

IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH:

*Towards a Medical Epistemology of New Orleans's Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black Spiritualist Healers*

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## ABSTRACT

The Spiritualist movement has had a profound impact on the nature of American religion. Spiritualism's unique magico-religious liturgical practice is central in understanding this influence. In the early 20th century, New Orleans witnessed the creation and rise of Spiritualist congregations with unique liturgical systems. One of these liturgies – the healing ceremony – served a pivotal role in organizing Spiritualist churches and popularizing Spiritualist leaders. Often, scholars have studied New Orleans's Spiritualist healing ceremonies in relation to wider social justice and Black resistance movements. While this scholarship has contributed to a fuller understanding of Black Spiritualism, a paucity of work regarding the medical knowledge produced in Black Spiritualist healing rituals still persists. This thesis analyzes the possibility of framing Black Spiritualist healing rituals as a distinct medical epistemology. I ask how these liturgies, both spatially and visually, reify the divisions between healers and the sick? This thesis responds to this question by using philosophies of subjectivity, aesthetics, and critical historiographies.

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## Introduction: Stirrings of the Spirit

Singing gave way to silence when Mother Catherine Seals emerged behind the altar. Advanced in age, but youthful in appearance, she darted her eyes across the spectacle with “vitality, self-confidence, and resourcefulness.”<sup>1</sup> A table with lemons and glass tumblers occupied a space some distance from the altar, leaving a clear gap. When Mother Catherine approached this gap, congregants filed into an orderly line.

Earlier that morning, when the heat of New Orleans was only just beginning to take full effect, the scene was more incoherent. In the presence of a bust of Christ, parishioners sang Voodoo “bamboulas.”<sup>2</sup> Self-fashioned apostles broke through choral ranks to ensure that visitors received a sprinkle of wishing salts. Unaccompanied dogs wallowed freely through the church floor, stopped only by a constructed pool of salt water. If this was the meeting of the faithful, it appeared more carnival than ceremonial, more ludic than holy.

But the morning had given way to afternoon, and Mother Catherine hovered above the table’s lemons, blocking the image of the saints behind her. Her headdress fashioned her as a god or a “nurse”<sup>3</sup>. To her admirers, now sober and alert, she appeared as the consummate bridge, straddling the carnal reality of her audience and the world of spirits.

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The healing practices of Mother Catherine Seals, and other New Orleans based mediums like her, have remained enigmatic to modern historians. Part of the difficulty in historicizing

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<sup>1</sup> Tinker, “Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil,” 150.

<sup>2</sup> Tinker, “Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil,” 149.

<sup>3</sup> Tinker, “Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil,” 150.

these practices stem from their sheer idiosyncrasy. For Mother Catherine and her contemporaries, healing is a delicate synthesis of contrasting images, cultures, and bodily movements. Voodoo chants echo against the backdrop of Catholic saints, and traditional African notions of possession jut against a focus on sacred scripture. Both historians and scholars of religion categorize these unique practices under the term, “spiritualism.” In the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spiritualism loosely refers to a set of, often esoteric, religious movements that prioritized the active involvement and invocation of the spirit realm in the affairs of daily life. These movements expressed this synchronicity between the immaterial and material world in ways that mirrored the complexity of their immediate communities. As a result, studies of spiritualism have tended to focus on certain niches of spiritualism.

Black Spiritualism has been a particularly rich niche for historical and theoretical inquiry. If Spiritualism, more broadly, asserts a connection between the spiritual and physical world, Black Spiritualism directs this connection towards the ontological question of what it means to be Black. For Black Spiritualists, the world of spirit offers a template to perform a racial reality. Debates over the mechanism of this performance have driven historical studies of Black Spiritualism. While these studies are foundational, they are often based on starkly different claims. Understanding the historical emergence of these claims, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, provides a clearer picture of the theoretical and historiographical gaps inherent in Black Spiritualist scholarship, gaps which this thesis attempts to respond to.

## **Black Spiritualism: A History**

Though Spiritualism was first formalized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the roots of Spiritualism extend back to earlier spiritual awakenings of mid-19th century America<sup>4</sup>. While the congregations that emerged from these Spiritual awakenings were mostly white, Spiritualism would later be defined by its significant acceptance and syncretism within Black American religious culture from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. The first full comprehensive ethnographic study of a Black Spiritual congregation was conducted by Edith A. Lockley. In her 1936 master's thesis, "Spiritualist Sect in Nashville," Lockley examines the history and practices of the Redeeming Christian Spiritualist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. The church, according to Lockley, was founded in the 1920s as an offshoot of a larger Spiritualist congregation in St. Louis<sup>5</sup>. Initially, the church's religious ceremonies were held in its founder's home<sup>6</sup>. However, significant increases in the number of regular attendees prompted the church to move its ceremonies to a building that seated 300 individuals<sup>7</sup>. Lockley identifies the Redeeming Christian Spiritualist Church as a forerunner of many Spiritualist churches founded in Nashville during the early 1930s. She identifies two major events that led to the eventual demise of the church: a separation from the church's mother church in St. Louis and internal power struggles between the church's pastor and assistant pastors<sup>8</sup>.

Lockley's documentation of the Redeeming Christian Spiritualist Church served as the inspiration for the anthropological and sociological work of Hans A. Baer. In his 1980 essay, "An Anthropological View of Black Spiritual Churches in Nashville Tennessee," Baer notes that Lockley's ethnography, in addition to his work, represents the only scholarship on Black

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring to the Second and Third Great Awakenings of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Baer, "An Anthropological View of Black Spiritual Churches in Nashville, Tennessee," 56.

<sup>6</sup> Baer, "An Anthropological View of Black Spiritual Churches in Nashville, Tennessee," 56.

<sup>7</sup> Baer, "An Anthropological View of Black Spiritual Churches in Nashville, Tennessee," 56.

<sup>8</sup> Baer, "An Anthropological View of Black Spiritual Churches in Nashville, Tennessee," 56.

Spiritualism in America<sup>9</sup>. Responding to this “paucity,” Baer supplemented Lockley’s finding with a larger ethnographic study of his own, visiting and observing the rituals of all eleven spiritual churches in Nashville. An explanation of these rituals appears alongside a concise history of the American Spiritualist movement in Baer’s essay. According to Baer, Spiritualist churches represent the synthesis of rituals and practices from four main religious traditions: Black Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Spiritualism, and Hoodoo<sup>10</sup>.

The highly syncretic nature of the Black Spiritualist tradition contributes to the difficulty in categorizing Spiritualist congregations theologically and sociologically. Baer notes how Black Spiritualist churches often lack formal creeds<sup>11</sup>. Further, Black Spiritualist congregations actively draw from a heterogeneous assemblage of religious traditions, making it difficult to identify these congregations with any singular denomination. Baer responds to the liturgical and theological complexity of Black Spiritualist churches by grouping Spiritualist churches under one encompassing descriptor: manipulationist<sup>12</sup>. According to Baer, manipulationist religious sects provide members with the ability to alter present and future circumstances through the use of magico-religious rituals.

Baer expanded on the category of ‘manipulationist’ when describing Black Spiritualists in *The Black Spiritual Movement*, his larger 1984 book-length study of Black Spiritualist churches in the United States. Manipulationist sects, as Baer states, operate on an individualistic basis of social action. Often, Spiritualist leaders focus on providing their congregants with the esoteric

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<sup>9</sup> Baer, “An Anthropological View of Black Spiritual Churches in Nashville, Tennessee,” 54.

<sup>10</sup> Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, 9.

knowledge necessary to achieve the good life, a state of being exemplified by “socially desired ends” – health, love, prestige, and financial success<sup>13</sup>.

Many scholars have rejected the narrowness and slight cynicism of Baer’s historiographical and theoretical analysis of Black Spiritualism. For instance, in their 1991 book project, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow draw on the work of William Paden to suggest that Black Spiritualist rituals center on a unique framework of “sacred time and action.”<sup>14</sup> In this framework, Spiritualist traditions do not merely offer individuals magico-religious control over their corporeal realities. Rather, they actively reorient Spiritualist congregants towards a present and tangible encounter with the immaterial.

Drawing on the work of Thomas Csordas and June Macklin, Jacobs and Kaslow describe two effects of this encounter. First, Spiritualist encounters with the sacred imbue Spiritualist congregants with a “sacred mode of attending to the world.”<sup>15</sup> In this modality, all events stem from complex causal relationships that straddle the cosmological and the physical. Second, sacred encounters provide Spiritualist congregants with what Macklin describes as “salvation.”<sup>16</sup> Here, Macklin draws on Paul Tillich’s theological definition of salvation. To Tillich, salvation possesses a restorative and teleological essence. Salvation is restorative because it entails the complete healing – both physically and spiritually – of the believer and teleological because it culminates in the eventual reattachment of the temporal to the divine. Within the conception of sacred time and action, the rituals of Black Spiritualist churches embody both aspects of salvation. Spiritualist leaders provide congregants with the promise of wholeness in rites that

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<sup>13</sup> Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 169.

<sup>16</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 169.

actively bridge the chasm between the material and the immaterial through spirit possession, iconography, and ecstatic processions.

Unlike the reading proposed by Baer, Jacobs's and Kaslow's analysis allows for the possibility of viewing Black Spiritualism as an ontological project. The sacrality produced by Black Spiritualism is a sacrality that actively changes how congregants inhabit the world. The extent of this transformation and its ramifications has been a topic of interest to contemporary scholars of Black Spiritualism. Notably, Margarita Guillory asserts that the ontological transformation that occurred in Black Spiritualist congregations was political. In her book, *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, Guillory portrays Spiritualist churches as the site of social mobilization for the Black, urban poor. She argues that through their ritual practices, Spiritualist churches offered their members a public opportunity to recognize and repair the psychological effects of their social discrimination.

While these histories of Black Spiritualism are expansive, they must confront the complications that arise from the highly local nature of Black Spiritualist congregations. Black Spiritualist leaders consistently conversed with the spatial, cultural, and socioeconomic demands of their locales. This thesis is focused on one locus of Black Spiritualist activity: New Orleans.

### **Black Spiritualism in New Orleans**

Comprehensive accounts of the Black Spiritualist movement in New Orleans emerge from two prominent sources: (1) the ethnographic work of Andrew Kaslow and Claude Jacobs and (2) a series of interviews conducted by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s. In their book, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, Kaslow and Jacobs detail the history, liturgical practices and communal beliefs of New Orleans' various Black Spiritualist congregations. These

congregations – though structurally distinct from each other – share a similar tendency for religious syncretism which mirrors the religious and cultural complexity of New Orleans. Spatially, the city is defined by its rich tapestry of socio-cultural boroughs. Each borough is a historical remnant of the city's multifaceted history.

The city, by virtue of existing at the entrance of the Mississippi River, has historically maintained a strategic geopolitical position. The territory surrounding the Mississippi possessed opportunities for fur trade with Indigenous Americans, and the river's vast length made it ideal for the transfer of goods across the American frontier. As such, in the time following its founding in 1718, New Orleans was the envy of many expanding nations including France, Britain, and the United States. Each of these states, through the use of arms, wrestled for and gained control of the city in various prolonged conflicts. When the United States finally possessed legal ownership of New Orleans in 1803, the city already contained extensive French and Spanish influences. Perhaps the most noticeable sign of these influences was the demonstrably significant Catholic presence in the city. The arrival of American settlers and free Blacks from the Caribbean in the early 19th century provided a counterbalance to the overwhelmingly Catholic nature of the city. Both American settlers and Black Caribbeans possessed distinctively different religious genealogies. While American settlers were mainly Protestant, freed Caribbean Blacks contributed traditional West African religious practices to the overall religious culture of New Orleans.

This mix of Catholic, Protestant, African, and, often, Indigenous religious cultures made New Orleans a multifaceted Spiritual assemblage. As Kaslow and Jacobs illustrate, Black Spiritualism – which emerged in New Orleans in the early 1920's – actively drew on this dynamic religious assortment. For instance, some Black Spiritualists developed creedal

confessions which, like their Protestant analogues, placed a high emphasis on the authority of scripture. Though, as Kaslow and Jacobs show, the liturgical practices of New Orleans' Black Spiritualists possessed many Catholic, African, and Indigenous influences. During Spiritualist seances, mediums were cloaked in elaborate clerical vestments akin to those worn by Catholic priests. Highly decorated altars with consecrated candles and liquids stood at the center of liturgical spaces. Often, these altars would be accompanied by icons or statues of Christian and non-Christian saints. The most prominent of these non-Christian saints was the former 19th century Shawnee war chief, Black Hawk. Here, the mass popularity of Black Hawk is a clear indication of the pronounced Indigenous influence on Spiritualist ritual. Spiritualist leaders, though professing to be strict Christians, displayed a remarkable admiration for Indigenous leaders and ritual practices.

While Spiritualist liturgies are materially indebted to Catholic and Indigenous influences, the actions of Spiritualists during rituals point to wider African influence. During Spiritualist seances, congregants often fall into trance-like states where notions of time and space are suspended. During these trances, some congregants and mediums actively take on the spirit of a saint. This embodied act of being overcome by a saint mirrors the ritual practices in traditional Yoruba (and other West African) religions. In these religious traditions, human beings can act as a channel for divine agents. This is likely the reason that Spiritualist leaders refer to themselves as mediums; They are the vessels by which saints speak to the congregation. This uniquely West African cosmology would have likely been introduced to the Spiritualists through the similarly West African 'voodoo' practices of freed Caribbean Blacks that migrated to New Orleans.

As their rituals clearly show, Black Spiritualists imbibed the multifaceted religious culture of New Orleans. This syncretism allowed early Spiritualists mediums to individually

locate themselves within unique, self-created niches of religious practices. The individual personalities of each medium and their unique religious outlooks, then, point towards the gradated nature of Black Spiritualism in New Orleans. This is a reality that often complicates the study of New Orleans' Black Spiritualists. The risk for scholars of Black Spiritualism in New Orleans is a potential for over abstraction. The vastness of Black Spiritualist practice in the city requires scholarship that is descriptively concise and theoretically modest. The last section of this literature review will present how I plan to use a Foucauldian methodology to achieve this balance.

Luckily, sources from the period that this project is concerned with, 1920-1950, display the idiosyncratic practices of individual Spiritualist mediums with a promising lucidity. Most of these sources are found in the New Orleans City Guide, a comprehensive guidebook composed by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration. In a section entitled, "Some Negro Cults," the guide presents accounts of the history and practices of eight different Spiritualist leaders. These accounts are quite detailed, often including references from interviews with the city's residents and vivid descriptions of the building where each medium led weekly liturgies. The details of these sources will be helpful in constructing a more precise picture of early 20th Black Spiritualism in New Orleans. Though, for the purposes of this project, a particular aspect of these sources will be emphasized: namely, their shared focus on the healing liturgy as a central component of spiritual practice.

### **Liturgical Healing: Black Spiritualism in New Orleans**

The healing liturgy has been a central component of New Orleans' Black Spiritualist congregations since the 1920s. The components of this liturgy mirror the religious juxtapositions

that govern life in the city. In healing seances, African, Indigenous, and Catholic saints are invoked in elaborate and spell-binding processions. Congregants descend into trance-like frenzies. Mediums converse with dead saints. This aesthetic overload itself is alluring and seductive to outside observers and potential converts.

Sources from the New Orleans City Guide (1938) detail how Spiritualist healing services served as the foremost attraction for early adopters of Black Spiritualism in the city. Three of these sources – from the section entitled “Some Negro Cults” – are particularly useful in highlighting the elements of Black Spiritualist healing and recent theoretical approaches used in understanding these elements<sup>17</sup>.

The sources detail the lives and ministries of three Spiritualist mediums – Mother Catharine Seals, Mother C.J. Hyde, and Mother Kate Francis. What is most apparent in the rhetoric and practice of all three mediums is a clear emphasis on healing as a totalizing force of Spiritual practice. As the city guide illustrates, each of the three mediums centered the healing liturgy in their ministries in similar and distinct ways. For instance, while each medium used prominent material elements such as holy water and special icons during their healing rituals, the grandeur of these liturgical rites differed amongst each medium.

However, despite these aesthetic differences, scholars – most notably Margarita Guillory – have synthesized descriptive frameworks for understanding the similarities among New Orleans’ Black Spiritualists. In the third chapter of her book *More than Conjurers* Guillory uses accounts from the New Orleans City Guide, local newspapers, and local university archives to contextualize Spiritualist healing liturgies along a four-part process: (1) separation, (2)

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<sup>17</sup> Federal Writers Project, *New Orleans City Guide*, 199-211.

invocation, (3) identification, and (4) reintegration<sup>18</sup>. In the separation stage, sick congregants are physically separated from the congregation to signify their lack of spiritual wholeness. In the subsequent invocation and identification stages, a healing medium calls upon a specific “spirit guide,” often a prominent saint or the patron saint of the congregation, to assist in naming the disease and issuing specific prescriptions to the ailing congregant<sup>19</sup>. In the final stage of the healing ritual, reintegration, the formerly sick congregant is physically rejoined to the congregation to signify their regained spiritual wholeness<sup>20</sup>.

