

**Whiteness in the Ancestral Waters: Race, Religion, and Conversion  
within North American Buddhism and Haitian Vodou**

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*In the 1950s, Ukrainian American filmmaker Maya Deren traveled to Haiti and became initiated as a manbo (priestess) in Haitian Vodou. How did Deren become drawn to Vodou, and how did she cultivate relationships with fellow devotees? Further, what does her experience as a Vodouizan reveal about other North American whites converting to “exotic” religions practiced largely by people of color? In an exploration of race and religious belonging, this essay offers a theoretical framing of “whiteness,” and considers the history of North American conversions to Buddhism as a precursor to white initiation to African Diasporic traditions. The paper examines Maya Deren’s identity as an immigrant artist, resulting in an alternate experience of whiteness, and allowing her to conceive of her journey to Haiti as a spiritual homecoming. Ultimately, I argue that Deren became enmeshed in a ritual kinship system whose bonds reached far beyond the boundaries of mortal geographies.*

*Keywords: Haitian Vodou, Buddhism, comparative religion, conversion, whiteness studies*

In his 1997 hit track, Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur considers the racial inclusivity of religious spaces as he muses aloud, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto.”<sup>1</sup> Shakur’s song poses a salient question about whether a Christian heaven includes room for impoverished communities and non-white racial groups.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as we think about Biblical stories such as the Curse of Ham<sup>3</sup> that assert Blacks’ ontological inferiority to whites, Tupac’s inquiry about whether the Divine Kingdom welcomes people of color presents an understandable, if cynical, line of questioning. This leads one to ponder an equally intriguing and inverted question: who populates the heavens and paradise of traditionally Black religions?

In the religious tradition of Haitian Vodou, ancestors, spirits and those unborn are said to live beneath the ocean in a mystic realm known as *Afrik-Ginen*. This underwater world represents an imagined Africa and spiritual homeland, and Vodou devotees claim that every departed spirit will eventually come to rest as a citizen of this region. *Afrik-Ginen* then, is not simply the site of one’s birth, but a womb, graveyard, and *ritual center*.<sup>4</sup> Ethnographer and filmmaker Maya Deren echoed these sentiments about *Afrik-Ginen*, relaying a creation myth that cites *Ginen* as “the

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<sup>1</sup> Tellingly, this song was also Tupac Shakur’s first song released posthumously. See Tupac Shakur, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto,” accessed May 22, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Wonder\\_If\\_Heaven\\_Got\\_a\\_Ghetto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Wonder_If_Heaven_Got_a_Ghetto).

<sup>2</sup> While it is typically unhelpful to define people by their non-entity (i.e. *non-white racial group*), here I highlight the implications of Tupac’s lyrics that *every race* besides whites may not live grandly in heaven.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as the Curse of Canaan. See Gen 9:20–27. NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> For more on *Afrik-Ginen*, see Kyrah Malika Daniels’ “Mirror Mausoleums, Mortuary Arts, and Haitian Religious Unexceptionalism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85, No. 4 (Dec. 2017): 957–984, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfx012>.

legendary place of racial origin.”<sup>5</sup> What is striking about this assertion is that it does not explicitly state that residents of *Afrik-Ginen* must be of African descent. We might then ask ourselves, within Vodou cosmology, where do white spirits travel when they depart from this earth?

