

Chapter 9

The Spirit(s) of New Orleans

Community Healing through Commemoration

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In this chapter I focus on faith, heritage, music and the fabrication of temporality in relation to Afro-Caribbean spirituality in New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans is particularly relevant as a site for exploration within the Atlantic perspectives because of the historical connections and circulations between Africa and the Caribbean, from which New Orleans emerged as an important port city. My research has been on contemporary voodoo cultures in New Orleans, and I will specifically focus on ceremonies that contribute to a form of healing for the community that has to deal with the violent past of slave trade and slavery as well as with the more recent past of hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

As the locus for this chapter I have chosen Congo Square,¹ as historically it has had such a prominent position in the transatlantic community of New Orleans. It is a place where people from African and Caribbean diasporas still come together on a regular basis for activities such as drum circles, Sunday gatherings and healing ceremonies. My research has focused on contemporary voodoo in New Orleans, and Congo Square is a vital part of the dialogues surrounding these cultures in the city, being a unique site for New Orleans's African and Caribbean diasporic connections.

The cover term 'voodoo'² refers of a set of practices and beliefs in which there is one God (*Bondye/Bon Dieu*) who can be reached via divinities (both spirits, *Lwa*, and ancestors, *vodun*) either by the practitioner him/herself or through the mediation of a priest (*oungan*) or priestess

Notes for this chapter begin on page 192.



Figure 9.1 Bambooula 2000 on Congo Square. Photograph by the author.

(*mambo*) (McCarthy Brown 2001; Richman 2005; Rey and Stepick 2013). There is a vital connection between the human and the divine one could even call interdependence (Dayan 2000). The mutual interdependence between the visible world of the living and the invisible world of the spirits requires communication via sacrifice, prayer, possession and divination (Bay 2008). People depend on the mediation of the spirits for healing and the spirits likewise depend on humans to ‘feed’ them, hence the expression ‘serving the spirits’ (Richman 2005; Bay 2008). Although some practices remain hidden from the outside world, an example of a public and inclusive gathering that contained rituals for the ancestors was the Maafta commemoration in Congo Square on 4 July 2015.

Internal Diversity in New Orleans’s Contemporary Voodooscape

Although the specific sites of our respective fieldworks are different, there are many elements Ulf Hannerz (1969) describes in his work on the ghetto in Washington DC that I encountered in New Orleans in a similar vein. An element of his book *Soulside* that relates to my research is the reference to the internal diversity of the research population. Hannerz elaborates on how his first fieldwork experience brought him to a view of culture as ‘processual’ – ‘based in interactions, anchored in structures of relationships, capable of including diversity and conflict, not divorced from power, and not necessarily clearly bounded’ (ibid.: 216). As I observed above, New Orleans voodoo, or the ‘voodooscape’ as I named it, is not necessarily clearly bounded either. Even more so, it consists of unbounded practices. This is in line with Ulf Hannerz’ argument, based on Anthony Wallace’s statement that culture can be as much ‘an organization of diversity’ as a ‘replication of uniformity’. Hannerz explains:

In part, ghetto culture precisely involved the habitual ways of managing the coexistence of lifestyles. I could add here that one of the useful aspects of the ghetto concept, at least in its original form, is that it draws attention to an enforced, unidimensional ethnic/racial exclusion that may entail a diversity, in the shared space, along any number of other dimensions. (Hannerz 1969: 215)

Which brings Hannerz to the observation that behind the signs of homogeneity in the ghetto, which are ‘blackness and at least relative poverty’, there is much heterogeneity. If there is such a thing as a ‘ghetto way of life’ it consists of ‘a web of intertwining but different individual and group lifestyles’ (ibid.: 212). Similarly, the social arena of contemporary voodoo

in New Orleans consists of a web of intertwining but different individual and group lifestyles, ranging from individual practices at home to group ceremonies held in a temple. Therefore, I examine the complexity of contemporary voodoo cultures in New Orleans using the notion of 'scapes'. Arjun Appadurai introduces the suffix '-scapes' to refer to the fluid and irregular shapes of landscapes such as 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai 1996: 33), which indicates that these relations are not objectively given, but rather are constructs that depend on perspective. According to Appadurai, the perspectives are informed by 'the historical, linguistic, and political "situatedness" of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods and families' (ibid.: 33). Within my research on the voodooscape, the actors involved are the city and its tourism industry, diasporic communities, subnational, but also supra-, trans- and international religious movements and face-to-face groups such as voodoo 'houses' or congregations. Furthermore, some people practise voodoo individually from their homes, having various religions and belief systems represented in their families. Appadurai maintains that the individual actor is influenced by these perspectival landscapes that are in turn navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer. Appadurai (1988) extends Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) by the notion of 'imagined worlds' – that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of people and groups spread around the globe. This concept of imagined worlds applies to the context of voodoo in New Orleans, as the voodooscape is not geographically fixed, but lies somewhere between Africa, the Caribbean and New Orleans, and even between different neighbourhoods and 'houses' within the city. Thus, geographical historical imagination, though based in a certain continuity, is not fixed either, but is ever moving.