Guillory opts to contextualize this liturgical process within the racially charged political dynamics of early 20th century America. To Guillory, Spiritualist healing ceremonies in early 20th century New Orleans represent a counter-politics to segregated life in the American South. By forcing Spiritualist congregants to recognize and individually address their illness, Spiritualist healing liturgies imbue their predominantly Black congregants with a sense of agency that allows them to exist within a structurally dehumanizing political world.

However, while Guillory’s political analysis is insightful, it reveals a gap in the historiography of New Orleans’s Black Spiritualist healing rituals. If these rituals explicitly claimed to heal, then can Black Spiritualism in the city be historicized on account of these claims? Can one write a history of New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists that uses the practice and aesthetics of healing as its underlying theme? This thesis argues that such history is possible and provides larger insights regarding the enduring connection between religion and health. What enables this relationship is a discursive understanding of healing and ontology, particularly provided by French scholar, Michel Foucault.

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<sup>18</sup> Guillory, *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> Guillory, *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Guillory, *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, 73.

## A Foucauldian Intervention

Michel Foucault is perhaps one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. His theories – which span across numerous disciplines – have redefined how historically minded scholars approach the task of accurately reconstructing and interpreting the past. While Foucault wrote on various historical and philosophical topics, his work in the history of medicine will be the basis of this project's intervention.

Foucault's engagement with medicine is synthesized in his 1963 work, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. In the book, Foucault attempts to present a comprehensive genealogy of clinical medicine. At the core of Foucault's project is the recontextualization of medicine and medical knowledge as an episteme – a disciplinary process that creates knowledge by controlling how individuals exercise their subjectivity. In this modality, medicine, according to Foucault, is defined by the interlocking relations of power that allow certain individuals to deem knowledge as 'medical'.

By recasting medicine as a relational system, Foucault's methodology aims for a certain historical restraint. Rather than constructing a historical narrative that reproduces the past through the direct knowledge provided by sources, Foucault opts to historicize by focusing on how sources are themselves created<sup>21</sup>. This unique historical approach – which locates historical objectivity in systemic realities – lends itself to a close reading of the historical *subtexts* that undergird every historical text. In this sense, historiography is fundamentally a process of revelation – each text points to the unsaid systemic elements that make the text a possibility. For

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<sup>21</sup> This method is not exclusive to the *Birth of the Clinic*. See also *The Archaeology of Knowledge* for full exposition of Foucault's historical method.

Foucault, these systemic elements deeply influence and are influenced by the symbols and language that encode their presence within a text. It is here – in the revelatory relationship between language, the symbol, the text, and the system – that the possibility of a theoretical recontextualization of Black Spiritualist healing becomes realizable. If symbols and language shape the way that epistemes exist in particular settings, then is it possible – through a close analysis of the symbols enshrined Black Spiritualist healing practices – to recontextualize Spiritualist healing as a unique medical episteme?

This thesis asserts the possibility of this reframing of Spiritualist ritual, but not without certain challenges. Firstly, Foucault's historical analysis emerges from a close reading of textual symbols. To Foucault, the hidden system of intelligibility that makes certain realities possible is a system that manifests itself in language and texts. This linguistic focus complicates any attempt to apply Foucault's historiographical thought to liturgy. Liturgy, rather than text, relies on the additional interplay of material aesthetics and soma-aesthetics. More specific to the demands of this thesis, the linguistic productions of Black Spiritualists are loosely arranged. Due to the secrecy of these rituals, few 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualist mediums or congregations maintained organized texts detailing their beliefs and practices. As aforementioned in this introduction, most knowledge regarding Spiritualist belief comes from ethnographic sources which often unintentionally obscure the voices of Spiritualist believers and leaders. If any connection between Foucault's epistemology and Spiritualist historical experience can be made, it will require historians to think creatively with the ideas present in *The Birth of the Clinic*. To put it bluntly, any critical history of Black Spiritualism is dependent on a reimagination of language.

### **Liturgy as Language: Towards a New Historiography of Black Spiritualism**

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault expounds on language's role as a system of relation. Language, he asserts, occupies the space between the signified and the signifier. The signified is the object that language points to, and the signifier is the linguistic string that makes the object intelligible. When a person uses the word 'dog,' for instance, the term 'dog' is a signifier that conjures up the image and or idea of the signified object, a physical dog.

The relationship between the signified and the signifier is not linear. Though the syntax of language gives the impression of relating to concrete phenomena, the meaning of language is often hidden, "[hanging] over us, and leading us forward in our blindness."<sup>22</sup> In the previously provided example of linguistic structure, this phenomenon appears like this: though the signifier 'dog' is uttered clearly, it is understood through a process of interpretation. What images are constituted as 'doglike'? And how does the context of the usage of 'dog' change its meaning? If, for instance, one insults an adversary by calling that person a 'dog,' the antagonism in the utterance imbues 'dog' with a deeper meaning that deviates from a strict biological understanding of 'dog-ness'. This example and Foucault's claims illustrate a central truth about language: that it is always a site of interpretation and "exegesis." Language's meaning is constantly debated, and the use of language rests on defining what interpretations are legitimate and illegitimate in a particular context.

Recent scholarly work has tried to display how the discursiveness of language mirrors the discursiveness of other communicative mediums. Like words, visual and auditory productions transmit conceptual ideas and facilitate contact between peoples. Some scholars, like Birgit Meyer, have even asserted that non-linguistic mediums imbue this contact with a heightened realness.

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, xvi.

In her seminal work, *Aesthetic Formations: Media Religion and the Senses*, Meyer argues for the centrality of material sensations in the process of forming religious community. Material artifacts, as Meyer claims, aid language and text in realizing religious divisions that are often imagined<sup>23</sup>. Here, the process by which materiality creates religious experience is especially notable. Sensory experience is initiated through the interaction with the concrete – a physical icon, a statue, consecrated food items. Within individual religious cultures, this interaction with tangible items is situated in the context of larger cosmologies. As Meyer notes, these processes of physical stimulation and religious contextualization are “co-constitutive”<sup>24</sup>. Religious devotees both access religious truths through physical stimulation and realize physical sensations through abstract religious belief. This circularity between the material and immaterial world is key to Meyer’s insistence on the revelatory power of material artifacts. In religious contexts, material objects are signifiers of a larger cosmologies. In essence, liturgy molds material and bodily aesthetics into a language. Every shift in the religious use of an object, for Meyer, illustrates how aesthetic language is, like textual language, incessantly discursive.

The discursivity of textual and material sources has historiographic ramifications. Rather than accepting these sources *prima facie*, historians can trace the development of written texts, public performances, and physical artifacts to unearth the incongruencies in a particular narrative. Often, these incongruencies reveal the subterranean social dynamics that make certain histories possible. This thesis applies this production-focused historiography to New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists, albeit with certain modifications. As previously established, liturgy is the site of both written and embodied language. Within communities, each of these languages can

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<sup>23</sup> Meyer, “From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 5-6. But entire piece points to this trend as well.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, “From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 11-12.

produce an entire history. The possible exhaustiveness of a Spiritualist history focused on textual or material evidence presents a clear dilemma. If a historian were to focus on one type of evidence, they would neglect a large swath of a particular narrative. Further, what is written about the Black Spiritualists can often deviate from the practices of the Spiritualists. The contradictory historical perspectives that may emerge from this deviation could complicate any shared scholarly understanding.

This thesis responds to this challenge by proposing a liminal reading of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists. This reading recontextualizes Spiritualist liturgy as an attempt by Spiritualist mediums to manage the gaps between their aesthetic and textual representations. Historians must analyze how Spiritualist liturgies (and in the case of this thesis, Spiritualist healing liturgies) synthesize their material and ideological components in one comprehensible experience.

The method proposed by this thesis to probe at this synthesis is a historiography that focuses on recounting the fissures between material and textual sources. In the chapters that follow, components of New Orleans's Spiritualist healing liturgies will be understood as solutions to the disconnect between the cosmological claims of Spiritualist leaders and the affective experiences these leaders attempt to construct. By revealing the unique liturgical methods that Spiritualist mediums used to 'create in the gaps,' this thesis attempts to display that larger logic implicit within the Black Spiritualist healing liturgy.

This logic centers around the deconstruction<sup>25</sup> of the body. New Orleans's Black Spiritualist healing liturgies, this thesis argues, artistically subverted the possibilities of the body,

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<sup>25</sup> I use deconstruction in the Derridean sense. By Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida broadly refers to the process by which the original meanings of a source are revised in the face of the source's multiple possible interpretations. In this case, the body is given multiple interpretations that jut against its presumed medical description.

providing Black congregants with the ability to re-imagine their corporeality. The stakes of this re-imagination were immense. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century American South, where Black bodies were physically and ideologically desecrated, the creative possibilities offered by the Spiritualist healing liturgy were life affirming. In our contemporary age, racial disparities in medical practice are once again reanimating debates about the role of medicine in tyrannically creating knowledge. The experiences of the Spiritualists provide medical and non-medical thinkers with the tools to re-imagine a more humane, inclusive medical future. Further, New Orleans's Black Spiritualists remind us that this future should incorporate religious scholarship. Religion, as this thesis shows in all its sections, has the ability to animate fundamental ideas about the body for both its adherents and its scholars.

## Entranced: Black Spiritualist Trance as Medical Language

An evening Spiritualist ceremony in New Orleans crescendos to an overwhelming climax. A minister appointed with the task of leading the congregation in its séance takes the stage accompanied by the deafening sounds of a “pounding organ” and the “steady beat of a drum.”<sup>26</sup> Struck by the spirit, he pronounces the presence of the immaterial world in a sequence of poetic and prayerful utterances:

“Yes! Oh God! “Call me at the twelve o’clock hour. I shall give you shelter.” Now Sir! Burden’s shelter. Peace in heaven! “All that desire justice. Call me. I shall give you strength.” Catherine Seals! “I’m in the meeting. I’m in the meeting.” Little Brother! Aunt Peggy! “I come to sweep up. Leave my blessings on each and everyone.” St. Anthony! Ain’t he beautiful! “When you get home just touch that prayer. Call my name nine times. I’ll be with you. Need my blessing?” ... “Blessed mother, come give me what I ask. So beautiful! Ah! So beautiful! Ah! She’s the one. She comes, so beautiful with flowers. There’s a healing spirit. Healing spirit! My, my! Ain’t this sweet? No matter what type of condition, just touch the right hand, just sort of move on it. She comes! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit! Spirit!”<sup>27</sup>

This is the trance, manifested in a series of discombobulated sounds and references. The minister, who moments before planted his feet in this assembly, is bifurcated, split in half. He straddles the space between heaven and earth, and as if in a dream, visions of spirits unfold before him.

To the crowd, untrained in this esoteric art of “[working] the spirit,” the minister’s chants are uncanny<sup>28</sup>. Each word, screeched forth with increased intensity and fragmentation, excites a shared conclusion: this spectacle is not natural. The man that gesticulates before them has ceased to be merely a man. No. He is, in this instant, an altar calling forth the theophany of a spiritual host.

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<sup>26</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 132.

<sup>28</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 132.

The trance is the epicenter of the liturgical life of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists. No gathering of the Spiritualists is complete without it. It is an element in all rituals performed by the Spiritualists. For congregants, both old and new, the trance is the ultimate symbol of mystical transcendence<sup>29</sup>. It is the space where the immaterial and material converge, displaying the inescapable fusion of both worlds. In Spiritualist cosmology, this fusion is the source of all spiritual and worldly wisdom. This wisdom, like the array of spiritual entities involved in a trance, is infinite. As Archbishop E.J. Johnson, a leader of a Black Spiritualist congregation, put it, "Spirit knowledge is unlimited."<sup>30</sup>

If the trance enables Spiritualist liturgy to reveal truths, then any analysis of the *medical* truths revealed in New Orleans's Black Spiritualist liturgies must begin with the trance. To say anything worthwhile and intelligent about the act of Spiritualist healing, one must understand what trance is and how it alters the embodied experience of its practitioners. Only then, can a scholarly work investigate the uses of trance in Spiritualist healing ceremonies, the messages these healing trances disseminate, and the power these trances confer to the leaders and laity of Black Spiritualist congregations.

To this end, I seek to accomplish three things in this chapter. First, I will describe the components of trance historically and theoretically. Second, working from this description, I will analyze how Spiritualist trances subvert normative structures of religious and epistemic authority through processes I term *mutual lack* and *co-figuration*. Lastly, I will argue for the role of aesthetics in enabling trances to signify and produce truths about the material world and, more important to the inquiry of this thesis, the body.

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<sup>29</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 126-127.

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 128.

## Defining Trance

Trances, by nature of being *prima facie* opaque, are difficult to fully comprehend and replicate in scholarly language. They are so unpredictable and subject-specific, that most scholars resist analyzing trances as metaphysical events. In contrast, most of the literature on the nature of trances focuses on the social and psychological contexts that undergird the ritual.

In this regard, Blackness, as a sociological phenomenon, dominates scholarship on the trances of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists. As has been gestured to in the introduction of this thesis, Blackness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century American South was a very real political reality. Blacks in the American South were victims of systemic violence and lacked the formal privileges of citizenship. Against this backdrop, scholars argue that the tradition of trance and possession in New Orleans offered poor, low income Blacks an avenue for political resistance<sup>31</sup>. By relying solely on the supposed intervention of the spiritual world, New Orleans's Black Spiritualists were "[symbolically] [reacting] against a dependent societal status."<sup>32</sup>

Scholars have noted various physiological and psychological elements that induce this "symbolic reaction." Alexander Alland, in his 1962 ethnographical account of a Spiritualist ceremony, describes how trance states are often induced in "musical interludes" where the chaotic assemblage of jazz-like rhythms and collective chanting send individuals to a state of bodily catharsis.<sup>33</sup> Members sing wildly and contort their heads and bodies spontaneously<sup>34</sup>. Alland notes how heating machines within the church building produce excessive amounts of carbon dioxide, neurologically morphing the perceptions of attendees.<sup>35</sup> Importantly, he mentions

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<sup>31</sup> Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches," 46.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches," 46.

<sup>33</sup> Alland, "Possession in a Revivalistic Negro Church," 206.

<sup>34</sup> Alland, "Possession in a Revivalistic Negro Church," 207.

<sup>35</sup> Alland, "Possession in a Revivalistic Negro Church," 211-212.

how trances are more likely to occur in women within the ceremony<sup>36</sup>. Alland collates these factors – gender, space, and physiology – under a single theoretical explanation for trances, hypnosis<sup>37</sup>. Mediums, by crafting a unique experience that appeals to the personalities susceptible to trance, induce a catharsis in their audiences.

Alland's analysis yields two critical observations about Spiritualist trances. First, his analysis suggests that trances rely on sociologically specific contexts. The jazz and percussion-based music played during Spiritualist ceremonies are purposed for the trance. Further, the orientation of the space used for ceremonies conditions members to prepare for catharsis. Second, Alland's analysis – in particular, his analysis on personality and susceptibility to trance – highlights how the trance is instantiated in special subjects. Certain subjects, owing to their biological or psycho-social condition, induce trances more frequently than others. Spiritualist liturgy, in this sense, physically and socially orients the body to a particular state for the purpose of increasing the possibility of theophany.

Claude Jacobs, whose work focuses on the history of trance in New Orleans, builds upon Alland's social and physiological framing of the trance. Citing Michel Laguerre, Jacobs agrees that trances contain elements of racial discourse. However, he asserts that the willingness of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists to call on specific saints during trance, rather than the broader spiritual world, is indicative of how New Orleans's diverse religious environment creates unique socio-cultural conditions for the trance.<sup>38</sup> In New Orleans, the trance can occur from individual spirits "[mounting]" a congregant.<sup>39</sup> The interaction between a spirit and a congregant

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<sup>36</sup> Alland, "Possession in a Revivalistic Negro Church," 207.

<sup>37</sup> Alland, "Possession in a Revivalistic Negro Church," 210.

<sup>38</sup> Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches," 46.

<sup>39</sup> Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches," 46.

personalizes the relationship between the immaterial and material world. Spiritualist possession, in addition to asserting truths about the community, is deeply formative for the person who has the fortune of being possessed.