Haitian Vodou is an African-derived religious tradition grounded in tenets of sacred healing that work to maintain balance and rhythm within the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> Vodou emerged from the collisions and cohesions between the indigenous religious traditions of Dahomey, Yorùbá, and Kongo<sup>7</sup> nations from West Africa and West Central Africa; Taíno communities, the original inhabitants of Hispaniola; as well as Catholicism and European mysticism. The Vodou pantheon of spirits exists as a complex matrix, with *Bondyé* serving as the high God and creator. *Bondyé* leaves much of human affairs to intermediaries, spirits known as the *Lwa*,<sup>8</sup> whom devotees note may number as many as 400.<sup>9</sup> These many *Lwa* may be understood as manifestations of fifteen to twenty archetypal spirits who belong to several *nanchon* (nations) of spirits.<sup>10</sup> As with many indigenous traditions, the ancestors of Vodou serve as interlocutors between the mortal and spiritual realms, and spirits may act on behalf of the families who tend to them on earth, nourishing the *Lwa* in ritual tributes and sacred rites.<sup>11</sup> Vodou also maintains a deeply interwoven if complicated relationship with Catholicism, as various periods of Haitian history involved the active persecution of African religions and Vodou either by French colonizers, local Catholic priests, or the state.<sup>12</sup> Adding even further nuance to Haitian religious history, many Kongolese citizens arrived in the Americas intimately familiar with an Africanized Catholicism,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1953), 35–36.

<sup>6</sup> See the following works of Haitian Vodou scholars: Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010 [1991 first edition]); Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, ed., *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Claudine Michel, “Le Vodou Haïtien est-il un Humanisme?” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 12, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 116–136; and Gina Athena Ulysse, *Because When God is Too Busy: Haiti, me & THE WORLD* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Bantu language orthographies do not include the letter “c.” As such, “Kongo” is used when referring to populations of the ancient Kongo Kingdom (a region encompassing the current-day nations of Angola, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries).

<sup>8</sup> The *Lwa* (both singular and plural) are spirits akin to the *Orisa* of Yorùbá-based traditions in Ifa of Nigeria, *Oricha* in Santería and Lukumí of Cuba, *Orixá* in Candomblé of Brazil, and *Orisha* or Shango worship of Trinidad. See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone*.

<sup>9</sup> See Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone*.

<sup>10</sup> These spirits generally fit within one of several *nanchon* or nations of spirits—*Rada*, *Djouba*, *Ibo*, *Nago*, *Petwo*, *Simbi*, *Congo*, and *Gede*—each with their distinct personas and ritual rhythms in Haitian ceremony.

<sup>11</sup> Vodou rites often take three general forms: *fèt*, ritual ceremonies held to honor particular spirits or departed ancestors; initiations for those hoping to further develop their relationships with the spirits and deepen their *konesans* or spiritual knowledge base; and healing rites, in which a community, family, or individual receives prescriptions and curatives to mediate physical, social, and spiritual ailments.

<sup>12</sup> See Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> The Portuguese arrived in the Kingdom of Kongo in 1486, and in 1491, *one year before Christopher Columbus arrived on the island of Hispaniola*, King Nzinga a Nkuwu became a baptized Catholic, and was christened as King João I. Though King João I would eventually return to indigenous religion, his two sons—one representing indigenous tradition and the other Catholicism—would battle over the kingdom. Eventually King Afonso I prevailed and in 1506, he converted the Kongo Kingdom to Catholicism, which would undergo an Africanization over several centuries. See John K. Thornton, “On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas,” *The Americas* 44, No. 3 (Jan. 1988): 261–278; Luc de Heusch, “Kongo in Haiti: A New Approach to Religious Syncretism,” *Man, New Series* 24, No. 2 (June 1989): 290–303; Desmangles, *The Faces of the God*; Hein Vanhee, “Central African Popular Christianity and the Making of Haitian Vodou Religion,” in *Central Africans and Cultural*

and would encounter Vodou as yet another blended tradition of indigenous African religions and European Catholicism.

As new studies emerge to render the experiences of whiteness more visible, one field worth studying is white conversion to “othered” and immigrant religion. Indeed, there exists a notable tension in white subjects as a dominant racial group who *actively choose to convert* to “exotic” religions such as Buddhism of Asia or Vodou of Haiti, practiced up until the twentieth century primarily by people of color. In this age of conversion to “religions of color”<sup>14</sup> in the United States, it might be helpful to invert Tupac’s pressing question: if African-derived religious circles have historically proven to be “*nonwhite zones*,” in what manners does a Black spirit world also carve out the celestial room for whiteness?