Based on my fieldwork, I have found that the voodooscape in New Orleans consists of a variety of voodoo cultures that entail five elements: first or all, there are practitioners who base their practice on their African ancestors' heritage and traditions; secondly, there are cultural retentions that consist of certain elements of voodoo cultures, amongst others second-line parades and Mardi Gras Indian masking; thirdly, there is New Orleans voodoo, or New World voodoo; fourthly, there is a thriving economy of tourist fantasies of voodoo; and fifthly, there are practitioners from Haiti who continue their practices in New Orleans. Before I turn to an ethnographic fragment, I give a brief overview of the history of New



Figure 9.2 'Ancestor meditations' sign next to an old oak tree in Congo Square. Photograph by the author.

Orleans and the development of the local voodooscape. Then I give an overview of the current aspects to the voodooscape, after which I turn to a description of the Maafa commemoration to illustrate the interconnect-
edness of the various influences.

History of New Orleans and the Development of the Voodooscape

The city of New Orleans was founded in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, leader of the French Mississippi Company. The city was named after Phillip the Second, Duke of Orléans, and the Regent of the Kingdom of France at the time. The conditions of slavery in the French colonies and the restricted activities of enslaved and free people of colour were defined by a decree named the *Code Noir* or Black Code, which was signed by King Louis XIV of France in 1685. The code forbade the exercise of any religion other than Roman Catholicism and forbade the enslaved to own any kind of property, to conduct any kind of trade on their own account, to gather in large groups, to hunt or to sell

goods without written permission. However, it also expressly forbade the enslaved to do any kind of work on Sundays or holy days. Article five of the Black Code discharged the enslaved from forced labour on Sundays and religious holidays. On these 'free days' enslaved people began to hire themselves out for wages or to take their surplus products into town to sell them, much as local Indians had been doing since the city was founded (Usner 1981). After decades of French rule, Louisiana became a Spanish colony in 1766. An era during which Governor Miró applied the Proclamation of Good Government, which prohibited labour on Sundays, ordered shops and businesses to close during the hours of the Mass, forbade the tango (not the Argentinian version we know today, but music with a similar rhythm, later known as *habanera*) or any other 'negro dance' to occur before the end of Sunday evening services (Sublette 2008: 122–23).

Still under Spanish rule in 1789, the *Real Cedula* were presented: a code with fourteen articles aimed at giving the enslaved the 'benefits' of living under a Spanish and Catholic regime. In the first article, it was forbidden for 'slaves' to work on Sundays (McGowan 1971). In Louisiana this turned out to be unworkable because of the pressing food situation. Whereas sitting governor Esteban Miró simply delayed implementation, his successor, Governor Baron de Carondelet, issued a slave code of his own in July 1792, expressly recognizing the enslaved's rights to have Sundays as free days (Carondelet's Code 1792). In this code it was proclaimed that Sundays belonged exclusively to the enslaved, who should not be compelled to work for their master unless they were paid. In 1803, New Orleans briefly came under French rule again, until the Louisiana Purchase of 30 April, in which the United States purchased Louisiana from France. Nine years later, on 30 April 1812, Louisiana gained statehood. Only between 1861 and 1862 was New Orleans part of the Confederate States of America: a confederation of seven 'slave states' in the Lower South region of the United States (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas). Their economy depended to a great extent upon the plantation system and thus the labour of enslaved African Americans. Since 1862, Louisiana has been one of the fifty United States of America (Roach 1996).