While Jacobs's focus on the individualistic elements of the trance complicates Alland's sociological readings of the ritual, he still maintains the primary role of sociology in understanding New Orleans's Black Spiritualist trances. Even when charitably considering the possibility that Black Spiritualist trances operate on the logic of "sacred time and action," Jacobs asserts that the sacrality of this encounter operates on a merely functional level<sup>40</sup>. As he argues, spiritualist rituals, including trance, provide a worldview that incorporates the possibility of the divine, helping members to "transcend... the obstacles to what one hopes for in the 'normal' flow of everyday life."<sup>41</sup>

Jacobs's and Alland's shared emphasis on the role of the divine as a mirror to the physical needs of Black Spiritualist congregants presents limitations to scholars who want to seriously engage with spiritualist trances. By tethering the trance's characteristics to the immediate social and psychological conditions of congregants, both scholars restrict the possibility of engaging with the trance at a metaphysical level. By a metaphysical reading, I mean a method of analysis that analyzes how the trance shapes the fundamental, rather than the normative, conditions of being. This is not to say that the social and psychological is not important when analyzing trances. Rather, what I am claiming is that to assert the primacy of sociological understandings of trance over metaphysical framings erroneously flattens the social and philosophical truths

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<sup>40</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 169.

<sup>41</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 169.

implicit in the ritual. I am attempting to ask: how does the trance, and Black Spiritualist ritual more broadly, alter an individual's asocial experience of the world?

Importantly, for this thesis, an asocial understanding of trance makes a medical reading of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists' rituals possible. Medicine rests on the comprehension of medical language. As an epistemology, medicine and its language does not merely gesture to social relations. Rather, medicine first and foremost speaks ontologically. Once it defines the conditions of being, a state of existing which is separate from the social, medical language illuminates underlying social realities. Thus, asserting the possibility of spiritualists to speak *medically* requires one to illustrate how spiritualist ritual – in this case, the trance – asserts truths about the very being of a congregant, as opposed to their social experience.

This ontological focus in framing trance does not contradict the history of trance in New Orleans. Ritually, trance is a feature of West African cosmology<sup>42</sup>. The trance was most likely introduced to New Orleans through its involvement in the Caribbean slave trade. As Black slaves, many of whom stemmed from the Caribbean slave colonies, were forcibly trafficked into the city, they carried with them the spiritual traditions of West Africa and the West Indies<sup>43</sup>. The most popular of these traditions was Voodoo, which is an amalgam of traditional African and Catholic beliefs. Voodoo has, for most scholars, been a misnomer. Conventionally, voodoo, and other West African derived religious practices have been lumped in the same category of beliefs and traditions. This, of course, is contrary to the true nature of these traditions. Voodoo contains significant differences from its Yoruba roots. Further, different regions where Voodoo is practiced in the Americas maintain varying rites and beliefs.

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<sup>42</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 24-25.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 24-25.

In New Orleans, where Black slaves and freed persons engaged with French Catholics and Native Americans, Voodoo acquired a naturalistic and cosmological character. Voodoo practitioners in the city often used herbal concoctions to invoke a spiritual effect. This reliance on the natural world formed the basis of Hoodoo, a specific tradition of Voodoo that became popular in the American South.<sup>44</sup> Further, New Orleans's Voodoo practitioners assimilated the cosmological beliefs of Roman Catholics. These beliefs centered on the presence of a transcendent, immaterial realm that could be called upon through communication with saints and other divine agents. This realm was posited as real and connected to a wider metaphysics of existence. Here, in the two major influences on New Orleans's West African and Voodoo cultures – Indigenous beliefs and Roman Catholicism – the poles of Voodoo practitioners become apparent. New Orleans's Voodoo practitioners had deep reverence for the ability of the supernatural (or the metaphysical) to shape one's physical being.

The trance extended from this theology. Already a feature of Caribbean variations of Voodoo, the trance acquired new layers in New Orleans. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century trance practitioners in the city sought to syncretize their practice with Catholicism and Indigenous belief by invoking popular Catholic saints and Native leaders. Notable figures in this regard were the Sauk Chief, Black Hawk, and Saints Jude and Patrick.<sup>45</sup> Further, material elements particular to both Native and Catholic religions played a significant role in the trance portions of Voodoo ceremonies. Catholic icons and Indigenous ornaments were aesthetically adjacent to the altars where Voodoo mediums summoned the spirits.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 30-31. Also see Zora Neale Hurston's *Hoodoo in America*, 1931.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 123. Also see, Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 86.

The Black Spiritualists, who emerged in New Orleans in the early 1920s, were heirs to these syncretic traditions. This is illustrated in Black Spiritualist belief and the location of Spiritualist congregations within the city. Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow note how many Spiritualist beliefs bear close resemblance to Voodoo and Catholicism.<sup>47</sup> Like Voodoo mediums and Catholic priests, Black Spiritualist mediums center their liturgy around the invocation of saints and mediation with the spiritual world. Further, many aesthetic elements of Spiritualist ritual, such as the wearing of blue cords, are taken directly from the syncretic Voodooism that emerged in the city.

The geography of the Black Spiritualist movement within the city also provides evidence of the close links between Black Spiritualists and New Orleans's syncretic religious traditions. Most 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualist congregations emerged in the French-Creole and industrial quarters of the city<sup>48</sup>. These districts were prominent for their high concentrations of freed Blacks, Catholics, and Native Americans – all progenitors of the religious elements adopted by the Spiritualists. Here, the spatial dynamics that aided the formation of Spiritualist ritual are starkly apparent. As a product of the same environment as synthetic, Voodoo-based cultures, Black Spiritualism is the heir of New Orleans's unique religious milieu.

This milieu was characterized by an attunement to the metaphysical. As such, any analysis of Spiritualism and its rituals – including, most importantly, the trance – must account for underlying metaphysical truths and substructures. Scholars, only by imaginatively and rigorously teasing these substructures, can reveal social and, for this thesis, medical

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<sup>47</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 38.

understandings of Black Spiritualist ritual that have more fidelity to Spiritualist history and lived experience.

### **Mutual Lack and the Structure of the Healing Trance**

To understand the substructures of the healing trance, one needs to properly analyze two things: (1) the role of the trance within the healing ceremony and (2) the effect of the trance on participants within these ceremonies. By coming to terms with how these factors allow the trance to drive the Black Spiritualist healing rite, scholars can reveal the larger messages imbedded in Black Spiritualist healing.

In her book *The Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, Margarita Guillory identifies the general structure of New Orleans's Black Spiritualist healing ceremonies. This structure is four-fold: (1) separation, (2) invocation, (3) identification, and (4) reintegration<sup>49</sup>. In the separation stage, 'sick' congregants are invited at the front of the ceremony hall, physically separating them from other 'healthy' attendees<sup>50</sup>. The reasoning for this process is complex. On one hand, Guillory argues, this separation signals the necessity of a communal purity<sup>51</sup>. However, the close interplay of the spiritual world on these separated congregants gestures at an alternative reading. Namely, separation articulates the parameters and boundaries of the *spirit's* or a particular spirit's healing work<sup>52</sup>.

This work commences in full swing during the ritual's invocation and identification stages. During these stages, the *spirit* or particular spirits manifest themselves in the

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<sup>49</sup> Guillory, *The Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> Guillory, *The Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, 73.

<sup>51</sup> Guillory, *The Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Note that when I use *spirit*, I am referring to the spiritual world generally. Otherwise, my use of 'spirit' refers to particular spirits or what the Spiritualists call 'spirit guides.'

congregation hall. Their presence is recognized by the medium, who possesses skills in recognizing and speaking to the spirits present. Through conversing with these spirits, the medium attains the treatment for each sick congregant. When this diagnosis is complete, and the medium issues their spirit-revealed prescriptions, the ‘sick’ congregants are ushered back into the crowd in the final reintegration stage of the liturgy.

The trance, as the primary means of communicating with the supernatural, is a feature of the second and third stages of the healing ceremony. Here, it serves two main purposes: (1) to affectively announce the presence of the spiritual world and (2) to provide a conduit for prophecy. Here, the trance has both a symbolic and affective character. Symbolically, the commencement of the trance gestures toward the real presence of the divine. Additionally, the trance has to make this presence comprehensible to its human participants. In essence, the trance has to induce an affect that communicates on behalf of the divine. The need for the trance to symbolize and materialize the spirit world is similar to the role of signifier and signified in the process of creating language. In the trance, meaning is transmitted in the interplay of material phenomena and the spirits represented by these phenomena. In a sense, the trance is the linguistic glue that links “healing and prophecy.”<sup>53</sup>

If the trance allows for a language of healing, then it’s effect on individual congregants reveals how this language operates. In a trance, the self gives way to the spirit. The spirit, as one congregant notes, “overshadows you.”<sup>54</sup> The result of this overshadowing is conspicuous. The possessed congregant takes on the forms and mannerisms of the spirit they are possessed by. If, for instance, a congregant is being touched by Black Hawk, they “act as an Indian.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 131.

<sup>55</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 131.

Prima facie, the loss of self in the act of trance may signal a loss of subjectivity – the possessed congregant becomes an object, the spirit. However, I argue that this assumption is false. Though congregants cede themselves to the spirit, they still maintain the ability to consciously interact with the world. As Reverend Johnson states, members need to know how to “[work] with [their] spirit.”<sup>56</sup> The ability to “work” a spirit, to essentially direct the spirit, contradicts readings of trance that claim that the ritual destroys subjectivity. This presents a dilemma: If members lose themselves, but not their subjectivities, during trance, how does trance alter congregants’ experiences?

I argue that the trance endows its practitioners with *pure subjectivity*. By *pure subjectivity*, I mean a state of interacting with the world where one’s immediate experience resists interpretation by or reference to one’s conception of self. This state is similar to Carl Jung’s framework of the psyche, albeit with significant differences.

The Jungian framework severs being into three separate, but interacting domains: the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. The ego, to Jung, is the “center of the field of consciousness” responsible for conscious “personal acts.”<sup>57</sup> In a sense, the ego is analogous to the ‘self.’ It creates the frameworks that allows an individual to be self-aware of the decisions they make. The personal unconscious is a level of being that hovers above the realm of conscious choice. It is composed of an individual’s repressed memories, most often formed in childhood. While an individual may not be aware of these memories, they shape one’s actions and drives in a subterranean manner. The final domain of Jung’s framework of being is the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious, for Jung, represents the metaphysical and

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<sup>56</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Harris, ed., *The Quotable Jung*, 33.

immaterial laws and structures that complete our existence. This realm is composed of different, general archetypes that drive human behavior.

The telos of Jung's anthropology is 'individuation.' By individuation, Jung refers to the process of "integrating" the conscious and unconscious worlds<sup>58</sup>. This integration is not mechanical, but rather iterative. The conscious and the unconscious are two conflicting "fundamental psychic facts" that resolve themselves in the process of realizing a full life<sup>59</sup>. This aliveness, for Jung, is a process of "[becoming] what one is."<sup>60</sup> The possibility to become is a function of the unconscious which, through interjecting itself in the material world, makes itself known to individuals.

Guillory has argued that the Spiritualist trances can also be analyzed as an interjection of this kind. By providing a space for the unconscious to manifest, Spiritualist healing rites and trances allow for the integration of the physical and the metaphysical. This integration is at the core of the Spiritualist healing trance's "therapeutic" quality<sup>61</sup>. It is important to note that Guillory's Jungian reading of the trance maintains the presence of a congregant's 'ego' or 'self.' Like Jung's process of individuation, Guillory argues that the Black Spiritualist healing rite does not dissolve the 'self.'<sup>62</sup> Rather it merely allows the 'self' to commune with the world beyond.

The material elements of the Spiritualist healing liturgy complicate any straightforward Jungian reading applied to the rite. Insofar as objects within the liturgy are animated with an aliveness, there can be no individuation process that, like Jung's theory, is limited to the discourse between the individual and their underlying identity. Spiritualist icons and aesthetic

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<sup>58</sup> Judith Harris, ed., *The Quotable Jung*, 283.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Harris, ed., *The Quotable Jung*, 283.

<sup>60</sup> Judith Harris, ed., *The Quotable Jung*, 284.

<sup>61</sup> Guillory, "Therapeutic Enterprise," 70.

<sup>62</sup> Guillory, "Therapeutic Enterprise," 70.

elements are active participants in the ontological processes of the trance. Further, their aliveness is a function of the spirits they represent. These spirits display characteristics hyper specific to different congregations and cannot be viewed as archetypes in the way a Jungian reading might suggest.

I argue that the most coherent resolution to the dilemmas of a Jungian reading of the trance is to analyze the trance, and the pure subjectivity it produces, as a dissolution of the self. In a purely subjective state, one's being is reduced to the instantaneous. This instantaneity does not destroy an individual's consciousness. Indeed, while pure subjectivity attunes individuals to the immediacy of experience, instantaneous experience is not unconscious. One still has an acute awareness of the objects of one's wills and drives. However, in a state of pure subjectivity, these wills and drives are experienced in themselves without explanation from any individually formed ideology or underlying framework. This lack of explanation affectively translates to discombobulated flashes of action. The Black Spiritualist healing trance, as an instantiation of pure subjectivity, is a frenzy that distorts any previously held notion of being.

This frenzy is only made possible by the assertion of a spirit's presence. When a spirit enters the physical space used by a congregation, congregants are given leeway to reject any propositions about themselves and their bodies. This a deconstruction in a total sense. In the *spirit*-fueled trance, the body is moldable. This deconstruction extends to the invoked spirit. By invoking the spirit in a particular location, Spiritualist healing trances destroy the idea of a fully sublimated and independent spiritual realm. The spirit, who *prima facie* has the freedom to transcend the material world, is locked in a material encounter with congregants.

This is what, I argue, is meant when New Orleans's Black Spiritualist healers talk of "working" the *spirit*. When Spiritualists 'work' a spirit during a trance, they are reconfiguring

their bodies by trapping the spirit in specific place and time. In essence, they are attaining pure subjectivity by endowing the spirit with the qualities of an object. This relationship precipitates a loss on the part of possessed congregants and the spirit. Congregants, by attaining pure subjectivity, lose any fixed notions of themselves. In contrast, the spirit, by gaining the qualities of objecthood, loses any degree of complete transcendence. This loss, on the part of the spirit and congregant, I what I am calling *mutual lack*<sup>63</sup>.

When *mutual lack* is read in contrast to Foucault's formulation of medical language, the revolutionary elements of the healing trance become apparent. Foucault asserts that medical language alters the relationship between doctors and patients. Namely, medical language transforms the patient, who is the main focus of observation, into a "subject-object." While patients experience the world through their personal subjectivity, medical examination morphs patients into discernable objects. The mutual lack of the Black Spiritualist healing trance is a reversal of this process. In the healing ceremony, the congregant, who is the main recipient of healing, is the sole participant that lacks a defined objectivity. In contrast, it is the spirit, who, like Foucault's doctor, diagnoses, which is reduced to the level of 'subject-object.'

The effect of this inversion is critical. Insofar as the spirit attains objecthood, its power over 'sick' congregants is bounded. While spirits can transmit diagnostic information during the healing trance, the transformation of sickness into health is the sole prerogative of congregants. As a 1949 manual provided by the Israel Association, a Black Spiritualist congregation in New Orleans, states:

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<sup>63</sup> I derive the descriptor, *lack*, from Lacan's idea of the lack in "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" (1960). Lacan identifies *lack* as an incompleteness that drives a person to create meaning. For the Spiritualists, this incompleteness saturates the healing trance, a liturgy that strips participants of the norms they believe are essential to their identity.

Heal yourself – and others. Harmful thoughts and emotions are reflected by inharmonious conditions of the physical body. “Mind not only makes sick, it also cures.” You can heal yourself and others, when you fully understand why Divine Healing is the result of definite and unfailing laws, and that Healing does not come from without, but from within man.<sup>64</sup>

Here, the link between pure subjectivity and congregants’ healing prerogative is clear. Changing one’s thinking of immediate experience is a license to “heal [oneself]” independently of the prescriptions of a medical authority. Pure subjectivity, as a state where being is undefined, is the conduit by which the healing trance affords congregants the possibility of wholeness. Further, the indefinite nature of pure subjectivity restricts the possibility of any healing on the part of a spirit to be concrete and unchallenged. Ultimately, while a spirit can speak on the nature of reality, its edicts are only true if the entranced congregant, through personal “faith,” accepts this reality. In essence, the trance is a discursive, rather than domineering, phenomenon. During the trance, meaning is created by the actions of equal agents that possess different objectives and experiences. As a result, the messages of a trance are constantly up for interpretation. The trance is a conversation that emerges from the mutable contact of the material and immaterial. This contact creates a significant possibility: the destruction and recreation of normative identities and truths. Unlike in language, where set rules dominate the ability of subjects to engage with each other, the trance – by nature of its conversive quality – allows practitioners to subvert and recreate the rules of engagement. This freedom drastically alters the power dynamics within the trance. If all healing trance practitioners can determine the rules of spiritual contact, then it is impossible for any single participant (medium, congregant, or spirit) to unilaterally impose

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<sup>64</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 161.

normative constraints on another participant. The removal of these constraints forces the process of ascertaining truth within the trance to be collaborative. I am calling this collaborative meaning making, *co-figuration*. Co-figuration makes the trance a radical hermeneutic process. Unlike most hermeneutic processes that enable a clear hierarchy of power, co-figuration derives from an equality that locates the power to heal in all facets of human and non-human existence. Both co-figuration and mutual lack illustrate how the trance destabilizes normative conceptions of healing and medical authority.