### ***Inquiries into Whiteness***

What exactly do we look for when trying to identify whiteness? If whiteness in North America represents normativity (very rarely does one speak of “my white friend so-and-so”), then what we aim to locate will be *invisible to eyes that search for racial otherness*. In this way, whiteness might be appropriately read as a thick yet imperceptible pane of glass,<sup>15</sup> at once present and imperceptible for the purposes of reflexive inquiry. As forward-pushing critical race theorists however, we must consider whites as subjects with as complex a racial and religious profile as any other community.

Academically speaking, this question of white North American<sup>16</sup> conversion to religious traditions practiced by people of color proves consequential because despite the emergence of critical studies on whiteness, very little scholarship addresses the topic of religion in depth. (In fact, in the 500-page volume *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, there is only one entry dedicated principally to the topic of whiteness, nationality, and religion.)<sup>17</sup> Practically speaking, this research is important because white women from the U.S., Canada, and France make up the largest percentage of converts to Haitian Vodou today.<sup>18</sup> This leads us to question the deeply intertwined realities of racial experience and religious identity. In particular, my essay considers the unique case of Ukrainian American filmmaker Maya Deren, who traveled to Haiti in the 1940s with intentions of filming ritual dance, became initiated as a *manbo* (priestess), and began

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*Transformations in the American Diaspora*, edited by L. Heywood, 243–264 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and John K. Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church in Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750,” *The Journal of African History* 25, no. 2 (2008):147–167.

<sup>14</sup> This term indicates religions practiced by people of color. In part, I suggest that faith traditions practiced in North America such as Buddhism and Vodou have become increasingly multicultural with new converts in the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>15</sup> This metaphor of whiteness as a pane of glass was introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois, perhaps as an addendum to understanding Blackness as a “veil” of double consciousness. John Hartigan, Jr., “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 99, No. 3 (Sept., 1997): 502.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout this paper, I will specify the terms “North American” and “U.S. American” as much as possible to acknowledge the reality of “America” as two continents with widely varying geographic and cultural entities. North Americans will refer in these instances to white U.S. Americans and white Canadians.

<sup>17</sup> This is the thought-provoking piece by Karen Brodtkin Sacks, “How did Jews Become White Folks?,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 395–401.

<sup>18</sup> See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, eds., *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

growing deep roots in Haitian religious communities. How did Deren become drawn to Vodou, and how did she cultivate such meaningful relationships with fellow devotees? Further, what does her own intimate relationship to Haiti reveal about other North American whites converting to “exotic” religions practiced largely by people of color?

In his work on African and African Diaspora religions, cultural historian Ivor Miller encourages us to think more expansively about notions of nationality and belonging, particularly with regard to *ritual kinship patterns*.<sup>19</sup> Miller remarks that in initiations to African-derived religions, all devotees must pledge an oath of solidarity to an African “homeland.” He further suggests that African-derived religions in the Americas “require[s] their members to assume a transnational identity.”<sup>20</sup> In doing so, Miller suggests that practitioners do more than align themselves with an actual site of origin; rather, initiates create a myth of origin for themselves, and North Americans begin to relate the story of their (meta)physical birth with an African subjectivity at the core.

Highlighting these notions of racial and religious belonging, I begin this paper by offering a theoretical framing of whiteness as a “racial group,”<sup>21</sup> however flawed the category of “race” may be.<sup>22</sup> I then contextualize Deren’s initiation by considering the history of North American conversions to Buddhism as a precursor to the phenomenon of white initiation into African Diaspora traditions (such as Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou). I argue that white North Americans often initiate or convert to these “ethnic” religions in hopes of seeking an individualized, personal connection with the divine and reinventing self in a newly “discovered” tradition of their own. Lastly, I examine Maya Deren’s identity as an immigrant artist, which provided her *an alternate experience of whiteness*, and allowed her to conceive of her journeys to Haiti as a *homecoming*. Indeed, in claiming a lineage of Haitian spirits through initiation, Deren eventually came to regard Haiti as a spiritual nation of origin. Ultimately, I argue that Deren became enmeshed in a ritual kinship system whose bonds reached far beyond the boundaries of mortal geographies.