Since its founding, New Orleans has had to deal with the impacts of its recurrent floods and hurricanes.³ In 1947, a hurricane and the waves it caused overtopped the lakefront levees (this was before hurricanes were named) and damaged the suburbs in Orleans and Jefferson parishes.⁴ In 1965, hurricane Betsy destroyed 27,000 houses and more than 300,000 people were displaced in its aftermath. Since then, there have been improvements in the levee system, but as history has proved, the



Figure 9.3 House in the Lower Ninth Ward, ten years after Katrina. Photograph by the author.

protection was not enough for the force of hurricane Katrina in 2005. The city's estimated pre-Katrina population of 437,186 (Frey and Singer 2006) lived in a bowl, half of it located below sea level, between the natural levees of the Mississippi River and the built levees (pierced by canals) along Lake Pontchartrain. In the four years preceding Katrina, there were repeated warnings from both scientists and the media that the 'big one' would eventually hit the city. These included specific concerns for the evacuation of an estimated 130,000 residents without vehicles, homebound, or in hospitals and care facilities. In 2005, 'The Big One' hit the city on 29 August: hurricane Katrina. But more than just a hurricane, it was a series of events consisting of both a natural disaster and a human failure in decision making with regards to evacuation and dealing with the aftermath.

New Orleans is also known as 'the City that Care Forgot', something that was experienced before Katrina, but that became visible in the aftermath. People who sought shelter in the Superdome or the Convention Center (the official evacuation locations) were without food, clean drinking water and sanitary facilities for days. People died in the heat while waiting for buses to evacuate them. It was not until Friday 2 September that a convoy of US National Guard troops and supply trucks arrived in New Orleans and distributed food and water to residents stranded at the Superdome and the Convention Center. It lies beyond the scope of this chapter to give all the details, but the hit of Katrina and its aftermath have left a deep trauma in the city. People are still rebuilding their lives and

homes, more than thirteen years later. A place where some of the city's inhabitants find comfort and healing is Congo Square.

The History of Congo Square

Congo Square, once an open field just outside of the city walls of New Orleans, is nowadays a part of Louis Armstrong Park. Throughout the history of the city, Congo Square has been holy ground to certain groups of people. Initially, Native Americans celebrated their corn feasts in the vicinity of Congo Square (Evans 2011). With the arrival of enslaved people from Africa, the place became a site for remembering slavery and the African spirit world (Turner 2009: 46).

Both enslaved and free people of colour gathered at the square on their Sunday afternoons 'off' to trade, drum, dance and worship the spirits. Robert Ferris Thompson explains:

In this circum-Atlantic context, the concept of the Kongo crossroads was transported across the Atlantic Ocean to Haiti and New Orleans where it was re-created in music, dance, and material art performances that consecrated special locations as sites for remembering slavery and the African spirit world. (Quoted in Turner 2009: 46)



Figure 9.4 Maafa commemoration in Congo Square. Photograph by the author.

Congo Square is such a site, and a key factor in the establishment of New Orleans as the ‘voodoo capital’ of the United States. The various backgrounds of the African Americans present at the square required what Stefania Capone names ‘ritual pan-Africanism’, in which the focus lies in similarities between the ‘ritual practices of different African belief systems, such as Yoruba, Kongo, Ewe/Fon and Akan religions’ (Capone 2007: 361). The focus, thereby, comes to lie in the ‘genetic ancestry’, as well as West African divinities that ‘run in the blood’ of African Americans (ibid.).

The scope of the circum-Atlantic intercultural may be recognized most vividly by means of the performances, performance traditions, and the representations of performance that it engendered (Roach 1996). Those who receive a tradition receive that ‘bodily, by re-enacting it’ (Connerton 2011: 105). This is because performances carry memory of history. An example of this is the (recreations of) traditions that take place in Congo Square, which were originally by-products of the square’s market function (Johnson 1991: 121). In short, the performances at the square can be seen as ‘multidimensional life-affirming resistance traditions’ from the nineteenth century that allowed the participants a form of ‘reconnection with a host of social, familial, and spiritual networks that had been severed as a result of the slave trade’ (Walker 2004: ix).



Figure 9.5 Maafa commemoration through the French Quarter. Photograph by the author.

The former market's physical relation to the city changed in 1760, when military engineers moved the city's defences for the French and Indian war. The city walls now included the place later named Congo Square, as described in the *New Orleans City Guide* (Tallant 1952). The current place referred to as Congo Square is not the full size of the field that lay outside the city walls in the early days of the city's existence. In fact, it is a relatively recent construction by the local city planning department. Before the Louis Armstrong Park was built, the space was part of the Tremé neighbourhood, one of the first African American neighbourhoods in the city (Powell 2013: 348–49). Its inhabitants have been frequent visitors to the square and therefore important for the development of jazz.

