

The Spirit of Traffic: Navigating Religiosity in the City

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In the summer of 2000 *Boukman Eksperyans*, the Haitian band known for strong political and *racine*¹ or roots Vodou aesthetics, was the next to last band to play in the large out door concert at Place Emelie-Gamlin that was to end the annual international *Nuits D’Afrique* Festival² in Montreal. The popular band interacted with the crowd, calling out *ayibobo*, a complex Creole phrase that is generally understood to mean “bless you”, to which Haitians, Vodouisants and others in-the-know responded, shouting *ayibobo* back. At the end of the half hour set the band left the stage to make way for the reggae group that was to end the show. The fans of *Boukman* were not happy. They cheered in hopes the band would return. Someone started to blow into a large corrugated piece of duct creating a deep reverberating noise, sounding like a distant conch, others began to drum on the metal waste bins, still others began to beat their water bottles and chant. Creole words poured out over the open air too fast to catch, but you could hear the names of some *lwa*, the gods that populate the polytheistic pantheon of Vodou. But *Boukman Eksperyans* never returned and the singing, chanting crowd eventually stopped calling for them as a local reggae group, *Kali Roots*, took the stage. “Jah bless” shouted the lead singer as the first piece started. “Jah bless” responded the crowd.

This is how religion can sometimes be in the city—transient, variant, slotted into time frames of the cultural and social institutions of the metropolis, bound by the urban landscape. For those multiple people who do not frequent officially recognised sites of worship, religion in the city is often about carving out a niche in time and space. It is

¹ For more discussion about the socio-political role of groups such as *Boukman Eksperyans* and the *racine* music movement in the Haitian and Vodou homeland and diaspora see, for example, Elizabeth McAlister’s *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, and Gage Averill’s *A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey: Power and Politics in Haitian Popular Music*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

² See <http://www.festivalnuitsdafrique.com> for more information on the annual Montreal festival.

often about making do with a piece of duct instead of a conch, a concert instead of a ritual. It is often about negotiating continuity and change in a complex environment that simultaneously makes room for, and glosses over, the differences and distinctions between multiple religiosities. Karen McCarthy Brown explains the implications of this on-going act of negotiation for Vodouisants in New York City;

Some of the slaves who were brought to Saint Dominique although able to carry away nothing else, brought small sacks of earth. By holding onto a bit of the homeland, they hoped to keep some contact, however tenuous, with the ancestors and spirits who sustained their lives. In greater New York, where many of the descendents of these slaves now live, immigrants have lost contact not only with both the African and the Haitian homelands but also with the earth itself. They walk on concrete streets and sidewalks covering a labyrinth of subways, sewers, and water pipes. They live in high-rise apartment buildings and row houses with concrete or wooden floors covered in carpet or linoleum. When Haitians in New York pour libations for the spirits, their offerings spill out on hard, unreceptive surfaces. This problem of ritual logistics has cosmological implications. [...] Haitian immigrants are currently negotiating this shift in the cosmos (377).

It is clear that the city can shape religious practice, experience and even, as Brown observes, cosmology. But a study of religion in the city, particularly one which takes as its vantage point “unofficial religions”, explores more than the effects of the city on particular religions, it explores the multiplicity and concurrence of sometimes seemingly conflicted cosmologies that is both generated and managed in the city.

Such research can build upon the work laid by, amongst others, urban anthropologists. However, as Ulf Hannerz warns³, the development of an urban anthropological approach that focuses on bounded communities (such as ethnic “villages” or impoverished districts) risks ignoring those conditions of urban life that are not indigenous to any one group or community, but are manifestations of a more complex and fluid “urbanism”. Urban anthropology can map the flux and flow not only of the small, seemingly bounded communities that exist within city limits, but also those interconnected and transient social and cultural phenomena that seems indigenous to the metropolis. Such an analysis draws on the conditions of urban religious communities but

³ Hannerz, Ulf. *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology*. N.Y. Columbia University Press, 1980.

is most concerned with the space between those communities and how the conditions of urban life create transit routes between religious practices and signifiers.