### **“Spiritual Not Religious” Buddhists**

To understand the history of white conversion to “immigrant” religions in the United States, we might begin by examining the case of North American Buddhism. Of the three to six million practitioners living in the U.S. today,<sup>23</sup> the majority fall into one of two categories: “heritage” Buddhists whose families have immigrated from East Asia sometime within the past 50 years (still comprising the majority of American Buddhists), and “convert” Buddhists,<sup>24</sup> who

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<sup>19</sup> Ivor L. Miller, “The Formation of African Identities in the Americas: Spiritual ‘Ethnicity,’” *Contours* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 193–222.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>21</sup> Hartigan, “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness,” 502.

<sup>22</sup> Along with many other humanities scholars, social science researchers, and scientists, law professor Angela Onwuachi-Willig reminds us that “race” is not a biological category, but a social construct. “Race and Racial Identity Are Social Constructs,” *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/16/how-fluid-is-racial-identity/race-and-racial-identity-are-social-constructs>.

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, “Religious Landscape Study: Buddhists,” accessed Jan. 18, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/buddhist/>.

<sup>24</sup> For more on “convert” Buddhists in the Western world, see Sharon Elizabeth Smith’s “Buddhism, Diversity and ‘Race’: Multiculturalism and Western Convert Buddhist Movements in East London—A Qualitative Study.” PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths’ College, University of London, 2008.

have become followers of the tradition through the practice of meditation and/or chanting of mantras. As religion scholar Jan Nattier has stated, “American Buddhists at the dawn of the twenty-first century are thus almost all new in one way or another.”<sup>25</sup> The same might be said of Haitian Vodou devotees, as the largest wave of Haitian migrants to North America has occurred in the past 50 years, with many seeking economic opportunity and fleeing political unrest during the turbulent changes of state.<sup>26</sup> An additional parallel is that Vodou’s North American devotees tend to be either recent immigrants (members of the Haitian diaspora in the U.S. or Canada) or initiates to the religion (primarily white Americans/Canadians and Black Americans).

What has historically motivated white North Americans’ entry into religious spaces of color? Noting today’s common adage that one can be “spiritual, not religious,” many white Americans have avoided active participation in religious institutions during the past fifty to sixty years,<sup>27</sup> instead focusing on the development of their own private spirituality. The eminent historian of religion Charles H. Long suggests that unlike spirituality, religion is an *inherently communal act, practice, and belief system*. He notes that on the other hand, the origin of the term “spirituality” derives from Roman Catholic retreats and solitary prayers of the early twentieth century. Long dismisses the idea that that one can practice religion independently of others, arguing that spirituality “presumes that the term it is replacing, ‘religion,’ is simply and only a private belief. . . . [One ought to] see it as an analogue of language. You cannot simply have your ‘private language,’ a language only you speak. You can see how silly that is.”<sup>28</sup> Long further asserts that this longing for “spirituality” (rather than religion) among some upper- and middle-class whites represents what he calls “simply a non-efficacious and somewhat vague belief in ‘some kind of something.’”<sup>29</sup> This taste for a tradition that we might identify as “secular spirituality”—one that is less tied to collective worship in institutional houses of religion and less rooted in communal expressions of faith—reveals a *spiritual longing* among many North American whites who strive for direct modes of contact with the divine, yet seek fewer obligations to an established religious community.