In 1956 the city began to demolish sections of the Tremé neighbourhood adjacent to the square with plans to create a Cultural Center. It was not until 1973 that the city completed the demolition of a nine-block section of the Tremé neighbourhood, while there were no definite plans for its development. With the support of the mayor, in 1974 the city council authorized funds to develop the 31-acre property which included the Municipal Auditorium, the Theatre of Performing Arts, Congo Square, and sections of the demolished Tremé neighbourhood into the Louis Armstrong Park Complex in honour of the native jazz musician Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong, who died aged seventy on 6 July 1971.

It is important to note that people in the community think it is ironic that a historic part of the city, with an important role in the development of jazz and home to great musicians, was torn down to make place for a park that was meant to honour that history, but that is closed at night and thus not open for improvisations in the evenings. Resilient as New Orleanians are, however, they found a way to make the best of it and reclaim the site.

An organization concerned with the continuation of the above-mentioned Sunday traditions is the Congo Square Preservation Society, that since its incorporation by co-founders Luther Gray and Jamilah-Peters Muhammad in 1990, has been working on the resurrection and continuation of activities, and the preservation of Congo Square. In 1993, Congo Square was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, the site is in use not only as a public park, but also as a place for prayer and contemplation. Therefore, it is a key site where many aspects of the New Orleans voodooscape are practised.

Internal Diversity of the Contemporary Voodooscape and Its Interconnectedness

The research question that I took to the field was: 'What does the social arena of contemporary voodoo in New Orleans look like?' My fieldwork was focused on mapping that field by giving an inventory of people involved in New Orleans voodoo today, and of mapping what elements of the voodoo cultures are still in use. I encountered a social arena that is very fragmented but interconnected at the same time, so the focus of my research came to lie on what happens when these rich influences reach each other. The interconnectedness that I refer to can be between various subcultures as well as within one and the same person.

As a relative newcomer and an outsider to the voodooscape, I asked all the people I spoke with in relation to my research to describe what voodoo meant to them and where they would draw the boundaries between voodoo and other cultures present around the city, such as Cuban Lukumi (Santería) and Brazilian Candomblé. Two things came up in all the answers: first, the person would refer me to someone else they thought of as an authority in the field, implying that the other had more knowledge. And second, although they thought there are many differences, people concluded that there are similarities and shared elements. In this chapter I advocate a pragmatic⁵ approach to voodoo, which is a tradition that is ever changing. Whereas anthropologists in the past have tried to define whether or not the practices under study were 'authentic', I, instead, would like to focus on what it means for the practitioners, and see how locals use the very notion of authenticity. As Luther, drummer and co-founder of the Congo Square Preservation Society, put it when I explained to him that I found it hard to focus on one aspect of contemporary voodoo culture because all forms seem to be interconnected, he replied: 'Right. That's why we say about voodoo that it is a spiritual belief system. Whatever you choose to believe, it starts to connect you to those resources – the French, Spanish, African and Indian. All of that is coming together, there's something about this place, maybe it is inherited' (Interview 21 May 2015). Indeed, the voodooscape is closely related, and despite internal diversity there is a strong overlap in practitioners of different traditions. This is why in this work I take 'voodoo' as a broad term. However, one should be cautious about how to use the term, as it quickly becomes too generalizing.

Bill, a drummer and Lukumi initiate, told me how it bothered him that voodoo in New Orleans was often used as a generic term: 'It's like cornflakes. People here are very loose with the term voodoo to the point

where it is abusive. There is a fast food chain named Voodoo Barbecue, a Voodoo football team, Voodoo Fest [a music festival], and so on. They can't do that. If I would go up and say I'm going to have Jesus Fest I would have a problem' (Interview 27 October 2015). This experience of a lack of respect for the culture contributes to the culture of secrecy surrounding it. The popularized and stigmatizing way the term is used by outsiders also influences whether practitioners themselves use the term. Some say they should claim 'voodoo' back and not be ashamed of it, while others say it is just everyday life and to name it voodoo is offensive. In that case the offence lies in the simplification of the religion by outsiders, such as Hollywood depictions. Even though today in Louisiana practitioners experience more freedom in the everyday practice of their cultures than they used to historically, they still have to deal with fear and stereotypes from outsiders. Sources such as Hollywood productions and books in the horror and thriller genre reinforce contemporary prejudice against the voodooscape. Often in these sources, voodoo is paired up with zombies and vampires, whereas those cultures are relatively more recent and generally unrelated. Nonetheless there is a growing group of tourists who romanticize this 'horror' image. In response to this development, entrepreneurs, such as shop and museum owners, come up with the creation of tourist fantasies of voodoo. I interpret this process as a characteristic of voodoo culture that has enabled it to survive for centuries, despite decades of oppression. However, commercialism and commodification are elements of adaptation to current times that are contested, as are claims about authenticity.