To understand the effects of this destabilization, this thesis seeks to understand the ways that Black Spiritualist congregations pursued mutual lack and co-figuration in their healing ceremonies. I argue that three aesthetic trends in New Orleans's Black Spiritualist healing rites illustrate the phenomenon of mutual lack and co-figuration: (1) the racialization of Spiritualist iconography, (2) the gendered performances of Spiritualist healing mediums<sup>65</sup>, and (3) the ability of mundane objects to become objects of veneration (a process I am calling *iconographical spontaneity*). Each of these trends highlight additional possibilities that extend from New Orleans's Black Spiritualists' re-interpretation of medical language and the healing process.

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<sup>65</sup> I will pay special attention to the power dynamics of these performances in chapter three.

### **The Exaltation of Black Hawk: The Racial Aesthetics of *Mutual Annihilation***

An altar sits in the middle of a dimly lit shopping front church in industrial New Orleans. Its shape is inconspicuous. Its clothing is flamboyant. A “teepee made of thin skates” is shawled upon the sculpted shoulders of a gaudy and masculine bust<sup>66</sup>. As far as artistic representations go, there is no question that the man depicted on the altar is an “Indian” man, a warrior of sorts<sup>67</sup>. Incense “[burns] at [his] base” and the crackle of the evening’s lightning protrudes from his artificial mouth<sup>68</sup>. He is alive. Someway, somehow. This alone is guaranteed by the humble silence of the evening’s congregation, twelve attendees, who sit in silence, expecting the edicts of a saint<sup>69</sup>.

The performance begins when a man, a living man of flesh and blood, enters the hall in a “flowing white gown.”<sup>70</sup> The congregants stand. The man walks. The “Indian” dominates his frame of vision. They speak. The man recounts the great deeds of the “Indian.”<sup>71</sup> The “Indian” remains silent. The man continues his panegyric. There is still no response. Perhaps the “Indian” is unamused. The man gesticulates, each movement more frantic than the other. If the “Indian” is unamused, then a more energetic display may wake him up. The man ceases to speak. He shouts. Louder. Even louder. The congregants wait. Outside, rumbles and sparks announce the continuation of the evening’s storm. That is, until a final percussive snap. The lights go out<sup>72</sup>. To those in the room, the omen is clear enough. The “Indian” has spoken. The “Indian” is here. The

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<sup>66</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 4.

man is still fervent. He chants in darkness, dances in darkness, sweats in darkness. To the congregants, half joined in this frenetic frenzy, the man is indistinguishable from darkness. Only the voice of the “Indian” remains, and his teepee, lit by the citrus hues of a small array of candles. For the congregants and the man, it’s total destruction. An understandable cost. They have, of course, decided to commune with Black Hawk, and Black Hawk is a commanding spirit who demands you give all.

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The scenes described are a regular occurrence in the many Black Spiritualist churches that operate in New Orleans. Across these congregations, Black Hawk is a popular saint and spiritual figure. He has retained this popularity since the establishment of the first Black Spiritualist congregations in the city during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Prima facie*, his inclusion in the pantheon of the city’s Black Spiritualists is not so unsurprising. As has been discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Black Spiritualism emerged as a syncretism of African, Christian, and Indigenous traditions. A noted warrior and political figure, Black Hawk would have been a popular character within Indigenous communities preceding the creation of Black Spiritualism. Consequently, his importance to Black Spiritualists is most clearly a result of Black Spiritualist healing mediums consistently interacting with Native communities throughout the city.

However, while Black Hawk’s presence in Black Spiritualist tradition has a clear historical explanation, the various aesthetic elements of his veneration prove to be more difficult for scholars to contextualize. New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists used a wide array of artistic and performative techniques to summon the spirit of Black Hawk during their ceremonies. The trance, which the previous chapter asserted as the stage where the immaterial and material worlds combined, was the primary ritual used by Black Spiritualist mediums to aesthetically

represent Black Hawk. Elements of the Black Hawk trance speak to the aesthetic complexity of Black Hawk's work in Black Spiritualist life. Black Hawk trances often employed iconography that blended the multiple religious elements of the Black Spiritualists. Black Hawk altars, for instance, often included mini busts of the Virgin Mary in addition to West African textiles<sup>73</sup>. Further, Black Hawk trances yielded performances that interpreted Black Hawk in novel and contradictory lenses. Mediums who were ridden by Black Hawk, for example could present themselves calmly or erratically depending on the demands of a particular ceremony<sup>74</sup>.

The underlying presence of race, both aesthetically and ideologically, is starkly apparent when considering the complexity of Black Hawk's representation within Black Spiritualist liturgies. While the imagery of the Black Hawk trance was multi-dimensional, all representations of Black Hawk centered around racially legitimizing Black Hawk. If a congregant or medium was touched by Black Hawk, they needed to display the traits of an "Indian."<sup>75</sup> The necessity of race as an aesthetic feature of the Black Hawk trance derived from the need of Spiritualist mediums to confirm his presence to themselves and their flock.

Black Hawk's wider societal popularity made this task quite difficult. As a cult figure in the minds of many Americans, Black Hawk's Indianness was the site of a highly contested discourse. In one sense, Black Hawk's defiance of the US government during his lifetime marked him as an untamable figure resistant to the project of Manifest Destiny. In contrast, his wide erudition and his admiration by both regular individuals and the political class granted Black Hawk a particular nobility. Both Black Spiritualists and other Spiritualist movements played with

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<sup>73</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 123. Also see, Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 86.

<sup>74</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 35-39.

<sup>75</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 131.

these poles of Black Hawk's popular character to signify his continued presence following his death.

Some scholars have argued that this balancing act yielded representations of Black Hawk that radically pacified perceptions of Indigenous culture. For instance, early Spiritualist mediums represented Black Hawk as a calm and verbose spirit<sup>76</sup>. Mediums who were ridden by Black Hawk often began to speak beautiful prose. Black Hawk transferred a certain poetics in his touch. Further, the femininity of many Spiritualist mediums lent Black Hawk a masculinity that largely withheld from Indigenous men in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America<sup>77</sup>. When a female medium called upon Black Hawk, she was granting him the authority to invade and control her bodily and mental faculties<sup>78</sup>. In essence, representations of Black Hawk's "Indianness" were also imbued with deeper, erotic connotations.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will not solely explore the various debates that Spiritualist liturgy spawned regarding Black Hawk's Indianness. Rather, I am also interested in the other elements of Black Hawk's representation in Black Spiritualist liturgy. Firstly, I am interested in how Black Hawk adopted a certain 'Blackness' during Black Spiritualist trances. Though Black Hawk was Indigenous, he was invoked in Black bodies and material statutes that bear the mark of traditionally Black aesthetic features. How does Black Hawk become Black in Black Spiritualist trances?

Additionally, I am interested in how Black Hawk's 'Blackness' during the trance affects the trance's ability to disseminate knowledge. I want to particularly focus on the Black Hawk trance in the context of the healing ceremony. As the previous chapter established, the healing

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<sup>76</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 35.

<sup>77</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 33-34.

<sup>78</sup> I discuss the gendered stakes of this phenomenon in chapter three.

trance provides Black Spiritualists with an avenue to speak medically. If the healing trance produces medical language, then does Black Hawk's assumed Blackness alter or aid this linguistic process?

My answer to this latter question is an unequivocal yes. Black Hawk's Blackness is an aesthetic feature that contributes to the ability of his invocation to prompt medical speech I will show this phenomenon by arguing that Black Hawk's assumed Blackness precipitates the process of mutual annihilation. By becoming Black, Black Hawk allows the largely Black congregation of Spiritualist mediums to muddy the racial fixations of their bodies. This allows Black congregants to deal with the effects of race on their psyche and physical health. Black Hawk's Blackness places the pathological associations of Blackness up for continued debate. This reverses the medical discourses surrounding race and Blackness. To argue my point, I will first begin by detailing the history of Black Hawk and recounting his sublimation into a saint.

### **The Makings of a Spirit**

Black Hawk is a figure whose exploits straddle myth and fact. He was born in 1767 in the boundaries of the Sac Nation<sup>79</sup>. A man of exceptional physical and political ability, he became a prominent leader of the Sac people as a young adult<sup>80</sup>. He never forgave US officials for a series of violent treaty signings and opted to fight for the British during the War of 1812<sup>81</sup>. Though the result of the war was a pyrrhic victory for the American government, Black Hawk would continue hostilities with federal troops on the American frontier. Nearly twenty years after the War of 1812, Black Hawk sought to defend traditional Sac lands in a conflict named after him,

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<sup>79</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 22.

the Black Hawk War (1832)<sup>82</sup>. Having been captured after the war, he would never return to his ancestral homeland. While being held in Fort Armstrong, Black Hawk relayed his autobiography to government interpreters<sup>83</sup>.

It was this autobiography which immortalized Black Hawk into the depths of the American imagination. The autobiography's popularity was due in part to the Indian tropes it played upon. Black Hawk is portrayed as a "formidable" and masculine Indian chief<sup>84</sup>. His life's work is asserted as the defense of traditional "Indian" values against an American government that is "[deceptive] and [cruel]."<sup>85</sup> Black Hawk's militant persona mirrored the aggressiveness associated with the Indigenous peoples of the American frontier. His strength combined with his adherence to traditional Indigenous practice was a course of curiosity to an American public with little interaction with the American West.

This curiosity solidified itself in the plethora of publications that repeatedly reviewed the autobiography. These prominent publications include "the North American Review, the American Quarterly Review, Hesperian, and New England Magazine."<sup>86</sup> Columnists and reviewers in each of these publications praised the book for portraying a clear description of Native life. Further, columnists long after the book's publishing and the death of Black Hawk were even sympathetic to Black Hawk's plight, with one Harper's article criticizing treaties made with Indigenous nations as the schemes of "designing agents and rapacious traders, speculators, and interpreters."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 22.

<sup>84</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 24.

<sup>85</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 23.

What gave this largely white, American audience a reason to view Black Hawk's book, and the tropes it contained, as an authentic and true source of information? In one sense, the fact that the work was produced by Black Hawk himself lent credence to the work's content. The autobiographical nature of the book gave it the identity of a primary source, so to speak, that could be extrapolated to describe all of Indigenous life. Further, his focus on American injustice was appealing to a readership concerned with defining the ideals of American life and governance. In this way, Black Hawk's autobiography had a similar relationship to the American public as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), whose documentation of slave life prompted heated reflection among readers.

While it is clear that Black Hawk's autobiography was the source of lively discourse in American print culture, Black Hawk's mythos also saturated non-print elements of American cultural life. Black Hawk's noble dispositions attracted the interest of Americans who sought to encounter him in public as he toured the eastern seaboard of the country<sup>88</sup>. Crowds eagerly flocked to witness Black Hawk's glorious processions<sup>89</sup>. Interest in Black Hawk was so pronounced that even President Andrew Jackson, who at the time was implementing the Indian Removal Act (1830), opted to take a different travel route during his tours of the nation<sup>90</sup>. Further, Black Hawk remained a popular archetype in fairs and theatrical productions. These events displayed Black Hawk as a noble hero and complicated the descriptions of Indigenous peoples promoted by the US government. To the American public, Black Hawk, through his admirable qualities and assertive disposition, was establishing a new aesthetic framework for understanding who an "Indian" was.

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<sup>88</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 26.

<sup>89</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 26.

Many mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Spiritualist mediums experimented with this framework to legitimize their religious claims. From its outset, Spiritualism as a religious sensibility asserted the immediacy of the spiritual world. Different figures possessed the ability to transcend death and remain alive in a “[ghost]” like way<sup>91</sup>. Upon his death in 1838, Black Hawk was initiated into this pantheon of spiritual ghosts. However, to legitimize his presence to a laity already familiar with his life story, 19<sup>th</sup> century mediums had to develop a sophisticated set of imagery that remained true to Black Hawk’s larger mythos. This imagery encompassed racial and gendered beliefs about Black Hawk. On one hand, 19<sup>th</sup> century mediums used Native materials and clothing in their iconography and performances. Black Hawk’s statues and icons were decorated in Indigenous clothing and mediums spoke like Black Hawk during his apparitions. This speech, in contrast to other caricatures of Indigenous peoples, was calm and eloquent<sup>92</sup>. Additionally, mediums, who were mostly female, used their gender to emphasize Black Hawk’s masculinity. Black Hawk was a potent spirit who could, through his own force, inhabit any space he chose. As he inhabited the consciousness of female mediums during the trance, the masculine nature of his authority became highly evident. In a culture where manliness was defined by an ideological and material authority over female bodies, Black Hawk’s ability to strip female mediums of their autonomy signified that his spirit was a powerful, masculine spirit. Here, by using images, speech, and gender, Spiritualist mediums used the interplay of personal attributes and Black Hawk’s mythologized traits to create novel representations of Black Hawk.

This relationship extended to New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualist mediums possessed an abundant well spring of knowledge regarding Black Hawk

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<sup>91</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 27.

<sup>92</sup> Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, 35.

and his exploits. Mother Leafy Anderson, the medium credited with founding New Orleans's first Black Spiritualist congregation, learned about Black Hawk through the various circus shows of the urban American North<sup>93</sup>. She claimed that Black Hawk told her to create a Spiritualist congregation in the city as a means of venerating his power and authority<sup>94</sup>. While this veneration maintained similar dynamics to Black Hawk's veneration by 19<sup>th</sup> century Spiritualists, it contained a notable aesthetic addition: elements of African and Black American culture. Mediums like Anderson and her numerous disciples played a delicate performative balance when interacting with the spirit of Black Hawk. In their invocations of Black Hawk, New Orleans's Black Spiritualists needed to show Black Hawk's Indianness to stay consistent with the perceptions of their congregants. However, they needed to also display Black Hawk in relation to Black symbols to stay relevant to their largely Black audiences. This spawned an aesthetic tradition that merged Blackness and Indianness. The next section of this chapter examines this tradition.

### **The Black Hawk Altar Examined**

An image of a Black Hawk altar is presented in figure 1. The photo is somewhat recent, stemming from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The recency of the photo reveals a difficulty in analyzing Black Hawk's importance to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualists. Because few photographic sources of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Spiritual churches exist, scholars must compare and contrast recent images and historical descriptions of Black Spiritualist liturgical art to fully analyze the aesthetic

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<sup>93</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 68.

<sup>94</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 69.

elements of particular churches. This is work done on the basis of informed judgement rather than rigid method.

The elements of figure 1 align with the traditional descriptions of Black Hawk altars in sources from the 1930s. These sources describe Black Hawk altars that contain elements of Indigeneity laid over a statue or bust of Black Hawk. Further, the incorporation of non-adjacent religious imagery – in this case, the icons of Jesus, Mary, and the African clothing worn by the priestly couple – would have been a typical format for iconographic displays in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A clear example of this phenomenon is the liturgical practice of Mother Catherine Seals detailed in the Federal Writers Project's 1935 *Guidebook to New Orleans*.

I want to pay particular attention to the different types of symbols in figure 1. Though Black Hawk appears in traditional Indigenous attire, he is flanked by Western European Christian symbols (The traditional busts of Christ and Mary). This contrast begs a larger question: Can Black Hawk retain his Indianness and exist in a spatial domain that not Indigenous? This question extends to consideration of the mediums' outfits. These outfits, adorned with African patterns and stylistic motifs, mark the mediums as Black on an aesthetic level separate from racial phenotype. Does the fact that they attend to the Black Hawk shrine in African presentation alter the Indianness of Black Hawk?

Certainly, the answer to both questions is yes. By placing Black Hawk in contact with other non-Indian actors, the altar provokes uncertainty about Black Hawk's Indian appearance. Black Hawk is notably out of place. Despite possessing the traditional garbs of an Indigenous man, he is not in the spatial context of an Indigenous man. While this spatial mismatch may in fact elevate his Indianness, it has the additional effect of making his presence seem manufactured. As an Indian man in a non-Indian space, Black Hawk appears as a simulated,

rather than real feature of the altar. His adornment, amidst the different adjacent materials, is consequently costume-like.

The crafted nature of Black Hawk's aesthetic within the altar has two important effects. Firstly, it severs the real spiritual nature of Black Hawk from his presentation. If his presentation is manufactured, then one cannot truly ascertain Black Hawk's immediate location. This gives him a spirit-like quality. Like a ghost, he can traverse space and time at will. Additionally, this separation between Black Hawk's immaterial and material makeup grounds his theophany to the particular aesthetic sensibilities of a congregation or medium. Though Black Hawk is an Indian spirit, the bounds of his Indianness are always morphed when he is invoked. As such, while mediums use aesthetics to verify Black Hawk's presence, the process of verification is controlled by the material objects that the medium uses to orient the congregation. In the case of the altar in figure 1, those objects are Christian and, most importantly, Black.