The majority of white North Americans first became familiar with Buddhism during the late 1960s and early 1970s following the large influx of Asians to the United States with the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. During these decades, Buddhism was introduced to rebellious teens, curious agnostics, and culturally adventurous Americans, many of whom began exploring yoga and meditation practice.<sup>30</sup> (Who can forget Tina Turner’s incorporation of a redemptive Buddhist practice into her life in the 1993 biographic film *What’s Love Got to Do with It?*) Over the course of the twentieth century, yoga became a greatly lucrative and commodified industry marketed as an “authentic Oriental tradition” brought to the U.S. However the introduction of these Hindu and Buddhist traditions played on Western imaginaries

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<sup>25</sup> Jan Nattier, “The Divisions and Direction of Buddhism in America Today,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, accessed Jan. 18, 2018, <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma5/tension2.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Many Haitians fled to the United States, Canada, and France (and other Caribbean nations) under the totalitarian regime of François Duvalier in the 1960s, as well as during the coup that overthrew his son Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, and when president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in the 1990s.

<sup>27</sup> See Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Email correspondence between author and Charles H. Long, Feb. 25, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Jaweed Kaleem, “Buddhism in America: What is the Future?” HuffPost: Religion, updated Sept. 20, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/14/america-buddhism\\_n\\_876577.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/14/america-buddhism_n_876577.html).

of the East, as Phillip DeSlippe and several other scholars have demonstrated, “postural yoga depended on bricolage and *imagined origins* . . . posture-based yogic practice in the form and style it is commonly engaged with today is relatively new and not purely Hindu.”<sup>31</sup> Scholars also developed an interest in Buddhism as a rapidly growing religion, and they highlighted meditation as a ritual act for anyone to explore, overlooking some of the stricter doctrines of traditional practice that included communal activity and temple worship.<sup>32</sup> This curation of a Westernized Buddhism attracted great interest from the rebellious baby boomers. As cultural historian Sara Davidson<sup>33</sup> has explained, this generation of baby boomers pursued spiritual self-exploration during a cultural revolution and period of social upheaval in the U.S. We can thus understand how white Americans began to regard Buddhism as a spiritual alternative to Christianity, a tradition offering the opportunity to transcend “old-fashioned” Western notions of religion and community.

With increasing distaste for the “blandness” of Protestant culture and the prohibitive nature of Catholic culture, many white North Americans of the 1960s and 1970s began to seek out othered (read: ethnic) manners of worship.<sup>34</sup> Religion scholar Carl Bielefeldt refers to certain affluent North American converts as those “who are still not satisfied with what they have and who want something more; who have all they can eat, but are still searching for that special flavoring, some ‘psycho-spice’ of self-acceptance.”<sup>35</sup> The notion of Buddhism as a “spiritual spice of life” offers a helpful framework here, since many white converts describe the tradition as philosophy rather than religion *per se*, as a seasoning rather than the main course. Today, most U.S. religions include a wide cultural range of practitioners, many of whom may not necessarily define themselves as “religious.” For instance, religion scholar Henry Goldschmidt makes note of self-identifying “secular Jews,” who refer to their Jewishness as an ethnic inheritance rather than an active religious affiliation.<sup>36</sup> For instance, self-designated “secular” or “cultural” Jews may practice traditions such as Passover and still not identify as *religiously* Jewish.<sup>37</sup> In an inverted parallel fashion, many white North Americans identify their meditative practices and chanting of mantras as “Buddhist” (though they did not grow up in this cultural tradition) without calling themselves *religious* followers of Buddhism *per se*. In this way, we recognize how two distinct groups participate in the intimate rituals of a religious community *without claiming religious affiliation*.

It is critical to consider the ethnic and religious histories of Buddhism in order to fully grasp its cultural worldview(s). I maintain that it is dangerous to divorce the tradition from its

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<sup>31</sup> Philip DeSlippe, “The Hindu in Hoodoo: Fake Yogis, Pseudo-Swamis, and the Manufacture of African American Folk Magic,” *Amerasia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 52–53, my emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Bielefeldt, “The Divisions and Direction of Buddhism in America Today,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, accessed March 9, 2018, <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma5/tension2.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Sara Davidson, *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> “Comments on Tensions in American Buddhism,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, July 6, 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2001/07/06/july-6-2001-comments-on-tensions-in-american-buddhism/15941/>.

<sup>35</sup> Kaleem, “Buddhism in America: What is the Future?”