Emergent Authenticity

Erik Cohen (1988) puts this development in a broader perspective in his work on tourism and commodification. With the term 'commodification' Cohen refers to a process by which things and activities come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value. In this context of trade, they become goods and services. In relation to tourism, Cohen raises the question of what happens to other than economic meanings such as religious, cultural and social meanings of things and activities once they become commodified. He focuses particularly on the impact of tourism, and proposes a new approach to authenticity. Cohen refers to Greenwood's (1982: 27) remark that all viable cultures are in the process of 'making themselves up' all the time, and calls this process 'emergent authenticity'. For Cohen, emergent authenticity is a process that stresses one aspect or refers to one manifestation of the wider

phenomenon of ‘invention of tradition’, examples of which can be found around the world – from soapstone carvings of the Inuit to the emergence of Disneyland as an authentic American experience (Cohen 1988: 383). I see aspects of the voodooscape as emergent authenticity; new traditions are inspired by old ones, and slowly become ‘real’.

Ruy Llera Blanes and Diana Espírito Santo suggest that rather than search for ‘truthfulness’ of religious notions and beings (such as spirits), ‘it is more valid and productive as anthropologists of “intangible” phenomena to begin with the premises of their influence, extension, or multiplication in the world than from substantive ontological predefinitions’ (Blanes and Santo 2014: 7). They propose to trace the effects of the intangible within the texture of social life (ibid.: 30). As Stephan Palmié argues in relation to syncretism, where statues of Catholic saints are used to represent the spirits, the question is not ‘whether objects identifiable to the symbolic repertoires of “other religions” grace the altars of priests of *regla de ocha*, but *what their owners themselves think they represent*’ (Palmié 2013: 132, emphasis in original). I maintain that there is not ‘one original voodoo’, and that the New Orleans contemporary voodooscape is always in the making. In the same line of thought, Mattijs van de Port proposes an approach that treats Candomblé as forever in the making by taking the absence of an ‘ultimate’ or ‘essential’ Candomblé as a starting point for investigation (van de Port 2005: 6–7). Palmié too, argues that ‘the behaviour of such constructs (“original” and “syncretism”) is therefore also neither stable across time nor foreseeable in its impact on future iterations of concrete practice’ (Palmié 2013: 114).

Voodoo, Candomblé and Lukumi are often referred to as ‘syncretism’. In their work on voodoo in Miami, Terry Rey and Alex Stepick describe the process as follows:

Religious syncretism happened when enslaved Africans identified Catholic saints as new manifestations of African spirits, and adopted crosses, holy water, and rosaries as powerful religious trinkets to be used in conjunction with the amulets that they reconstructed from African religious memory. The Catholic ‘pantheon’ – with its single high creator God, Virgin Mary, and hosts of dead individuals (the saints) who intervene in the world of the living – lent itself to assimilation with the traditional African community of spiritual beings, which likewise has a single distant creator God (called Bondyè in Vodou) and numerous spirits and ancestors, who, much like the Catholic saints, are perceived of as accessible and with whom the greatest amount of human/divine collaborations and commerce transpires. (Rey and Stepick 2013: 117)

However, the notion needs to be used with caution, because using the terms ‘retention’ and ‘survival’ too often presumes the existence of ‘pure’

African religions. Jason Young suggests, in line with Andrew Apter and others who have criticized Melville Herkovits⁶ for being too essentialist (Apter 2005), that descriptions of African religion often render it 'unchanging and ahistorical (if not anti-historical)' (Young 2012). In his work on diaspora, Paul C. Johnson demonstrates that diaspora religions, as part of 'diasporic culture', do not 'merely reproduce homeland religion but transform it in response to constraints and opportunities posed by the host society' (Johnson 2007: 41).