It is fair to say, then, that the process of representing Black Hawk gives him a subjective and objective character. As a subject-object, Black Hawk maintains a level of transcendence over the congregation. However, as an object, Black Hawk is bounded by the material elements of Black Spiritualist liturgy. If these material elements contain a degree of Blackness, then it is clear that Black Hawk's invocation colors his Indigeneity with Blackness. This is not to say that Blackness and Indigeneity are historically opposed categories. Within New Orleans, there is a notable history of Black and Indigenous intermarriage. Further, the lower industrial and creole wards of the city, which hosted many of the first Black Spiritualist congregations, were wards with high numbers of Black and Indigenous residents<sup>95</sup>. Black Hawk's attained Blackness does not erase this history. Rather, it highlights metaphysical understandings that emerged from this

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<sup>95</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 38.

racial mixing. By creating Black Hawk into a subject-object, New Orleans's Black Spiritualists created a spiritual foundation that accorded to the traditions of their community.

Having established the metaphysical and aesthetic dimensions of Black Hawk's invocation, one question still remains: How does Black Hawk's aesthetics alter the role of medicine and healing during Black Spiritualist invocations and trances? After all, Black Hawk was the predominant saint called upon in healing ceremonies. To answer the larger medical questions of this thesis, one must apply Black Hawk's aesthetics to the act of Spiritualist healing. The final section of this chapter engages in this application.

### **Black Hawk and Medical Language**

Black Hawk's use in the healing trances of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists is a widely known fact. Black Hawk was the most popular saint invoked to identify and heal physical ailments. This role is memorialized in Black Hawk's aesthetic presentation. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the founding of New Orleans's first Black Spiritualist congregations, Black Hawk has been associated with a medicine bag. Often, medicine bags accompany altars of Black Hawk. This aesthetic feature points to Black Hawk's immense popularity in the act of healing.

His role in healing would have occurred during the invocation and identification stages of the healing trance. In these stages, mediums called upon particular spirits to help the congregation identify and solve bodily illnesses. As the previous chapter showed, the structure of healing during the invocation stage was a structure of mutual lack. Mutual lack is characterized by two events. First, the invoked spirit becomes a subject-object. Second, the congregant who invokes the spirit gains a pure subjectivity. As I have shown in this chapter, Black Hawk's racial aesthetics point towards this subject-object nature. He is an Indian spirit whose Indianness is

dictated by the racial and aesthetic concerns of individual congregations. To show how Black Hawk's subject-object qualities prompts congregants to attain subjectivity and mutual lack I want to examine a second photographic source from a Black Hawk trance.

Figure 2 illustrates a Black Hawk celebration during a healing ceremony in New Orleans. The celebrant wears the clothing traditionally associated with Black Hawk appearances. Their face is cold and austere, as if they are stuck in a continuous loop of thought. The congregants around the celebrant are in a frenzied state of chant and adoration. The visual components of the photo point towards the presence of pure subjectivity. Black Hawk's invocation initiates a cathartic mode of being in the world.

While this catharsis is sufficient to display the presence of pure subjectivity and, thus, mutual lack during the Black Hawk healing invocation, I want to pay special attention to the racial demands of this healing trance. Black Hawk does not merely gain a subject-object nature in this invocation; Rather, he attains a subject-objecthood through the conduit of the congregant's black body.

The racial nature of this mutual lack racializes the medical knowledge produced in the Black Hawk healing trance. The reversal of authority in medical language, as alluded to in the previous chapter, gains significant racial stakes. In its reconstruction of medical speech, the trance is similarly reconstructing the bounds of race.

In one sense, Black Hawk's theophany in the Black body, in addition to his theophany with Black objects, makes Blackness a transcendent category. If the spirit of Black Hawk can be Black, then Blackness can be spiritual. In another sense, the racial dimensions of Black Hawk's presence can diminish the domain of Blackness. Black Hawk, as it were, can also be interpreted as bearing the quality of Blackness so congregants can achieve a post-racial supersession of their

bodies. Both explanations reveal a racial discourse that Black Hawk's healing trance makes possible. This racial discourse is iterative. That the Black Hawk altar presents two opposed ideas of race is a clear indication of Black Hawk's ability to strip race of its normative qualities. Race, to borrow this thesis's term, is being co-figured. Black Hawk's theophany relegates Blackness to the liminal space between destruction and sublimation. What remains is a forum for congregants to create and re-interpret changing notions of what it means to be Black. Here, in Black Hawk's layered aesthetic, the relationship between mutual lack and co-figuration is starkly apparent. The next chapter will highlight this relationship by focusing on another aesthetic and social category within Black Spiritualist ritual: gender.



Figure 1 (*A Black Hawk Altar in the home of Bishop Efzelda Coleman and Bishop Oliver Coleman, her husband. The image is provided by Jason Berry<sup>96</sup>*)

<sup>96</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 93.

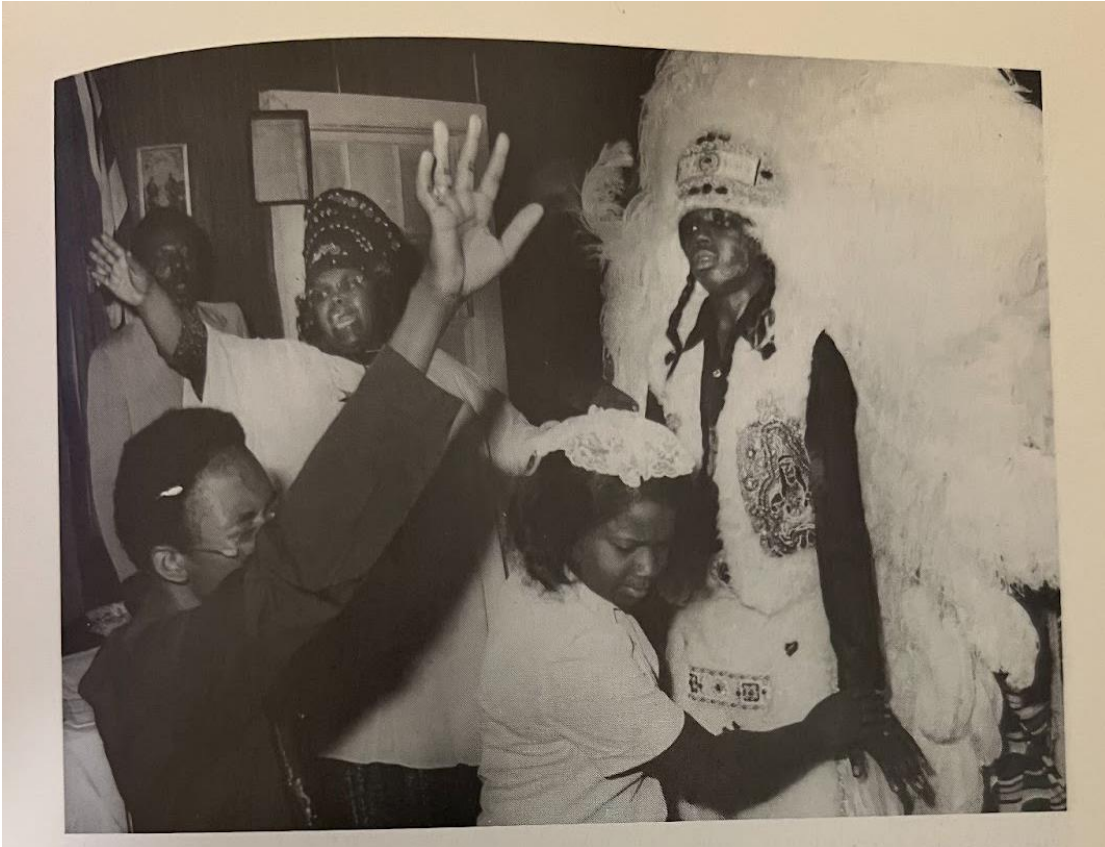


Figure 2 (A Black Hawk Celebration in a Black Spiritualist service in New Orleans. The image is provided by Michael P. Smith.)<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 123.

## Of Women and Spirit: Feminine Mediumship and Mystique

*Mother Catherine had no particular uniform. The Lord told her what to wear, and it was usually spectacular. One of her favorite costumes was a voluminous white dress and white cap. A large key dangled from a blue cord tied around her waist. The members were permitted to kneel at her feet and make wishes as they kissed this key... Mother Catherine always entered the church through a hole in the roof of a side room, intimating that she was sent down from Heaven to preach the gospel. The men of the congregation helped her to the top of the church by means of a ladder, and she made a very solemn entrance.*<sup>98</sup>

The relationship between charisma and Black Spiritualist leadership in 20<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans is voluminous. From the birth of the city's first Black Spiritualist congregations in the early 1920s, the legitimacy of mediums and faith healers was an issue that lingered in the foreground of Spiritualist religious life. If Spiritualism broadly rested on the thin line between the immaterial and material worlds, mediums possessed an active role in reifying the presence of the divine for their members. Aesthetically, this verification process took on significantly different molds. As the previous chapter of this thesis argued, the use of iconography was one strategy employed by mediums to heighten the spiritual sensitivities of their members. Another equally potent strategy was the self-glorification of Black Spiritualist mediums.

The popularity of Black Spiritualist ritual in New Orleans during the period was inseparable from the popularity of individual mediums. Black Spiritualist leaders oscillated between entertaining performative tropes and mythic personas. They were both rockstars and gods. The sets of jazz bands ushered their entrances, and an elaborate wardrobe replete with religious symbolism asserted their divine powers<sup>99</sup>. They stood at the center of meetings that appeared more like mass carnivals than a series of guarded, inconspicuous rites<sup>100</sup>. For both the

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<sup>98</sup> WPA, *New Orleans City Guide*, 200-201.

<sup>99</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurors*, 16.

<sup>100</sup> See Edward Tinker's "Mother Catherine's Castor Oil," 1930.

general public and the city's press, these carnivalesque gatherings were captivating homages to a set of often obscure spiritual leaders.

The authority of mediums was intertwined with this affective charm. For the congregants that regularly attended Black Spiritualist meetings, musical and visual overload was an augur for a medium's control over the spiritual and physical world. The most extravagant mediums, it was believed, could solve any problem and cure any ill. Certain mediums even likened themselves to Christ, asserting that they too could triumph over the insurmountable limit of healing – death. Take Mother Catherine Seals, the subject of this chapter's beginning excerpt, who gave this oration on the eve of her death: "Ah's gonna sleep awile, not die. De great Gawd Jehovia, he's callin' me to come an rest awile. But on de thud day Ah's comin' back; Ah's gonna rise agin."<sup>101</sup> Like Christ, Mother Seals proclaims her ultimate divinity through the foretelling of her resurrection. Mother Seals has not resurrected. However, her ability to incite such a bold comparison and validate her claims in the hearts of her congregants illustrates the power that she and her peers accumulated during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Analyzing the extent of this power requires particular attention to the questions of gender, race, and healing. New Orleans's early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualist mediums were overwhelmingly female. In an epoch where most religious denominations, white and non-white, relegated the theological and administrative roles of women, female Black Spiritualist leaders were, on account of their gender, ineluctably conspicuous. The awareness of gender in the performances of these mediums certainly did not help. In ceremonies recounted in ethnographic and primary sources Black Spiritualist mediums actively used womanhood to creatively interpret

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<sup>101</sup> WPA, *New Orleans City Guide*, 202.

religious texts and doctrines. In the words of these mediums, God became a “mother” bearing forth the full vision of the spiritual world.

Yvonne Chireau has argued that this overt feminization of religious life contrasts quite vividly from earlier Spiritualist movements<sup>102</sup>. These movements, led mostly by white women, emphasized the domestic qualities of femininity. Though the white mediums in the century preceding the birth of Black Spiritualism possessed the power to summon spirits, they directed these spirits towards making women more ‘womanly’ – agreeable, hospitable, and functional in their subordinate roles. The rejection of this traditional ethic by New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists illustrates how race, in addition to gender, shaped the authority of Black Spiritualist mediums. The exclusion of Black women from normative conceptions of womanhood, Chireau argues, provided Black Spiritualist mediums a canvas to create a more radical conception of femininity. In contrast to their white peers, New Orleans’s Black Spiritualist mediums asserted that womanhood was itself divine, irrespective of its social attachments to masculinity.

This boldness was performed in the confines of New Orleans’s most popular Black Spiritualist ritual – the healing ceremony. As has been discussed in this thesis, the healing rite was the defining ritual of Black Spiritualist life. For laypersons and mediums alike, miraculous cures and recoveries signified the immediate presence of spiritual power. Healing was an act of creative destruction. In solving medical cases that were beyond the capacities of biomedical institutions, mediums unraveled all figments of normality in themselves and the world<sup>103</sup>. When a Black Spiritualist medium healed, they imbedded their divinity onto the psyches of the ill. It is

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<sup>102</sup> Chireau, “Prophetess of the Spirits,” 303-314.

<sup>103</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 33.

no surprise, then, that most Black Spiritualist mediums in the city were called through visions that relayed their healing abilities or through miraculous healing they personally experienced.

If Black Spiritualist healing rites revolved around a larger, subterranean language of healing, then what do the experiences of these mediums reveal about this language? To what extent do the strategic performances of these mediums – their willingness to play with gender, race, and spectacle – shape their interaction with the healing rite? I want to examine these questions in this chapter and use the concept of *mutual lack* and *co-figuration* as a guide. If the Black Spiritualist healing rite allows for cooperative involvement in the healing process, then I am interested in how the lives of individual mediums mediates and interjects within this process.

To this end, I will chart the life of New Orleans's first Black Spiritualist medium: Mother Leafy Anderson. I have chosen Anderson because early 20<sup>th</sup> century mediums in the city, like Mother Seals, declared themselves as her direct successors. While the processes of these mediums are deeply individual, this historiography asserts the loose, but still analyzable continuation of Anderson's methods from her arrival in the city in 1920. These methods display an evolution of gendered and racial Black Spiritualist performance.

Historically, this evolution ends in the 1940s and 50s, the two decades at the close of this chapter. The institutionalization of Black Spiritualist congregations in New Orleans is largely to blame for this demise of gendered and racial play. Rising institutionalization, Hans Baer argues, introduced normative notions of gender into Spiritualist ritual<sup>104</sup>. In an attempt to shake away their more countercultural image, Black Spiritualist congregations reneged on female leadership and adopted the more traditional views of their Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist peers. In many ways, Mother Anderson's story represents what was lost as a result of this normalization. By

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<sup>104</sup> Baer, "Limited Empowerment of Black Women in Spiritual Churches," 65-81.

recentering the larger narrative of Black Spiritualist ritual on her life, I am attempting to salvage a landscape of Black Spiritualism that was, ritually dynamic and subversive. This spiritual rebellion seeps into a language of healing that this thesis has argued, is equally radical.

### **The Woman from Chicago**

Leafy Anderson's origins are shrouded in mystery and interpretation. To the well to do members of New Orleans's sixth district, the location of her Eternal Life Spiritual Church, her arrival was a fascinating anomaly. To her largely poor and Black followers, she bore the possibility of spiritual revival. Anderson was so mythical that years into her ministry she was the subject of an entertaining and autobiographical play entitled "The Life of Mrs. Leafy Anderson – Mortal and Immortal."<sup>105</sup> The play was broken into three parts that corresponded with three aspects of Anderson's life – her womanhood, mediumship, and motherly stature. When she finally passed in 1927, her funeral was a city-wide event<sup>106</sup>. All races paid their respects to the city's foremost medium in earnest. As one participant put it, "Prejudice and segregation were put aside on this occasion."<sup>107</sup>

The sheer scale of Anderson's persona, both public and personal, complicates any attempt to critically examine her as a historical figure. For most scholars, the mere act of separating truth from myth is itself difficult when writing historical accounts of Anderson. Theoretically framing the role of gender and race in her life adds another layer of complexity. Any fair historical analysis of Anderson must be attuned to the various theaters of her life and the remnants of her

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<sup>105</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 60.

<sup>106</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurors*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurors*, 9. Original quotation from Mrs. Gertrude Geddes Willis, "Interview from WPA Collection," (n.d.)

that remained in the actions and memories of her devotees. The first theater of Anderson's life that should be examined in depth is her spiritual maturation in Chicago. Most sources suggest that Anderson spent a considerable part of her early and midlife in the city. Her extensive residence in Chicago becomes crucial when one considers the historical and cultural trends that existed in the city from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chicago, situated in a pivotal position between the Western and Eastern coasts of the United States, maintained its position as the foremost industrial city of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A boom in the railroad industry following the Civil War marked the city as the shipping hub of the nation. Further, new factory-based industries, the most popular of which was meatpacking, increased employment opportunities. This increase of employment within the city was a major driver of migration from various domestic locales. Numerous Americans of different races and from different regions of the nation flocked to industrial stockyards of Chicago to find economic stability.