<sup>36</sup> See Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> While many Jewish communities have converted or left Judaism due to persecution, Maya Deren identified as “culturally” or “ethnically” Jewish rather than religiously Jewish for personal reasons. Following her fieldwork in Haiti in the 1940s and 1950s, she eventually found her “spiritual home” in the tradition of Haitian Vodou.

historical basis in Asia as a community-oriented culture of rituals and doctrine, regarding it instead as a prescriptive practice for “simple, mindful living” for individual adherents. Long reminds us of certain North Americans’ hesitation about communal aspects of religion, explaining, “One reason that Western modernity does not like religion is not so much because of the supernatural [elements] but because of its *emphasis on the community* while Western modernity has staked everything on individualism.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Western cultural attention to and fixation on “the self” likely fostered the idea that it was possible to curate one’s own personal Buddhism and fold the practice into other aspects of a spiritual-but-not-religious life. For instance, Americans who do not identify as Buddhists but who engage in meditation and chanting and read Buddhist literature have at times been referred to as “nightstand Buddhists.”<sup>39</sup> These individuals typically focus on the private practice or small-group practice with other similarly “non-religious” Buddhists.<sup>40</sup>

I argue that following the rejection of their religion of upbringing, certain white North Americans experience a sense of spiritual longing and avidly pursue self-exploration in “exotic” traditions such as Buddhism and Vodou. However, one might note that part of the appeal of these “new” ethnic traditions is that they do not require one to abandon all previous cultural or religious affiliations. As some North Americans suggest about Buddhist involvement, “One doesn’t have to subscribe to a catechism or creed, or be a vegetarian. Nor do people have to give up their religion. That’s why some Americans speak of being Jewish Buddhists, for instance.”<sup>41</sup> It is also why certain Buddhist religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama have suggested that even if they are intent to study Buddhism in depth, Westerners should remain grounded in their own faith traditions so as not to become “spiritually confused.”<sup>42</sup> Is it possible that North American converts to Vodou are similarly adding religious flavor to their agnostic lifestyles in a twenty-first century context? It may be that incorporating this “spice” of Vodou into one’s life also greatly appeals to North American converts seeking an individualized connection with the divine. Recalling the “counter-culture” movement that attracted so many white Americans to Buddhism, we might pose the question as to whether experiences of alterity in one’s whiteness render the “ethnic otherness” of Vodou more appealing than other faith traditions of the twentieth century. Indeed, we might surmise that Maya Deren’s initiation to Haitian Vodou and her close rapport with the spirits came about in part due to her “secular but cultural” Jewish identity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Email correspondence between author and Charles H. Long, Feb. 25, 2012. Long’s emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, “Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion,” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, eds. Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen (New York: Routledge, 1999), 71–90.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Dramatic Growth of Buddhism: An Overview,” *Dharma World Magazine: For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (July–Sept. 2011), [https://rk-world.org/dharmaworld/dw\\_2011julyseptdramaticgrowth.aspx](https://rk-world.org/dharmaworld/dw_2011julyseptdramaticgrowth.aspx).

<sup>41</sup> Jane Lampman, “American Buddhism on the Rise,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 14, 2006, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0914/p14s01-lire.html>.

<sup>42</sup> As Lampman further states, “The Dalai Lama, in fact, often encourages people to stay with the faith of their cultural upbringing, to avoid the confusion that can sometimes result from a mixing of Eastern and Western perspectives.” Lampman, “American Buddhism on the Rise.”

<sup>43</sup> Such a realization begs the question as to whether “secular” Jews have been more likely to initiate to Haitian Vodou than “areligious” Christians. There is no doubt that Catholics demonstrate greater cosmological understanding of the *Lwa* and/or saints’ role as intermediary entities between humans and God. However, since Jews were historically designated as “ethnic” whites (and many self-identify as a cultural group), I argue that Deren’s Jewish identity allowed her to relate to Haitians through her own experience as a marginalized “ethnic other” in the United States in a way that her white Anglo-Saxon mentors and peers could not identify.