A key work in the debates surrounding syncretism is written by Stephan Palmié. In his renowned paper 'Against Syncretism', Palmié argues that, despite the concept's merits as a descriptive concept, 'in relation to its purported empirical referent – certain processes and/or results of religious change – remain notoriously obscure' (Palmié 2003: 73). Palmié shows some consequences of the instrumentalization of notions about 'syncretism' by religious practitioners that imply opposing notions such as 'purity'. He characterizes how the ongoing interaction between several heterogeneous strains of discourse about the nature and history of these religions generated a discourse that implied linkage between an authentic African body of 'tradition', and its reproduction in partly contradictory New World practices (ibid.: 74).

Syncretism and the Search for Authenticity

As Sidney Mintz put it: 'When we speak of Afro-American cultures, we are speaking of disturbed pasts' (Mintz 1989: 14). But we are also speaking of self-conscious attempts to invest such pasts with continuity and moral significance (Palmié 2003: 93). Cultural pasts – as well as futures – are never just a given, but must be 'produced, modified, contested and defended in line with the options and constraints perceived within a historically constituted present that needs to be 'chartered' (ibid.: 94).

The countless studies over the respective 'syncretic' religions in Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean, as well as in New Orleans and Brazil, have not gone unnoticed by the practitioners. In these studies, there is often an assumption of 'real tradition' and the risk of losing it. Palmié observes that, partly because of ethnographic literature on 'Yoruba-ness', there is a very real sense in which Santeros⁷ feel the threat of cultural loss. This fear relates to complex notions about *la tradición* as an original body of sacred knowledge (*conocimientos*) 'that was once transferred to Cuba *in toto*, but has since been subject to erosion through amnesia and deliberate deviation' (Palmié 2003: 86). Santeros are aware of the 'economy

of information' (Barth 1969) with respect to their religion: knowledge is hard to share and only shared with new initiated by the initiated elders. When these refuse at times to share their knowledge, important knowledge has been lost, like chants, rhythms and ways of preparing sacred offerings (Palmié 2003: 86).

Maafa Commemoration

A special occasion that I would like to discuss here is the annual Maafa commemoration. Maafa is a Swahili word that means 'great tragedy', and refers to the period called the Transatlantic Slave Trade or Middle Passage, during which Africans were kidnapped in Africa and transported to the Americas in great numbers (up until mid nineteenth century). African American scholar Marimba Ani first introduced the term in the context of commemoration (Ani 1980). New Orleans-born reverend Johnnie Ray Youngblood of the St. Paul Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, organized an annual series of activities in remembrance of the Maafa. His work inspired the founders of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center to organize the first Maafa commemoration in New Orleans in the year 2000, and it has since become an annual event.

In 2015, I attended the 15th annual edition. As stated on the invite, it is organized to remember the millions of captives from Africa who were brought to the Americas where they were used as a labour force. It is meant to offer an opportunity for the community to reflect on this great wrongdoing against humanity, and to distance oneself 'from that transgression, its legacy and the evolved practice of racism in our civic, social, spiritual and personal lives' (Facebook 2015). In 2015, the commemoration is organized on the 4th of July, a US national holiday for Independence Day, when Americans celebrate the adoption of the declaration of independence from the British Empire in 1776. However, Native Americans and others perceive it as a sad day, on which one should commemorate the atrocities committed against the original inhabitants of the country and against the people forcefully brought there. To have the Maafa commemoration on this specific day gives it extra impact, as the city centre is filled with people dressed in their national flag colours of red, white and blue – a strong contrast with the people dressed in white outfits on a commemorative march. The Maafa commemoration is made up of two parts; it starts at 7 A.M. with healing ceremonies, and continues with a procession until around 2 P.M. First, people gather at Congo Square, and then there is a march through the historic city centre, popularly known as 'the French Quarter', that ends at the Mississippi riverside.

Around 7 A.M. that morning, less than a hundred people have gathered at Congo Square. Large tables with white cloths are positioned under a century-old oak tree that has seen much of the history that is commemorated that day. At the middle of the table there is a small 'shrine' of three steps and a sort of crown on top. On the steps are small vases with white flowers that will later be carried through the city and dedicated to the river to honour the ancestors. Facing these tables and the shrine are about fifty chairs occupied by people who have great authority in the community, such as religious leaders from various backgrounds, Mardi Gras Indians Maskers and community elders. Most people present, however, are standing in the square to the right of or behind the chairs, facing the big oak tree. The focus of the meeting is on healing, an essential part of voodoo, and speakers from many backgrounds are invited to speak, representing Christianity, Islam, Judaism, African religions, activists and musicians. The inclusiveness of the gathering illustrates the inner diversity and flexibility of the healing traditions being performed that day, welcoming the many non-initiates present.