This approach explores fragments of public and publicized encounters with unofficial religious practices. These fragments are pieces of a large matrix of religious practices and events that can be witnessed in cities, shaping and reshaping urban space, creating recognisable signifiers or moments of signification. The opening passage speaks not only to the multitude of religious and spiritual practices in the city, but also to something of the movement between them, the blur that happens when urbanites jump from one moment of spiritual signification to another, when the boundaries between secular and sacred, even between sacredness themselves, dissolve and become permeable. In the intensities and marketplaces of the city practitioners bounce from one spirituality to another—the elements of which are so dispersed they can often be glimpsed only in fragments and even then only for moments.

Perhaps not everyone in the crowd at the *Nuits D'Afrique* festival was aware of the spiritual significance of the words *ayibobo* and *Jah bless*, maybe some of them simply got caught up in the call and response of the concert. Nonetheless, their recitation (regardless of the degrees of knowingness which structured their voicing) signifies religiosity. This religiosity, arguably, is more than the sum of its parts. It extends past the specificities of Vodou or Rastafarianism into a junction of negotiations that take place within social and cultural institutions many of which are mediated, even policed, by the structures and institutions of the city.

Much scholarship has examined the conflation of ritual experience and music performance. In “Shouting the Church”, Ray Allen uses Victor Turner’s idea of *communitas*, “an experience of intense human interrelatedness that occurs during [...] ritual” (314) to analyze this link. The narratives and musical structures of gospel and other roots music are a ritualized reminder of “past experiences, collective struggle, common [...] roots, and a shared sense of ethnic identity” (315). This ritualisation occurred at the outdoor concert, not only during the performance of *Boukman Eksperyans*

or the *Kali Roots* reggae band that followed, but also in-between performances as the audience struck up their own rituals of improvisation.

These moments of transition are pathways between religions where urban traffic insists upon a shift in signification. But what happened in the time between the vocalisation of the rhetoric of Haitian Vodou and the vocalisation of Rastafarian I-ric? Is this in-between time the cessation of one ritual and the start of another, or is it a ritual bridge where *communitas*, in the city, is the coming together of disparate beliefs and the concurrence of religiosity? In Montreal, the *Nuits D'Afrique* festival expects leaps between cultural and religious signifiers in the shared celebration of all that is "African". This is part of what shapes spirituality in North American urban centres. Unification under the rubric of race or ethnicity often means sharing religious and spiritual elements under a cultural umbrella. The consumption of culture in the form of music, in this instance, is linked to the circulation of spiritualities in the urban environment. But does this mean that those who shout *ayibobo* and then *Jah bless* are simply *copying* (copy cats) appropriating those words as temporal cultural markers, significant only in the time and space of a single cultural event? Or are they expressing and communicating a deep-seated spiritual identity? If so, how does one account for this concurrence of beliefs and the movement between them?

In cities around the world practitioners of different religions share the same geographical space at the same moment in history, often uneasily, generating striking examples of the negotiation of religious beliefs⁴. In Montreal, practitioners of unofficial religions stake claim over transient times and spaces, such as those of the *Nuits D'Afrique* festival. Constricted by the structure of the festival, practitioners publicly claim their religions, giving voice to oral signifiers (in lieu, perhaps, of the more stable architectural structures of official religions which dot the urban landscape) in a temporal act that at once evokes a history and implies a future.

⁴ See, for example, Robert M. Hayden et al. "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans/Comments/Reply", *Current Anthropology*, 2002, 2:43. 205-231.

When an audience shouts *ayibobo* and *Jah Bless* they give voice to religions often marginalized in North American urban centres. And, as many have observed⁵, words such as these, illocutionary speech acts, carry with them their own historicity. These ritual signifiers, voiced in a given context, evoke not only that which constitutes Vodou and Rastafarianism, but also what it means to be constituted as Vodou or Rastafarian in Montreal. These words, *ayibobo* and *Jah Bless*, are spoken into a context generated and constrained by discourses of blackness and the religions associated with blackness. However, this public voicing of religion is *also* constituted by the culture of urban commerce that produces festivals such as the *Nuits D’Afrique*, where religions can become signposts that guide tourists, diasporas and those in-between to the concrete boundaries of Place Emelie-Gamlin. And because these words are voiced in the context of the *Nuits D’Afrique*, an urban festival, they also evoke a more distant historicity, the history of religion in Quebec and Montreal, including (but not limited to) its Catholicism and missionism, the loss of the power of the Church and its struggles to gain back that power, as well as the struggles of all other religions to take root in this city, to name and claim space and time from which to speak⁶. More importantly, the public voicing of religion in the *Nuits D’Afrique* evokes how that history has constituted and continues to constitute religious subjects in the city. Urban institutions and social practices create a world in which religiosity must be constantly negotiated not simply as inter-religious contact, but with the full social and political implications that religiosity carries within the metropolis.