### **White, But Not Quite**

Maya Deren cites her experience as an artist as foundational to her innovation in studying dance and religion in Haiti. In his foreword to her book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Joseph Campbell noted of Deren, “‘When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart.’ So declares, I am told, a Haitian proverb. Maya Deren on the other hand, was an artist.”<sup>44</sup> Certainly Deren’s orientation as an artist granted her greater access to Vodou circles, as she entered spaces of ceremony as a dancer first and foremost rather than as an anthropologist eager to encounter informants with ready explanations. In fact, Deren sought to learn ritual dance and planned to film ceremonies to bring parts of Haiti back home with her to New York City. She describes her early intentions to craft a narrative out of improvisational ritual services, detailing, “I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.”<sup>45</sup> Such humility reveals a profound sensitivity in documenting the devotion of other *Vodouizan*<sup>46</sup> and an artistic sincerity in recognizing what it meant to be a white person in a ceremonial site of color.

Deren also regarded her identity as an artist as a marker of white “otherness” in the United States. At one point she rationalized, “My own ordeal as an ‘artist-native’ in an industrial culture made it impossible for me to be guilty of similar effronteries towards the Haitian peasants . . . this discretion seemed, to the Haitians, so unique that they early formed the conviction that I was not a foreigner at all, *but a prodigal native daughter finally returned.*”<sup>47</sup> By casting herself as an “artist-native” in an “industrial culture,” Deren lays claims to a parallel marginalization: her identity as an artist, and we might add an immigrant artist at that.<sup>48</sup> Deren’s insight about Haitian perceptions of her also divulges an interesting revelation: her intuitive ritual actions proved to many Haitians that, while inhabiting a white body, she must be a “native” spiritual daughter returning home to properly serve the spirits. She later adds a parenthetical note on various Haitian class perceptions of her choice to initiate into Vodou: “(This conviction was shared by much of the Haitian bourgeoisie who felt that only an element of Negro blood in me would account for the psychological affinity with the peasants....)”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Haitian elites believed that no other reason besides some latent “Haitianness” could account for Deren’s affinity for the rural Haitian families with whom she stayed, danced, and participated in Vodou ceremony! Undoubtedly, Deren’s marginalized experiences of whiteness as a woman and immigrant artist fostered an ability to forge intimate, respectful connections with Haitian spirits and her religious community, who came to regard her as a member of their ritual kin.

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<sup>44</sup> Joseph Campbell, “Editor’s Foreword,” in Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1953), xiv.

<sup>45</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> There are a few ways to identify devotees of Vodou, most commonly a *sevitè* (one who serves the spirits) or a *Vodouizan* (both singular and plural).

<sup>47</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 8, my emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> Born in 1917 in Kiev, Ukraine (formerly U.S.S.R.) to Jewish parents, Deren moved with her family to Brooklyn, New York as a young girl and lived among other Jewish communities.

<sup>49</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 8.



### ***Artistic Initiation and Spirit for Everybody***

This project would not be complete without at least briefly discussing Haitian perspectives of white North Americans’ entrance into Vodou sacred spaces and into Haitian *lakou*.<sup>50</sup> I think it important to consult Haitian Vodou voices and opinions about how certain whites became welcomed into Haitian ritual kinship systems; how they became entwined in the tangled branches of racial and religious identity in the Haitian ritual family tree. While not every *Vodouizan* knew exactly how to categorize Deren, most seemed to agree that she was committed to serving the spirits. Hoping to film some of the ceremonies she attended for her project on ritual dance, Deren described her exchange with an *houngan*, a Vodou priest. Broaching the topic delicately, she beseeched him: “I spoke to him of my desire to capture the beauty and the significance of the ceremonies, so that the rest of the world might become aware. He understood virtually nothing of cinema and I was uncertain of his reaction. . . .”<sup>51</sup> Well aware that her request might appear strange, Deren had difficulty gauging his initial hesitation. The priest shifted his weight: “He hesitated but a moment. Then, offering his hand as one would to a colleague or a collaborator, he said: ‘Each one serves in his own fashion.’”<sup>52</sup>