Here I would like to focus on the African influences to be found, for example, in the *Maafa* song that was written for this occasion by one of the regular drummers of the Sunday drum circles. While he drums and tells the story of the Middle Passage, two female spiritual healers join him to sing. The women are both members of the band Zion Trinity, who are initiated in Yoruba tradition and concerned with the continuation of Yoruba religion. The band's front woman, Janet 'Sula Spirit' Evans, has taken it upon herself to make a book and CD with a selection of songs for the spirits/orishas. For the project, she worked together with her band, master drummers, and a translator who translated the Yoruba lyrics for her.

After singing the *Maafa* song, the women start singing a song from their repertoire. Suddenly, Sula stops and starts to pour libations of water on the ground, saying: 'I can't keep the spirit from coming'. She starts moving quickly, changing her usually calm appearance. 'We need to find the ancestors in the ground to come and help us', she says while pouring libations on the ground in the four directions of the wind. 'We greet the ancestors of the north, south, east and west. We ask you to come, great ancestors of the native nation', she says as she pours water in front of the feet of 'Big Chief War Horse' who is representing the Choctow Nation of Native Americans at this gathering. Sula thanks all the ancestors and acknowledges the suffering they have been through. While addressing the ancestors, the people gathered in the square (several hundred by this time) confirm all she is saying with 'Ashé', a term that refers to life power and strengthens the message that has just been said. After the libations



Figure 9.6 Victor Harris of the Fi Yi Yi Mardi Gras Indian Tribe at the 15th annual Maafa commemoration in Congo Square (4 July 2015). Photograph by the author.

the three musicians start singing songs for several spirits, starting with Ellegua, the gatekeeper who is often compared to St Peter in Catholicism and Legba in Voodoo. Then they sing for Ogún, the warrior spirit, whose song evolves into the song for Obatala, the father of all *orishas* (spirits in Lukumí). While the music continues, Victor Harris, chief of the Fi Yi Yi Mardi Gras Indian tribe,⁸ appears in full suit. He has been masking for almost fifty years, and his craftsmanship shows in the handmade suit and mask he wears representing Ogun, the warrior spirit. By calling on Ogun, the participants want to demonstrate the resilience of New Orleans people. Names of ancestors are called out loud, and bystanders encourage Victor Harris to dance and lead the way for the second part of the commemoration.

Towards the Mississippi Riverside

The way to the Mississippi leads through the French Quarter. Several stops are made at historic sites in the quarter. The first stop is at St Augustine Church in the Tremé neighbourhood; established in 1841, it



Figure 9.7 Tomb of the Unknown Slave next to St Augustine Church in the Tremé neighbourhood. Photograph by the author.



Figure 9.8 Maafa commemoration through the French Quarter. Photograph by the author.

has been welcoming enslaved and free people of colour as its worshippers ever since. Right outside the church is the tomb of the Unknown Slave; an outdoor altar that honours the unknown number of hastily buried dead slaves.

During this stop in the procession through the city, Victor Harris stands next to the cross, made out of metal chains, and his cries bring many of those standing around to tears. A large band, which consists of many drummers that frequent the Congo Square Sunday drum circles and trumpeters, accompanies the procession. People carrying cowbells and tambourines keep the beat and join these musicians.

The procession stops at several sites in the city centre where enslaved Africans used to be sold at auctions. After this, the procession reaches the riverside of the French Quarter. Participants form a 'portal' on the sides of the steps leading over the levee towards the Mississippi River, and the musicians walk up them, followed by the other participants. Walking towards the river people start singing 'I lay my burden, down by the riverside', and soon most people present sing along while they walk towards the Mississippi. This is an example of the interconnectedness of the different religions as it was historically a 'Negro Spiritual' that became a gospel song, containing references that can be interpreted either literally as baptism, or more covertly as an escape from slavery. Once at



Figure 9.9 'Down by the Riverside': the end of the Maafa commemoration on the banks of the Mississippi. Photograph by the author.