The migration of Black Southerners to the city during this period is a topic of extensive research. This migratory wave, commonly known as the "Great Migration," resulted from the lingering effects of racism and Reconstruction policy in the American South. A lack of federal government involvement in the region following the Compromise of 1877 exacerbated the maltreatment of freed Blacks at the hands of extrajudicial white terror groups and unfair legal regimes. These regimes, summed under the label, "Jim Crow," prevented freed Southern Blacks from attaining sustainable employment and the civil rights indicative of full citizenship.

Additionally, a culture of racial violence threatened the lives and bodies of Southern Blacks. The lynching was a commonplace explosion of grotesque impulses among White supremacist groups that, as many songs and first-hand accounts illustrate, irreparably bloodied the landscape of the

South. Tattered in blood and famished from the continual fight for sustenance, Southern Blacks hoped for an immaterial and material salvation. That complete salvation was Chicago. As one song put it,

“Cryin’ baby, honey don’t you want to go?  
Back to the land of California, to my sweet home Chicago.”<sup>108</sup>

The invocation of California as a parallel to Chicago is, as Wallace Best argues, an allusion to a rich and fertile landscape. In the minds of many Americans during the period, California represented a natural and psychological oasis, a “land of milk and honey.”<sup>109</sup> This quality, according to the song, is also shared by Chicago. The “windy city” was both a locus of employment and a regenerating well of dreams. For Black Southerners fleeing to the city in earnest, the hope of Chicago was also religious. Survivors of the pilgrimage North attributed their presence in the city to divine providence. Many Black Southerners even retained their religious traditions as newly made Chicagoans.

These traditions complicated the already dynamic Black religious culture of Chicago. Most Black religious congregations in the city were attached to mainline denominations – Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. However, an influx of esoteric ideologies slowly penetrated the religious milieu of the city. Holiness sects, like the Moorish Temple, and Black Nationalist religious movements, like those associated with Marcus Garvey, spread rapidly among Chicago’s Black residents<sup>110</sup>. But no movement spread so powerfully as Spiritualism, a religious system that prioritized the active involvement of the immaterial world of spirits in the physical world of congregants. Spiritualist claims appealed to the expressive and practical

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<sup>108</sup> Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues*, MoJo Working Series, Columbia Records, 1997.

<sup>109</sup> Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 22.

<sup>110</sup> Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 20.

elements of Black religion. The trance instantiated the possibility of catharsis and the magical elements of Spiritualism offered its adherents immediate control over their present circumstances.

The most popular narrative of the rise of Spiritualism is provided in Emma Britten's *Modern American Spiritualism* published in 1870<sup>111</sup>. The movement emerged in Hydesville, New York<sup>112</sup>. Katherine and Margaretta Fox, believing that ghosts resided in their family farm, created a set of rituals to communicate with these supernatural beings<sup>113</sup>. In Chicago the movement developed at a quick pace due in part to the First Society of Spiritualists led by Ira B. Eddy<sup>114</sup>. Spiritualists in the city spread their message in newspapers and even formed an association to accommodate the growing number of independent Spiritualist congregations. Many of these congregations were located in the city's South Side, a predominantly Black neighborhood<sup>115</sup>. Sources detail how a growing contingent of mainline Black Protestant congregations developed a distaste for the rise of these Black Spiritualist churches. One Chicago Defender writer went so far as to state that, "our people are superstitious enough without dabbling in that [Spiritualism]; the practical side of life will mean much more to us just at present."<sup>116</sup> Here, the writer's statements display a disdain for Black Spiritualist practices. These practices, according to the writer, exacerbate an already problematic level of spiritualism.

Many historians and sociologists contextualize the disdain of mainline Black Protestants for Black Spiritualists in an economic lens. Most frequenters of mainline Black Protestant

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<sup>111</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 10.

<sup>112</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 10.

<sup>113</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 10.

<sup>114</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 10.

<sup>115</sup> Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 28.

<sup>116</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 11.

churches in Chicago were well-to-do, middle-class Blacks who subscribed to a culture of intellectual improvement. In contrast, the congregation of Black Spiritualist churches teemed with the urban poor, many of whom were newly arrived Southern migrants<sup>117</sup>. For these migrants, spiritual activity needed to provide immediate power to remedy the ills of city life. Black Spiritualist congregations offered this power through elaborate ritual practices.

The activity of one particular congregation is relevant for this chapter's historiography. The Spiritualist Church of Redemptions of Souls was formed as Chicago's first Black Spiritualist church in 1915<sup>118</sup>. Reverend Mattie Thurman led the congregation with a team of other independent mediums who would assist with "readings" and "interesting tests." Here is where Mother Anderson establishes herself in the narrative of Black Spiritualist life. Sources detail how she was part of Reverend Thurman's staff of female mediums<sup>119</sup>. Engaged in the religious conversations at the time, Anderson worked in tandem with her fellow mediums to defend Black Spiritualist practices from their ardent critics<sup>120</sup>.

The structure of Reverend Thurman's church and common Black Spiritualist congregations in Chicago reveals important details about Anderson's independence as a medium. Spiritualist leaders during the period conducted private readings in their homes in addition to public readings in large congregations like that operated by Reverend Thurman<sup>121</sup>. Sources regarding the specific liturgical practices in these home meetings are limited. The prevalence of these independent meetings does, however, confirm the decentralized structure of Spiritualist practice in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicago. As a well-known Spiritualist in the city, Anderson would

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<sup>117</sup> Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 28-29.

<sup>118</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 12.

<sup>120</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 12.

<sup>121</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 12-13.

have had the freedom to experiment with different rituals. Further, she would have built substantial rapport with her largely poor, Southern congregants.

Perhaps this rapport may have prompted Anderson to leave the Chicago in 1920 for New Orleans. Like her practices in Chicago, her reasons for moving South are difficult to fully ascertain. One can speculate that the overcrowded landscape of Spiritualist healers in Chicago at the dawn of the 1920s would have limited her exposure to possible congregants. As historiographies of Chicago's Spiritualist communities suggest, increased exposure would have been attached to significant financial rewards<sup>122</sup>. Spiritualist mediums would often charge for private consultations. These fees cemented Black Spiritualist mediums as commercial and entrepreneurial figures within the community. Though, the paucity of sources renders any financial explanations of Anderson's exodus from Chicago inconclusive.

What is known is that Anderson left Chicago abruptly in 1920 for the bustling Southern port of New Orleans. As has already been established in this thesis, New Orleans was, religiously, a highly cosmopolitan city in the 1920s. It possessed large Indigenous, Black, European, and Anglo-American populations, each with very unique religious subcultures. The remnants of Caribbean Voodooism were ingrained in the culture of the city's Black residents. Mainline Protestant congregations, like those in Chicago, boasted large congregations. The French wards and Italian districts were bastions of Catholic culture. Further, Indigenous figures saturated the various syncretic religious holidays of the city. Figure one illustrates the visual impressiveness of this syncretism. The image displays how Mardi Gras, the most popular religious holiday in New Orleans, combined aesthetic elements of the city's multiple religious subcultures.

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<sup>122</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 12.

If Black Spiritualism was a dynamic sponge for religious life, soaking and collating spiritual traditions into an assemblage of liturgical practice, then New Orleans was the perfect playing ground for Anderson. Interestingly, Black Spiritualism had limited exposure in the city before her arrival. Indeed, certain sources establish that the city was hostile to Spiritualist practice<sup>123</sup>. Mother Dora Tyson, a student of Anderson's, recounted the mood of the city to Black Spiritualism: "you know how these people in New Orleans is. They think everything is a fake."<sup>124</sup> Tyson's quote displays the tensions that animated the city regarding Spiritualist practice. Like in Chicago, Black Spiritualist leaders had to defend their work against an onslaught of delegitimizing attacks and critiques.

Mother Anderson's solution to this antagonistic barrage was the curation of a larger-than-life personality. Almost immediately as she arrived, Anderson was greeted with a wave of curiosity regarding her healing practices and teachings. Her supernaturally focused cosmology, which taught the presence of life after death, seemed to provide a sense of hope for the many disenfranchised groups in the city. One particular demographic that enthusiastically latched on to Anderson's teachings was Black women, who were surprised by her ability to transcend legal and spatial limitations in the city. Her Eternal Life Christian Spiritualist Church was built on a lot at 2719 Amelia Street, a location deep within the city's Uptown district.<sup>125</sup> This district was predominantly White and well-to-do. Further, the loan for the church's construction was provided by the Italian Homestead Association, who were impressed by Anderson's "[fluent]" speech and high erudition.<sup>126</sup> Here, Anderson's ability to operate in a non-Black district of New

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<sup>123</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 13.

<sup>124</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 13.

<sup>125</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 14.

<sup>126</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 15.

Orleans illustrates her spatial freedom. Her largely Black congregants would not have had the means to reside in her locale. In one sense, her spatial separation from her congregants makes her appear elitist or detached. However, one must consider the fact that the location of her operations made her ceremonies a conduit for the Black, Urban poor to enter the Uptown district. In this light, Anderson's ceremonies were, spatially, liberatory. She clearly muddled the racial divisions of 20<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans. Further, she engaged in this liberatory work as a Black woman. Many historians have noted how Black women were precluded from economic and social activities as a result of Jim Crow laws. Anderson's rise in a city dominated by Jim Crow laws, then, is a stark anomaly.

To her followers, this anomaly was attributed to her divine authority. Their eyes were "[opened]" and "they could see" the consort of spiritual agents and laws she martialed for their well-being and salvation.<sup>127</sup> Crowds soon flooded the church hall where she would engage in weekly readings to the "singing of select hymns" and the rhythms of her "six-piece swing band."<sup>128</sup> Anderson, always the astute leader and businesswoman, utilized her mystique to create an organization of independent churches franchised from her Eternal Life Church. These churches, as Margarita Guillory details, spanned from Florida to Texas.<sup>129</sup> The founders of these churches needed to attend paid classes from Anderson to credibly engage in mediumship. Guillory illustrates how the need for certification bolstered Anderson's financial operations. However, I want to draw attention to another effect of Anderson's educational regime: the establishment of apostolic and spiritual succession. By conjoining the credibility of other congregations to herself, Anderson asserted that her spiritual power was transmittable. However,

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<sup>127</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 16.

<sup>128</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 16.

<sup>129</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 19.

holders of this spiritual power could only validate themselves through personal contact with her. In essence, Anderson's educational system established her as the ultimate signifier of spiritual enlightenment. Like the iconography she used to summon spirit guides, her body became an icon<sup>130</sup>. For her members, she precipitated contact with the full host of spiritual life.

Anderson's role as a gatekeeper of spiritual experience accentuates the gendered concerns of her ministry. If she was the bridge between spirits and earth, then her embodied life as a woman complicated her mystique. Most mainline churches in the city precluded women from the organized clergy. Even Catholic doctrine and aesthetics, which Anderson relied heavily on, maintained a well-established tradition of delineating the priesthood for men. How, then, did Anderson legitimize her spiritual work in a way that afforded her great social fluidity and power? I argue that the healing trance, a popular liturgical rite used by Anderson, can answer the larger questions of gender and authority at work in her persona.

### **Anderson's Double-Game: The Healing Trance and Gender**

The healing trance was a significant feature of Mother Anderson's development course for potential mediums.<sup>131</sup> Guillory details how Anderson "exerted a considerable amount of energy" in teaching the art of spiritualist healing to a limited cadre of future mediums. What separated this cadre of mediums from the students Anderson precluded from healing training was an identifiable giftedness. If healing restored the broken and the sick, it was a process that could

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<sup>130</sup> I use the term icon to refer loosely to ritual objects that possess the same form as the entity they represent. Many scholars have debated the relationship between icons and their subjects. For the sake of this thesis, I have chosen not to delve deeply into this topic. I only want to use the term to highlight a fascinating truth: Mother Anderson's followers believed that her physical awe could contain the magnitude of the spiritual world. She was, to borrow the language I used in chapter one, the theophany of a god.

<sup>131</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurors*, 31.

only be engaged with by those with a “restorative gift.”<sup>132</sup> In essence, healing, for Anderson, was ontological. In order to heal one had to be an inborn healer. The purpose of Anderson’s teaching was to mold a student’s innate potential to heal into the real act of healing. To this end, she taught her students how to use “blessed water” and “[lay] on hands.”<sup>133</sup> She also taught would be mediums how to work with the spirit and align their bodies with spirit’s “curative energy.”<sup>134</sup> The corporeality of Anderson’s methods is stark. Mediums wield their healing powers through material objects and physical touch. The following chapter will deal extensively with the former, analyzing the possibilities encoded in Black Spiritualist healing artifacts. For this chapter, I want to focus on the bodily and organizational elements of Anderson’s teaching.

Organizationally, Anderson’s belief in the giftedness of her pupils establishes the boundaries of her involvement in the healing process. While her students have the gift of healing, Anderson possesses expertise in the production of healing. These two modes of knowledge are vastly different. The gift of healing is amorphous. It can only be identified through spiritual revelation and self-reflection. In contrast, the production of healing is visible and real. The healing rites that Anderson relays to her students exist in the material world. They are displayed to congregants through the observable medium of bodily performance. When Anderson’s pupils bless water or lay hands on sick congregants, they use their bodies to signify the “intersectionality” between the physical and metaphysical<sup>135</sup>. This delineation between the healing gift, which is invisible, and the production of healing, which is highly corporeal, transforms the stakes of Anderson’s healing and Black Spiritualist healing more generally. For

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<sup>132</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

<sup>133</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

<sup>134</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

<sup>135</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

her students, performance is not simply channeling their gift; It is retroactively creating it. Though the production of healing is vastly different from the healing gift, it is the only process capable of asserting the presence of this gift. The bodily nature of the healing rite means, then, that a medium's healing power is revealed at the locus of the body.

Here, gender becomes an indispensable tool for analyzing the relationship between healing as a gift and a mode of production. If the body is the stage where healing is produced, then Anderson's largely female students contended with producing healing in a woman's body. This fact alone carries significant considerations. As was alluded to in the previous chapter on Black Hawk, 20<sup>th</sup> century American life regulated the expression of female bodies. Women were conceived as inferior, both spiritually and physically, to men. Medical handbooks often ascribed certain diseases like hysteria to the feeble nature of women. Legal regimes, both marital and non-marital in focus, allowed men to have possession over women's' bodies. For Black women in the South, these draconian laws were supplemented by the violent reign of Jim Crow. Black women were highly sexualized in the popular images of the South, and sexual crimes against Black women were prosecuted at lower rates than their white counterparts<sup>136</sup>. Black girls accused of crimes were denied prosecution as minors and often faced the punishments given to adult offenders. Economically, Black women were resigned to domestic jobs that only increased their wider image of subservience. How could Anderson and her students confirm the authority of their healing gifts by performing in Black, female bodies that were politically and culturally inferior?

I argue that Anderson and her students navigated this problem by using the healing trance to play a double game; Though their healing rites needed to visually align with the tropes

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<sup>136</sup> Carey, "Black Girlhood in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America," 6.

associated with the Black, female body, the trance's division between gift and production allowed their bodies to signify a spiritual force beyond accepted cultural norms. Anderson's own healing trances are evidence of this double game. Anderson believed that every medium needed a primary spirit to guide them in properly using their powers<sup>137</sup>. She had two primary guides: Black Hawk and Father Jones<sup>138</sup>. In order to heal, Black Spiritualist mediums needed to identify disease and evil. For Anderson, Black Hawk and Father Jones were necessary figures in this identification stage. She asserted, "the healing hand [belongs] to the divine spirit force."<sup>139</sup> *Prima facie*, the necessity of these healing spirits, which are both male, in Anderson's work mimics the power relations that would have been standard between men and women during the period. The male spirits possess an active knowledge which they grant Anderson according to their preference and prerogative. This hierarchical dynamic is an important feature of Anderson's performance during the healing trance. During these trances, Anderson calls upon her spirit guides to inhabit her body and use her hands to "heal the illness or disease affecting [a] person's body."<sup>140</sup> Her students also vocally acknowledge the power of Anderson's guides during and outside of her invocations. Mother Tyson, who trained under Anderson, claims that Father Jones was undoubtedly "de head man."<sup>141</sup> The gendered, and possibly erotic, overtones of this performance are conspicuous. Her performance is license for male spirits to literally use her body. With this established, a question remains: how did Anderson retain the respect of her congregation while showing public deference to conventional images of authority? There is no evidence to suggest that her sizable congregation adored her because of her deference. Further,

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<sup>137</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 30.

<sup>138</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

<sup>139</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

<sup>140</sup> Guillory, *More than Conjurers*, 31.

<sup>141</sup> Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, 70.

she was praised as a powerful maternal figure during and after her death, illustrating that her sublimation to a cult-like god did not dissolve her femininity.