Haitian scholar and *Houngan* Patrick Bellegarde-Smith has also noted the importance of spirit blessings in determining who is a “genuine” and well-meaning devotee of Vodou. In conversation with him about the legacies of Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Maya Deren, all ethnographers and *Vodouizan* in their own right, he states, “The fact that the women you cite were ARTISTS make[s] it more likely that they would have been ‘kissed’ by the Spirits. . . . They each found their *raison d’etre* in the Haitian spiritual tradition.”<sup>53</sup> Reflecting on their foreign nationality, Bellegarde-Smith suggests that these women came to Haiti as artists with a *spiritual hunger*, perhaps hoping to be nourished by a nation’s religious tradition where “spirit [is] for everybody!”<sup>54</sup> Bellegarde-Smith points out the importance of community approval and spiritual blessings for researchers conducting fieldwork in Haiti, and explains that the *Lwa* only reveal what they want researchers to know.

Returning to the discussion of belonging, another implication is that it is one thing to align oneself with a religious tradition that has been denigrated and demonized, or simply misunderstood; it is even more impressive to commit to using one’s privilege of whiteness/Americanness to build intentional community and collectively uplift one’s religious brethren and sistren. In this way, foreigners such as Deren who have been “kissed” by the *Lwa* carry a responsibility as spiritual children of *Afrik-Ginen* and as members of a *ritual kinship system* of Vodou (and thus, Haiti). In their role as initiates, these foreigners are charged with the task of protecting the sacred mysteries of Vodou while sharing the messages of spirits who claim all of humankind as their children.

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<sup>50</sup> A *lakou* is a community sharing physical land, ancestral lineage, and/or spiritual kinship. For more on notions of the *lakou*, see Charlene Désir, “Diasporic Lakou: A Haitian Academic Explores Her Path to Haiti Pre- and Post-Earthquake,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 81, no. 2 (2011): 278–95.

<sup>51</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Email correspondence between author and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Jan. 11, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> As stated by Mama Lola in Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 315.

## **Ritual Kinship and Whiteness**

*“How could memory reach back beyond the first thing which might be remembered?”<sup>55</sup>*

Grounding ourselves in these broader definitions of ritual kinship, perhaps it is possible that certain whites who have been blessed and chosen as “kissed” by the *Lwa* may have descended from a genealogy of spirits. Indeed, human beings are dynamic and there exists tremendous variation in the ways that humans enact their racial and religious subjectivities. As multi-faceted as any other “racial group” then, we must challenge ourselves to render white populations visible despite their “normativity,” and as worthy a subject of study in religion as any other community. In the words of anthropologist Audrey Smedley, “It is far more accurate and more fruitful to scholarship, and possibly to the future of humankind, to define African American people by their sense of *community*, *consciousness*, and *commitment* than by some mystical ‘racial’ essence.”<sup>56</sup> If foreigners such as Maya Deren claimed their souls as belonging to the ancestral waters of *Afrik-Ginen*, they already understood the implications of claiming an African ritual heritage. This lineage would mean embracing Haitian communities as an extension of their ritual family tree; the tradition of Vodou would not be a philosophy to be appropriated and folded into one’s private life, but rather a communal worldsense<sup>57</sup> shared by fellow devotees to shape one’s life, and that of their ritual kin.

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<sup>55</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 260.

<sup>56</sup> Audrey Smedley, “‘Race’ and the Construction of Human Identity,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 100, No. 3 (Sept. 1998), 699, my emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> As sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí has insightfully stated, “The term ‘worldview,’ which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s *privileging of the visual*. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term ‘world-sense’ is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups.” Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 4, my emphasis.

“Whiteness in the Ancestral Waters: Race, Religion, and Conversion within North American Buddhism and Haitian Vodou”

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