the riverside, participants find a place facing the river. As they stand next to the railing, they throw white flowers into the river in remembrance of their ancestors. In addition to the healing and cleansing ceremonies performed during the commemoration, this get together as a whole functions as a healing ceremony for the community, and is a marker of an important moment in the city's history. Congo Square is a space where *communitas* (Turner 1969) is built in an otherwise diverse group consisting of voodoo practitioners, musicians, tourists and researchers, creating a place for religious enchantment for some, an interesting day trip for others. This can be observed in the weekly healing and drum circles, but even more clearly in the special themed events such as the one just described.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated that voodoo is an organic unbounded practice with multiple voices. Like the 'ghetto way of life' (Hannerz 1969), the social arena of contemporary voodoo in New Orleans consists of a web of intertwining but different individual and group lifestyles. The landscape of voodoo cultures is fragmented, and ranges from individual

practices at home to group ceremonies held in a temple. I explored the question of what happens when this richness of influences reach each other. To take the complexity of the voodoo cultures that I encountered in New Orleans together, I borrow the notion of ‘-scapes’ from Arjun Appadurai (1996) to create the term ‘voodooscape’. Based on my fieldwork, I have found that the voodooscape in New Orleans consists of a variety of voodoo cultures that entail the following elements: practices based on their ancestors’ African heritage and traditions; cultural retentions that continue certain elements of the voodooscape through masking and parading; new practices created in New Orleans; the economy of tourist fantasies of voodoo; and practices based on a continuation of traditions from Haiti.

I have made an attempt to show how these influences are interconnected in the Atlantic context. I maintain that there is not one original voodoo, and that New Orleans’ contemporary voodooscape is always in the making. I endorse Mattijs van de Port’s conclusion on Candomblé in Brazil that ‘the boundaries between Candomblé and society at large are highly permeable’ (van de Port 2005: 6). In New Orleans voodoo too, society at large finds access to voodoo houses, as voodoo is a way to deal with everyday life. I have presented the Maafa commemoration as an inclusive event that brings several historic influences of the voodooscape together into one healing ceremony for the community. This illustrates my argument that ceremonies held in the city of New Orleans contribute to a form of healing for the community, facilitating mourning (Connerton 2011), thereby enabling the community to deal with the violent past of the slave trade and of slavery, as well as with the more recent past of hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

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Notes

1. Situated on Rampart Street, it lies north of the famous French Quarter and near to one of the city’s famous cemeteries – St. Louis Cemetery No. 1.
2. The word ‘voodoo’ originally comes from the word *vodun* (ancestors) in the language of the Fon people in Benin. The way it is spelt tells something about the region one is referring too: Vodun in Africa, Vodou in Haiti and Voodoo in the United States.

- As explained on the website of Anthropology News, in October 2012 the Library of Congress announced that it had changed its subject heading for the Haitian religion from 'voodooism' to Vodou. However, in New Orleans it is still generally referred to as 'voodoo'. Practitioners I have met during my stay, as well as host of websites and Facebook pages concerned with the religion, also use this spelling. I am aware of the negative connotations that might come with the way I write it, which is why I add the suffix '-scape' to refer to its dynamic and unbound character.
3. New Orleans has had twenty-seven major river or hurricane-induced disasters, and at a rate of one about every eleven years – US Army Corps of Engineers (1972), *History of Hurricane Occurrences along Coastal Louisiana* (New Orleans district; and 1986–1997 Update); and D.O. Elliott (1932), *The Improvement of the Lower Mississippi River for Flood Control and Navigation* (US Waterways Experiment Station, Vicksburg, MS).
 4. Districts.
 5. With 'pragmatic approach' I do not refer to the philosophical school of pragmatics, but to the approach I have towards the concept of voodoo, which is to mainly focus on the effects and execution of voodoo practices rather than on authentication of these practices by me as a scholar. The New Orleans voodooscape is so internally diverse that it is hard to draw the line for me as a researcher as well as for the people who practise one or several of the aspects of voodoo.
 6. Melville J. Herskovits (1895–1963) was an American anthropologist and a student of Franz Boas. Herskovits applied a humanistic and relativist approach to his studies. He advocated for cultural relativism as opposed to European colonial attitudes and ethnocentrism.
 7. Practitioners of the Lukumí belief system from Cuba.
 8. In short, Mardi Gras Indians are 'Black Indians' who 'suit up' or 'mask' as stylized Native Americans. They take to the streets in 'tribes' or 'gangs' wearing handmade suits of beads, feathers and sequins. In 1883, Chief Becate Batiste was the first at 'masking Indian' with the 7th Ward Creole Wild West Indian gang. There are various explanations about the origin of the tradition. The anecdotal history has it that runaway enslaved often found shelter among Native American tribes, and the men amongst them often found love among Native American women. The masking tradition can be seen as a tribute to that heritage.

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