The only plausible answer to how Anderson avoided this obvious tension is the structure of the healing trance. The greatest effect of the healing trance's separation of gift and production was this: it allowed the performance of trance to symbolize or signify an entity beyond itself. The ability of the trance to signify resulted in two important complications to Anderson's gendered performance. First, the indescribability of the gift behind this performance allowed Anderson to resist any constrictions of the feminine norms she could project. In essence, the range of her performance was unlimited. She could, in the same instance, be the dominated woman of male guiding spirits and the powerful mother capable of healing. Her femininity was something of a liminal experience. No one quite knew what woman Anderson was. This explains the inexhaustible stories that surrounded her. Second, any feminine trope that Anderson used always transcended itself by virtue of being performed in the healing ritual. While Anderson projected the exploitation of her body during the trance, her ability to engage in this phenomenon always illustrated her divine giftedness even publicly. This was a giftedness that transcended material divisions. As such, it is almost as if Anderson is reifying and mocking her feminine status. Viewers see her subordination to male figures while silently accepting that her feats place her in the liminal space between earth and heaven. There is a drive to Anderson's continual process of reification and rejection of normative notions of femininity. If this is a process of the trance, then every trance affords her the ability to redefine what womanhood looks like. For Anderson, the healing trance is an iterative canvas to engage in unlimited gendered play.

Here, the healing structure of *mutual lack* and *co-figuration* discussed in this thesis becomes glaringly apparent. The spiritual world, defined by the healing gift, lacks the ability to

be innately articulable. Though it is assumed to be present, it must always be represented. In the case of Anderson's trance, this representation occurs on the level of the Black, female body. The Black, female body, unlike the spiritual world, is highly articulable because of the starkness of social imaging. It is, in its normative state, trapped and lacks a freedom afforded to other bodies. When the spiritual and material worlds coalesce in the ritual of the trance, the mutual shortfalls of the spirit and the medium are transformed into a process of becoming shared by both actors. The spirit is constantly being represented and formed in every new trance. Likewise, the bodies of Anderson and other Black, female mediums are expanded beyond their visible and societal forms. In essence, the linguistic relationship of signified and signifier, discussed in this thesis's introduction and present in the Black Spiritualist trance, enables a healing process that is less restrained and domineering than a Foucauldian interpretation of health. In Anderson's trance, gender and spirit exist at the level of incessant play; both are not set states but shared and continual processes of becoming, what I have called *co-figuration*.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the role of gender in the healing trances of New Orleans's first Black Spiritualist medium, Mother Leafy Anderson. These trances formed a significant portion of Anderson's ministry from her arrival in the city in 1920 to her death in 1927. I have argued that they point toward a larger dialogue of gender at work in Anderson's ministry. Anderson facilitated the mobility of many women and amassed a considerable degree of personal power and mystique. Her spiritual persona often co-existed with performances that were, *prima facie*, patriarchal. The healing trance enabled this co-existence allowed Anderson to play a double game with gender, simultaneously asserting and rejecting its normative aspects.

Anderson's double game faded with the standardization of New Orleans's Black Spiritualist congregations in the decades following the 1950s. Baer's ethnographical work illustrates how modern Black Spiritualist churches look like their male-centric Protestant peers<sup>142</sup>. This is a deviation from the rich gendered history of Spiritualist healing, which reveals a more iterative conception of healing constituted around *mutual lack* and *co-figuration*. The next chapter of this thesis will explore these concepts in the material elements of New Orleans's early Black Spiritualist congregations.

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<sup>142</sup> Baer, "Limited Empowerment of Black Women in Spiritual Churches," 65-81.

## The Sacred Mundane: Ritual Objects and Black Spiritualist Veneration

*“De Lawd Jehovah done tole Mother Catherine a secret, an’ she done pray over dis oil. I ain’t goin’ tell yer what de Lawd tole me to say, cause den you know as much as me. But the sperit of sweet Jesus done enter inter dis oil an wid de he’p of de Lawd it sho’ goin’ chase yo’ misery.”-*

Parishioner of the Temple of the Innocent Blood (precise date unknown)

*“Evidently the oil was more than a mere remedy; it had become a ritual.”- Edward Tinker (1930)*

For New Orleans’s 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualists, liturgy was saturated with objects. Oils, candles, and holy water adorned Black Spiritualist altars. Mediums used nails, plants, and handkerchiefs to call on spirits and make medicinal remedies.<sup>143</sup> Even objects as religiously non-adjacent as a glass of lemonade were imbued with a sense of mystical presence.<sup>144</sup> What linked these paraphernalia was their mundane quality. Black Spiritualist ritual objects did not exist as pre-established ritual elements. This, of course, is a feature that separated Black Spiritualist religious cultures from other religions in early 20<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans. Unlike their Catholic and Protestant peers, New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists believed that any physical medium, especially profane objects, could activate the presence of the supernatural.

In this chapter I want to explore the mechanics of this unique Spiritualist process of converting everyday materials into ritual mediums. Specifically, I am interested in the relationship between profane and sacred objects within the Black Spiritualist healing liturgy. As earlier chapters of this thesis have illustrated, the healing liturgy was the primary ritual practice of New Orleans’s Black Spiritualists. Congregants with various types of ailments could, by their faith and the spiritual work of a medium, receive restoration. Practically, the healing liturgy

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<sup>143</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 100.

<sup>144</sup> WPA, *New Orleans Writers Guide*, 201.

offers a revealing viewpoint of the sacrality of Black Spiritualist objects. During healing liturgies congregants interacted with various balms and concoctions that promised to relieve sickness. Further, the application of these objects was imbedded in these healing rituals. Mediums proscribed and applied material substances to their congregants according to clear liturgical rules and philosophies. Thus, the healing liturgy provides a wealth of sources, from observers and mediums, detailing the various mundane objects used in Black Spiritualist ritual and the processes by which these objects were associated with the sacred.

These sources provide two avenues for understanding the ritualization of objects within Black Spiritualist healing liturgies. First, the sacrality of Black Spiritualist healing artifacts is connected to their effect on the senses. The candles and incense used in Spiritualist healing ceremonies heightened the immediate sensory experience of participants. As Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow observe, this emphasis on the senses, similarly to Haitian voodoo, turns religious worship into “entertainment.”<sup>145</sup> In this way, though being largely mundane, Black Spiritualist healing objects attain significance by effecting the bodily experiences of congregants. Second, Black Spiritualist healing artifacts gain sacrality by signifying an amorphous divine presence. Many sources detail how Black Spiritualist practitioners believed that mundane objects could represent a divine word. Certain mediums, for instance, would silently speak a God-given command into material objects, claiming that the object physically possessed this command. Here, material objects were imbued with the power to signify an entity beyond the physical world.

I focus my analysis in this chapter on this dual reliance on affect and signification within sacralized Black Spiritualist *materia medica*. Using various case studies of ritualized elements in

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<sup>145</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 99.

Spiritualist healing liturgies, I argue that affect and signification allow Spiritualist healing artifacts to assert and destabilize the somatic experiences of Black Spiritualist congregants. This assertion and denial of physical reality provokes a trance-like uncertainty in the minds of healing ceremony participants. The results of this uncertainty are two-fold. First, the healing object's effects are iterative; they change with each particular trance. Second, the iterative nature of the healing artifact shifts the standard for what makes an object sacred; in the healing trance, an object's sacrality is posited as a possibility rather than an innate quality. I am calling this phenomenon *iconographical spontaneity*. The ritual elements of the healing trance, as I illustrate, keep an object's venerability in flux. This flux allows the Spiritualist healing process to be radically more relational and dynamic than normative processes of healing and medicine.

### **Mother Catherine Seals and the Carnavalesque**

Mother Catherine Seals was an idiosyncratic character, even among a group as peculiar as the Black Spiritualists. Little is known about her origins. She was born in Kentucky, and arrived to New Orleans as a teenager<sup>146</sup>. Some years later, she contracted a paralytic stroke during a fight with her husband<sup>147</sup>. The rise of a Brother Isaiah was concomitant with her injury, and she sought to be healed by the very popular healing prophet. When he denied her his services because of her race, Seals intensified her personal prayers.<sup>148</sup> According to Seals, God healed her and gave her the task of starting a religious congregation. And thus began the formation of the Church of the Innocent Blood, Seals' prolific Black Spiritualist church.

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<sup>146</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 199.

<sup>147</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 199.

<sup>148</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 199.

The location and spatial arrangement of Mother Seals' Church provides clues about the nature of her ministry. The church was built on a lot near the city's industrial canal.<sup>149</sup> This muddied area of the city was quite far from most buildings. That Mother Seals would minister to her congregants in an area secluded from major social life reveals an element of secrecy in Seals' practice. Her ceremonies were quite literally in a profane domain of the city. Further, the church was enclosed by an "extraordinary" fence that restricted the ability of bystanders to observe the activities of the church<sup>150</sup>. Only congregants, who were themselves convinced of the general beliefs of the ministry, could access the church's interior. The grandiose nature of this interior added to the Seals' esoteric aesthetic. An altar with "fourteen stations of the Cross and banners of the Sacred Heart, Jehovah, and the Innocent blood" dominated the space.<sup>151</sup> Side tables with consecrated lemonades and coffees were adjacent to this altar, and a balcony for a large choir was opposite the altar.<sup>152</sup> Congregants prayed to clay statues of Seals that were littered throughout the floors and nooks of the auditorium.<sup>153</sup> Mother Seals herself slept in a manger constructed of "ornate brass."<sup>154</sup> The manger was constructed into another building that was adjacent to the main church. Thus, when congregants entered the Church of the Innocent Blood for services, their only reference to Seals' presence in the building were her statues. Incense and lighting added another layer of solemnity. The building was lit by "five hundred oil lamps" that burned incessantly.<sup>155</sup> In some particular rituals, parishioners would place water in these lamps,

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<sup>149</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>150</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>151</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>152</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>153</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>154</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>155</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

associating the changes in the water's color with the manifestation of a particular wish.<sup>156</sup> Here, the integration of the building and the congregation's rituals are clear. The building bears an enchanted quality that supplements the faith of Mother Seals' church members. Walking into the Church of the Innocent Blood floods the senses of congregants with a semblance of the supernatural. The church is, in all manner, eccentric, and its eccentricity marked Black Spiritualist ritual as a distinct manipulation of nature.

This eccentricity is mimicked in Mother Seals' entrances, which were crafted to resemble the descent of the spiritual world onto the material world. She entered the hall through a "hole in the roof of a side room."<sup>157</sup> On her way to the top of the church, she stopped to bless everyone. When she had settled in her normal position, she began to preach to the sound of chants and cheering. Mother Seals avoided drawing her sermons from set texts. The Bible, she claimed, was always within her because she spent considerable time memorizing it. The validity of this claim is hard to prove. But Mother Seals' rejection of physical text within her liturgy is connected to the overall cloud of secrecy that hung over the auditorium. In a sense, Mother Seals' reliance on memory de-formalized her addresses. There were no textual mediums that anchored Mother Seals' words. She pronounced indiscernible truths directly to her congregants. Only the faithful could understand and experience the benefits of these truths. When, on the basis of their faith, some congregants approached the altar to sequester Mother Seals' healing services, she prodded them on their commitment to the Black Spiritualist life. She asked one man who wanted to be healed, "Has de Lawd got His rod (curse) on ya?"<sup>158</sup> When a remedy of castor oil and draught could not heal the man, members blamed this lapse in Mother Seals' power on the moral

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<sup>156</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 200.

<sup>157</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 201.

<sup>158</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 201.

backwardness of the man, urging him to “clean [his] soul.”<sup>159</sup> Here, the effect of secrecy and belief on the sacrality of Mother Seals’ remedies is stark. While remedies, like that prescribed to the man, were assumed to produce an effect on the physical body, unknown elements could distort this effect. Mother Seals, then is asserting contradictory qualities to her healing objects. They are both sensorially effective and mere symbolizers of a larger healing force.

Edward Tinker, a 20<sup>th</sup> century American sociologist and ethnographer, observed this same paradox when visiting the Church of the Innocent Blood sometime before Seals’ death. He notes the sensory overload that surrounds Seals’ healing ceremonies. The venue looks like a “miniature county fair-ground.”<sup>160</sup> The “rhythmic drum-beats” of Voodoo bamboulas permeate the air<sup>161</sup>. Visitors are encouraged to make small donations for the gift of a candle and a wishing lamp. One guide informed Tinker that these candles were “burned spiritually, not materially.”<sup>162</sup> Here, the symbolic nature of Black Spiritualist ritual materials is once again evident. The church ground is riddled with chickens and dogs who roam freely at the feet of parishioners. When Tinker observes Mother Seals enter the church hall, she stands in front of the chosen healing substance of the night: simmered brown oil and quartered lemons.<sup>163</sup> Before she invites members to drink this brown oil, she utters a very short but punchy address. She proclaims, “evvythin’ I does comes straight from God.”<sup>164</sup> She speaks further, asserting that “De Lawd Jehoviah tole Mother Catherine a secret, an’ she done pray over dis oil.”<sup>165</sup> Mother Seals’ prayer over the oil is taken as proof of the oil’s effectiveness. Tinker goes so far as to argue that the prayer turns the oil from a

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<sup>159</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 202.

<sup>160</sup> Tinker, Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil, 148.

<sup>161</sup> Tinker, Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil, 149.

<sup>162</sup> Tinker, Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil, 149.

<sup>163</sup> Tinker, Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil, 150.

<sup>164</sup> Tinker, Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil, 150.

<sup>165</sup> Tinker, Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil, 150.

“mere remedy” to a “ritual.”<sup>166</sup> In suggesting this transformation, Tinker hints at the relationship between the oil’s symbolic value as a conduit of Mother Seals’ prayer and its material value as a substance that directly affects the senses of drinkers. This affect is, as Tinker describes, mainly the feeling of disgust. No one knows the components of the oil, and its smell and taste are noted as “nauseous.”<sup>167</sup> One young female member even experienced “paroxysms” as she attempted to gulp the substance.<sup>168</sup> And yet, despite its pungent taste, members believe that the oil will in fact cure them of their illness.

The stories of members who have been healed are helpful in strengthening the faith of the congregation. Often these stories are passed from person to person with little verification of authenticity. Despite proof of authenticity these narratives are captivating in their own right. They speak to a real sense of inequity for largely Black and female members of Mother Seals’ congregation. One story recounts how a woman who was assaulted by her husband suffered from debilitating complications: an inability to walk straight and a droopy eye.<sup>169</sup> When she participated in Mother Seals’ healing ceremony, her faith supposedly relieved all of her symptoms. Tinker recounts stories that even emerge from white participants in the church’s healing rites. A white man who had been deemed a lost cause by medical professionals in the city had his “innards” anointed by Seals and made a full recovery. The fantastical nature of the stories is evident. They are, like Black Spiritualist thought, beyond the realm of discernable truth or evidence. But despite this, most congregants in the Temple of the Innocent Blood took these tales

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<sup>166</sup> Tinker, *Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil*, 150.

<sup>167</sup> Tinker, *Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil*, 150.

<sup>168</sup> Tinker, *Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil*, 151.

<sup>169</sup> Tinker, *Mother Catherine’s Castor Oil*, 152.

as truth, perhaps as scripture. The unverified nature of these narratives seems to have only increased the faith of the Temple's faithful.

The added privacy of personal healing consultations would have added to the mystique of certain healing remedies. For certain cases, Mother Catherine would privately pull individuals aside from the congregation to prescribe specific remedies. In the midst of the carnivalesque performance of the communal healing trance, other members would not have been privy to these specific remedies unless told by the congregant being consulted by Mother Seals. This had two effects. First, narratives of healing were very difficult to contradict or disprove. Those who did receive healing from their private consultation were quite vocal, with no material evidence to justify or deny their story. In contrast, those who did not receive healing would have had to defend their narratives against the moralistic causes proposed by Mother Seals. Her already enlarged mystique drowned these contentions. Second, the privacy of individual consultations made every object liable to possible therapeutic use. If Mother Seals used mundane objects to create her healing concoctions, then the tailoring of these objects to certain individuals presented an interesting question to her congregation: what object would be assigned to provide one's healing? The ramifications of this question are significant. If a mundane object can induce a particular physical transformation in the sacred ritual of healing, then all mundane objects are ascribed the possibility of sacrality. For congregants of the Temple of Innocent Blood, this amounted to an enchantment of the physical world. Tinker notes how the services at the temple are utterly "absorbing."<sup>170</sup> Everything material element is subject to a possible interruption from the divine.

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<sup>170</sup> Tinker, *Mother Catherine's Castor Oil*, 154.

