people, places, and things.

Thus, in the search for authentic Voodoo, it’s not unlikely that designed tourist voodoo might satisfy the same need. If one expects to see black hen sacrifices in a Voodoo ceremony and

does (or if one does *not* expect to see a snake dance but then does), then they may very well believe that they have had an authentic Voodoo experience and have been privy to the view from the true back room (whether or not the experience was actually an authentic one). If they do not, then whatever one does see (whether simulated or authentic) does not satisfy and consequently is not real but merely another grotesque voodoo incarnation, poised between inviolability and entertainment. It would be interesting to learn how many tourists are disappointed when first confronted by the presentation of Priestess Miriam: A cheerful woman in a flowered muumuu may not likely be quite what they expect in their encounter with an “authentic” Voodoo priestess. Tourists may also be seeking a kind of fashionable spirituality in exploring Voodoo and if so, they have chosen well as Voodoo lends itself to fashion with its religious symbols, glittering candles, and magic potions. But the sophistication of the faith is effectively dampened and transformed by the tourist gaze and expectations to satisfy a desire for an authentic experience with an exotic cult.

The Voodoo Spiritual Temple presents its version of authentic Voodoo and whether this version is the front room, false back room or the true back room remains impossible to determine, even with semiotic and interview analyses that seem to suggest elements of authentic religious space, in accordance with what is known about the Voodoo religion: “Present day New Orleans priests and priestesses are indisputably genuine in their devotion to Voodoo. They are also compelled to make a living, and here the line between Voodoo as entertainment and Voodoo as religion becomes blurred” (Long 2002, 98). Whether the temple is perceived as authentic Voodoo by an observer however, seems to remain in the domain of the beholder and whatever each beholder’s eye wishes to believe and expects to see. Some observers perhaps expect a measure of the grotesque from Voodoo given its contumacious nonconformity to some stable definition or practice. Consequently, they cannot “un-see” their self-sanctioned filter of the grotesque and may laud or seek out such manifestations as being signifiers of the authentic. Designed tourist voodoo strengthens and may further develop these perceptions for it does not attempt to reeducate the observer (as to authentic Voodoo), but rather fulfills and actualizes the role that has been written for it by the desires of the observers and their expectations.

New Orleans Voodoo at least, cannot be so easily positioned along either “authentic” or “inauthentic continuums” and it would seem its practitioners are in accord with this lack of alignment. Flexibility and interpretation seem critical to each practitioner’s authentic practice: “Voodoo chic is spiritual *duende* [magic]. It’s accessible to those who go out to meet it on its own turf, within the framework of its own mythology and the peculiar outlines of its own sacred history” (Consentino 1987, 73). Some believe that New Orleans Voodoo cannot be known; that is owned by those with a birthright to it, whereupon it cannot be understood by or spoken about by those who are not already within the faith: “We who are natives of this City and count ourselves among the Faithful cannot talk with you, the outsider, about Voodoo” (Osbey 2011, 1). And perhaps that is true. Perhaps we cannot know anything about Voodoo or any other religion unless we are somehow part of its initiate or ancestry. However, what I think is also true is that authenticity is at the heart of such arguments, and authenticity is very personal and therefore largely untenable. Perhaps these very idiosyncrasies, these inconstant multiplicities of belief/s resonate with the heart of authentic Voodoo moreso than we are initially led to believe. The search for authentication may be the mirror of the heart and transformations of the Voodoo faith:

Over these years, what has made this practice more genuine, is the people from all over the world that come for different purposes. The unfixed state of your mind, that there can be different diverse activities or actions of people that can flow and make better meaning, is what the service is about. Because if you, in yourself, feel that you have structured a perfect one, you have just made a big flop of yourself. Because it’s better to not have any over-fixed, set notions to decide you have made and have all the right symbols...because the Earth is not guaranteed to prove it as steady or as perfect-set as we would have wanted to be...And it’s those things that are not so well-put together, that brings us out to serve it” (M. Chamani, personal communication, 2015).

“Myth is the facts of the mind made manifest in a fiction of matter.”

(*Maya Deren*)

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## Notes

The spelling of voodoo terminology may sometimes vary from what the reader may be accustomed to when reading research about Voodoo. Wherever possible, I used the spellings I encountered in New Orleans to try and authentically represent elements of the New Orleans Voodoo religion. For example, I use the spelling "voodoo" as opposed to "vodou" in this essay. Although the latter is the proper Haitian spelling, the former is how the word is spelled in New Orleans and by the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Erzuli was spelled as "Erzulie," Danbala as "Damballah," and so forth. Wherever I felt an alternate spelling or translation would be helpful, I inserted it in parenthesis following the term, as with the New Orleans spelling of loa, followed by the Haitian spelling "lwa," and the translation "spirits." I use the capitalized "Voodoo" to indicate the proper noun as associated with the religion and its practices: the Voodoo religion. I use the lower-case "voodoo" to indicate either a descriptor or common noun as associated with the concept of voodoo as a motif or theme: a voodoo tour.

Interviews were conducted with the Priestess Miriam Chamani (on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015), Jerry Gandolfo (owner of The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum, in March 2011), and a few random, willing tourists visiting the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana (early April, 2015).