I am calling this phenomenon *iconographical spontaneity*. The enchanted landscape created within the Temple of the Innocent Blood affords objects a potentiality that is foreign to their physical nature. As the sources described illustrate, this potentiality is achieved through two conduits. First, Black Spiritualist healing objects produce sensory effects that mark the difference of the healing liturgy from other social experiences. Before healing begins at the Temple of the Innocent Blood, the carnivalesque concoction of smells and visuals orients believers to the supernatural nature of the gathering. The auditorium of The Temple of the Innocent Blood is a place beyond what is physically normative. Second, Black Spiritualist healing objects are posited as symbols that represent an invisible, active spiritual force. Mother Seals claims that anointed objects bear the word of Jehovah. Further, the types of objects used for an individual is dictated by the personal relationship between Mother Seals and the spirit. The seclusion of this relationship from the public enforces its mystique and the mystery of healing artifacts. Though most congregants did not see the physical effects of Mother Seals' healing ointments, they still believed in the efficacy of these substances.

The division between production and symbol used in the last chapter is a helpful tool in framing the ramifications of iconographical spontaneity. Mother Seals' healing liturgy displays how Black Spiritualist healing splits mundane substances into their productive and symbolic roles. A substance as mundane as oil is important in Black Spiritualist healing precisely because of its material effects. Oil, such as that used by Mother Seals' during Tinker's visit to the Temple of Innocent Blood, is capable of eliciting a physical reaction. Even objects that are not consumed, such as towels, elicit a similar reaction. One story recounts how Mother Seals began to hit a lame man with a white towel, causing him to walk out of the church.<sup>171</sup> For Mother Seals,

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<sup>171</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 150-151.

an object was capable of spiritual use as long as it could produce a sensory response. Further, healing objects were also representative of underlying spiritual shifts. Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow note how Black Spiritualist healing sought to affect the “unnatural causations” of physical diseases in addition to helping congregants with disease symptoms. In essence, Black Spiritualists posited that sickness was itself a symbol of spiritual disharmony. Thus, the physical objects used in healing ceremonies worked in both a natural and unnatural sense. They precipitated the process of spiritual and bodily renewal.

If Black Spiritualist healing severed the productive and symbolic nature of material objects, then the results of healing substances were perpetually discursive. An object could produce an affect and not precipitate healing. This did not discredit the healing ritual. Rather it invited the congregant to mentally and physically continue their relationship with the object. Recall, the man who congregants stated had to clean his soul would have needed to attend the temple again in order to properly attain the benefits of the healing rite. Each attendance would not discredit the efficacy of the ritual but reveal another aspect of his spiritual life which needed to be fixed. In the event that the object did, in fact, heal the man, congregants would ascribe a sacrality to the rite tied to this healing. In all eventualities, then, the healing object would always mean something distinct. In essence, the Black Spiritualist healing rite, by severing production from symbolism, made objects iterative. This is what I mean by the spontaneity of a material during the phenomenon of iconographical spontaneity. The meaning of a healing object is tied to immediate conditions of a particular engagement or ceremony. The sacrality of an object is not fixed, and thus, is always in flux.

This flux has many effects on the relationship between congregants and mediums in the healing ceremony. First, a congregant’s sickness is always understood relationally. As this thesis

has argued, biomedical epistemes create knowledge by making diseases and patients fixed objects. If a disease is an object, it is liable to unmediated observation. In the case of Black Spiritualist healing, iconographical spontaneity illustrates that all observations of sickness are constantly being mediated. Indeed, the basis of this mediation changes from instant to instant. As such, the congregation of the Temple of the Innocent Blood does not need to witness a biological change in a person to deem them healthy or sick. That determination is made by the personal declarations of others within the crowd or the medium. It is faith, not sight, that creates knowledge in the Black Spiritualist healing ceremony. Second, the relationality of sickness affords mediums a considerable degree of circumstantial authority. Despite the inconsistent results of Mother Seals' healing remedies, congregants still attended her services in mass. This large attendance is tied to her own personal mystique, which conveniently colors over the improbability of her claims. By being in relation to this mystique, congregants hope to achieve the trappings of health. As such Mother Seals becomes essential glue between an object's productive and symbolic functions. Even if a healing ceremony goes awry, her connection to a particular healing concoction allows congregants to step away from services feeling enlightened. She is at the center of the iterative nature of the healing object, not through an authoritative power of her own but by the unique way she stimulates the faith of her congregants.

The overarching concepts of mutual lack and co-figuration are glaring. In the case of iconographical spontaneity, objects lack a cohesive identity. They can elicit physical responses or unseen metaphysical responses. This lack of an identity is the basis of continual engagement with the object itself. The efficacy of a healing treatment is always in flux, forcing congregants to continually engage with the ritual and the healing medium. This means that health, as a qualifier for an individual, is always being formed in relation to the immediate conditions of the object.

Both the healing object and the sick congregant are creating and recreating themselves. This process of creation and recreation occurs drastically reifies the character of the medium. The medium's relation to the object is always being analyzed in terms of the healing object's efficacy. Because this efficacy is constantly instantiated, the medium's authority is always reaffirmed. Faith never wavers. The calcification of the medium's power, then, is a direct response to the indeterminacy of healing object and the congregant's health.

## Conclusion

When Mother Seals died, she believed she would rise from the dead.<sup>172</sup> "Ah's gonna sleep awile, not die," she proclaimed.<sup>173</sup> For her heirs and her congregants this proclamation was significant. They truly did believe she would rise again. In fact, they sought to bury her near a "statue of Jehovah."<sup>174</sup> This element of Seals' death shows her enduring relationship to the icon. That she herself would be a spirit that could be materially venerated is noteworthy<sup>175</sup>. This occurrence is the culmination of her work with the iconographic world. In her short ministry, she presided over a bustling congregation that believed that she could make a healing icon out of practically anything.

This power, as this chapter has shown, should be understood through the lens of iconographical spontaneity. By severing the productive and symbolic nature of objects, Seals afforded mundane objects the possibility of becoming objects of veneration. This veneration

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<sup>172</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 202.

<sup>173</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 202.

<sup>174</sup> WPA, New Orleans Writers Guide, 202.

<sup>175</sup> Chapter three expands on the mechanism that made Mother Catherine and other mediums venerable. I just incorporate this point to highlight the how the depth with which Mother Catherine's followers believed in her enchantment of the physical world.

changed the relationships imbedded in healing. Health transformed into a process of becoming, which this thesis ascribes as the phenomena, mutual lack and configuration. By making health iterative, Seals calcified her persona and that of the medium more generally.

## Conclusion: Towards a Medico-Religious Ontology

When Hans Baer writes about the state of Black Spiritualist churches at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his tone reveals a dire situation. For many Blacks, entering a Spiritualist church is associated with elements of the occult and witchcraft.<sup>176</sup> Most Spiritualist congregants meet quietly while retaining membership in larger, more respectable Protestant denominations.<sup>177</sup> In the Spiritualist churches that remain from the early portions of the century, exuberant and idiosyncratic rituals have given way to Pentecostal theology. The demise of the Spiritualist epoch is even visible at the level of gender. Male mediums hold considerable power over their female counterparts.<sup>178</sup> The legacy of female Spiritualist founders like Mother Catherine Seals and Mother Leafy Anderson is only vaguely present in the memories of Spiritualist clergy and laity. Spiritualist leaders even hesitate to associate their practices under the loose term, *Spiritualism*, a label that has become a pejorative for “[opportunism]” and “pleasure-seeking.”<sup>179</sup>

This thesis has sought to respond to the recent decline of Black Spiritualism by resuscitating its radical elements from the criticisms of its most ardent opponents. As such, one can position this thesis in a contemporary movement of scholarship that aims to critically examine the underlying rhetorical and artistic elements that made Black Spiritualism appealing for its adherents. Like prominent scholars within this movement, such as Yvonne Chireau and Margarita Guillory, I have argued that Black Spiritualism produced a religious experience that enchanted the often tragic lives of poor, Urban Blacks. Ontology grounded this experience. The rituals of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualist mediums challenged normative understandings of

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<sup>176</sup> Baer, *Spiritualist Movement in America*, 10

<sup>177</sup> Baer, *Spiritualist Movement in America*, 10

<sup>178</sup> Baer, “Limited Empowerment of Women in Black Spiritual Churches,” (1993).

<sup>179</sup> Baer, *Spiritualist Movement in America*, 10

all facets of human existence. Mediums promised – and according to some congregants, delivered – the drastic reversal of social and material ills with carnivalesque rites. In Black Spiritualist congregations, transformation was always an immediate possibility.

I have attempted to document the nature of this transformation by focusing on two specific domains of Black Spiritualist life. First, I concentrated my analysis of Black Spiritualist ritual on the experience of Black Spiritualist in 20<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans. During the period, New Orleans witnessed an outburst of religious syncretism and dynamism. As I have illustrated, the city contained many individual religious subcultures that maintained different types of rituals and sacred objects. The multiplicity of religious life in New Orleans, then, afforded Black Spiritualist leaders an inexhaustive catalog of aesthetic trends to use in their own rituals.

Second, I have focused on a particular aspect of the human experience that fascinated the minds and actions of New Orleans's early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualists: health. According to many Black Spiritualist mediums and believers, the world of the spirit possessed a direct relationship with the material effects of the body; to heal the body, one needed to reconcile it to the spirit. This reconciliation was mediated through the aesthetic elements of the Black Spiritualist healing rite. The mechanics of this mediation is central to my analysis. Black Spiritualist healing rites imbued various aesthetic experiences – race, gender, the body, and material objects – with a symbolic and affective character. While Black Spiritualists interacted with the physical world in sensorially stimulating ways, their experience of the world always represented an immaterial essence beyond existence. The presence of the material and immaterial in every domain of their religious experience allowed New Orleans's Black Spiritualists to ascribe meaning to their interactions and healing liturgies. In the Spiritualist healing rite, every object and sensation were translations of an underlying truth or relationship.

In my first chapter, I argued that the ability of Black Spiritualist healing liturgies to translate the bonds between the spiritual and material world lent these practices a linguistic character. If language rests on the relationship between the signifier, that which represents, and the signified, that which is represented, the division between an object's symbolic and affective dimensions in Black Spiritualist healing liturgies operated similarly to language<sup>180</sup>. The sensory and visual components of the Black Spiritualist healing rite, like linguistic syntaxes, conveyed meanings that could be understood by participants involved in the ceremony. However, while most scholars have noted how languages restrict the possible meanings of their syntax, the aesthetic language of the Black Spiritualists possessed an openness that was subversive and radical. As chapters two, three, and four illustrate, the meanings contained within the aesthetic features of Black Spiritualist healing rituals were in constant flux. In Black Spiritualist healing ceremonies, truth was spontaneous; the phenomena represented by aesthetic displays and objects changed from ceremony to ceremony.

This spontaneity, as I have argued, significantly altered the relationships between the ceremony's participants. In one sense, the multiplicity of meaning in the Black Spiritualist healing ritual stripped individuals of any definite markers of their being. If the physical world could represent anything, then its full meaning was not concrete. Elements of a Black Spiritualist congregant's identity – race, gender, their relationship to the material objects – were liable to re-orientation within the healing rite. I have called this instability of material categories *mutual lack*. Participants in the Black Spiritualist healing liturgy were stripped of any definite categories.

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<sup>180</sup> I hinted at this comparison in the introduction's discussion of Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* (1963). Foucault posits a structuralist theory of language in the introduction of his book. This theory asserts that language is composed of signifiers (the syntax and strings of language) and signified (that which is represented by linguistic syntaxes). This, as I've argued, is similar to the symbolic and affective divisions of material objects.

This lack of definition was concurrent with another element of the healing ceremony: the ability of congregants and material objects to iteratively adopt new ways of being. While the Black Spiritualist healing rite destabilized existing material categories, it allowed participants to attain drastically new categories. The range of these categories, like the meanings of particular aspects of the healing liturgy, shifted from ceremony to ceremony. As such, all stakeholders within the Black Spiritualist healing rite possessed an inexhaustive cadre of identities and meanings. I have called this incessantly iterative process of identity formation *co-figuration*. The co- prefix of the term gestures at the relationality of this iterative process. If the Spiritualist healing rite allowed participants to adopt new identities within the immediate context of the liturgy, then transformation was inextricably tied to the communal act of engaging in the ceremony. For the Black Spiritualists, altering the conditions of one's being in the healing ritual meant placing oneself in continued conversation with the material and personal components of the ritual itself. Thus, the Black Spiritualist healing liturgy, through the phenomena of mutual lack and co-figuration, molded identity in a process that was deconstructive and interpersonal.<sup>181</sup>

I have traced the presence of mutual lack and co-figuration in three significant aesthetic features of New Orleans's Black Spiritualist healing liturgies. In chapter two, I analyzed the influence of race in the healing iconography of Black Hawk, the spirit guide associated with healing among New Orleans's Black Spiritualists. This iconography, I argued, allowed for a blending and re-creation of racial categories during healing trances. In chapter three, I concentrated on the role of gender in the performances of Mother Leafy Anderson, the founder of

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<sup>181</sup> By deconstructive, I am referring to the phenomenon of Deconstruction popularized by French thinker, Jacques Derrida. By Deconstruction, Derrida broadly refers to the process by which the original meanings of a source are revised in the face of the source's multiple possible interpretations.

the Spiritualist healing tradition in New Orleans. These performances illustrated the malleability of gender roles within the healing rite, a process I called a “double game.” While Anderson maintained traditional gendered roles within her physical performances, the symbolic nature of these performances simultaneously thwarted these rigid roles. In chapter four, I examined the effect of instable categories on the nature of mundane objects. Specifically, I analyzed the work of Mother Catherine Seals, a prominent healing medium who used mundane objects as healing artifacts. I used the term *iconographical spontaneity* to encompass the ritualization of these mundane objects.

What connects the chapters of this thesis is an attunement to the ways that Black Spiritualist healing liturgies create and complicate relationships between people and the material world. While this focus is certainly present in scholarly work on the Black Spiritualists, this thesis has attempted to provide a language for understanding the stakes and structure of these relationships. The interconnection between this language and the long-standing traditions of semiotics and medical epistemology signals to the possibility of this research. If healing, as a communal practice and body of knowledge, provides a window into the mechanics of religious experience, then religious scholars can benefit from practical and theoretical understandings of health and medicine. The language of sickness and disease, as this thesis illustrates, is inseparable from the language of faith and belonging; Both seek to grapple with the muddled conditions of what it means to be embodied.

Recent scholarly projects have attempted to explore embodied life by placing religion and medical theory in dialogue. Programs in medicine and religion have drastically grown in the past decade. In institutions such as Yale, Duke, and the University of Chicago, academics are grappling with what it means to frame medicine and religion as mutual practices. Often, the

scholarship within these programs focuses on the role of ethics, suffering, or death in binding healing and faith. This scholarship has been, in a one sense, fruitful. Yet, in another sense, increased cross disciplinary research in ethics, suffering, and death has yielded unsatisfying results. In many cases, scholars have approached these topics by illustrating the particular usefulness of medicine or religion rather than showing how deep existential questions destabilize the divide between medicine and religion. In essence, research in religion and medicine is slowly acclimatizing itself to seeing both practices as separate but helpful tools in responding to life's big questions. However, the reality of medicine and religion, as I have argued in this thesis, is far more radical. Medicine and religion are not separate practices; They are deeply entangled. Faith and healing are fused siblings in a larger language. This language, the byproduct of the symbolic and material world, is chiefly concerned with ontology. If we are to produce future scholarship that analyzes the relationship between healing and religious experience, we must do away with the simulated divisions between medical and religious epistemologies and come to terms with a stark truth: faith and medicine are co-constitutive projects for framing our immediate being<sup>182</sup>

That this truth was so clearly expressed in the religious culture of New Orleans's 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Spiritualists, a religious movement of the urban poor and women, is remarkable. It speaks to the centrality of the Black religious experience in providing us with a basis to think about the co-constitution of medicine and religion. Black religion has always challenged the divisions between categories. As such, Black religion will be necessary for scholars who wish to draw out the ontological stakes of healing and faith. Additionally, the "spirit work"<sup>183</sup> of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists illustrates how these stakes are grounded in the lived religious

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<sup>182</sup> My focus on "immediate being" is strongly influenced by the Heideggerian notion of Dasein, being-in-the-world.

<sup>183</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, 132.

experiences of everyday people. The real stories of these Black Spiritualists supply a language that scholars can use to show the thinness of the separation between the clinic and the altar.

By basing my analysis on the historiography of New Orleans's Black Spiritualists, I have explicitly argued that the Black Spiritualist voice is a legitimate guide in our quest to further our understanding the health's role in religious life. We ought to listen to the pronouncements of Mother Anderson or the healing drinks of Mother Seals. We ought to pay attention to the magnanimity of the Black Hawk invocation or the discombobulation of the trance. To do so is to attune ourselves to the body's mystique, its ability to orient us to the possibility of transcendence. Indeed, we can say that the Spiritualists have enlightened us with this mystique in the exuberant language of statues, movement, speech, and spirit.

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