It is a Thursday night in west-end Montreal. A tiny café is hosting a monthly drum circle. In Montreal, pagans from various sects are, sometime uneasily, allied under an umbrella organisation. Members organise such monthly gatherings, sometimes around ritual dates, sometimes not. Tonight the group is small but energetic. The drumming is loud and fast, the café is hot and filled with the smell of roasted coffee beans. Some

⁵ See, for example, Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster, N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1971. 170-186. For discussion of illocutionary speech acts see J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

⁶ For a discussion about religion, and especially Catholicism, in Montreal see Ammick Germain and Damaris Rose, *Montreal: The Quest for a Metropolis*, N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons, LTD. 2000

women are dancing in between the tables. Curious passer-bys pause at the window and look in. Nobody new enters the café. At the end of the evening there is a spontaneous ritual, improvised with stones from the courtyard in back of the café and a sprig from the maple tree encased in iron and concrete out front. Many pagan religions are nature based. Much like Vodouisants, pagans in Montreal have to improvise, altering their practices and cosmologies to account for the urban environment. Like those at the Nuits D’Afrique festival these individuals are carving out space and time for their religion. In their unofficial capacity, they can appreciate the generosity and sympathy of a café owner who gives up other clientele for a night, but they also bemoan having to unite under the common, but problematic name of paganism that makes such deals with café owners possible. These practitioners are well aware of the historicity of words like druid, witch, sorcerer, wizard, or Wicca to name only a few. Negotiating time and space in the city requires acknowledging how such words constitute them as subjects—perhaps restricting their mobility as religious subjects in the city—and choosing to reconstitute themselves under other words they deem less controversial.

The names and signifiers bandied about in unofficial religious practice articulate a historicity, not simply of that moment in which such words are spoken, but of a continuity with the past and a potential for the future in which subjects make agentic choices to share space or to compete for it, to actively or passively tolerate each other within city limits. As Robert Rotenburg explains in his introduction to *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space*, “In cities, people force the spaces around them to take on meaning. No space is permitted to be neutral—or homogenous (Kuper 1972). People’s understanding transforms space into place (xiii).” Cognition, even lack of cognition, of disparate belief structures circulates and create signification within the urban environment. The practices and artefacts of non-institutionalized religion transform urban space into sacred place. Imbued with multiple and perhaps even contradictory meanings these public places become nodes, conduits through which meaning passes and is transformed. In *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, Lawrence Grossberg provides an analysis that can be mapped onto an exploration of the city and such conduits. As he explains,

Places are the sites of stability where people can stop and act, the markers of their affective investments. They define the possibilities of people's identifications and belongings and construct the systems of authority in which they live. Spaces are the parameters of the mobility of people and practices. They define the trajectories along which different groups can travel and the vectors which make different connections possible or impossible. Every organisation of places and spaces is constantly being constructed—territorialized—by lines of articulation and escaped—deterritorialized—by lines of flight (295).

Practitioners of unofficial religions make a place for themselves in city space and in so doing they generate the possibility for concrete acts of identification. However, assuming that these identifications are permanent or unitary obscures the constitutive power of the concurrence of multiple religiosities (at the same time, in the same place) and the conduits that both circumscribe and disseminate unofficial religions. It is precisely this movement, this negotiation of space along the trajectories that allow for connections and negotiations between multiple groups, which manifests in urban religiosity.

In the fields of urban studies, where the city has been thrust into debates about globalization, cultural experience and citizenship, the markers of religiosity described here can function, like music or food, as cultural commodities, often carrying multiple and global significations. However, these potential commodities are at once appropriated and re-appropriated by multiple subjects and groups, all of whom interact with the history of a given local. In these transient moments of religious practice the sediment of all the various uses of place, in all the various moments of history, coalesce into a potentially transforming force. But this potential transformation of urban space carries with it the potential cosmological transformation of religions themselves. And so, unofficial religions are left constantly negotiating not only shared places, but also ways in which such sharing transforms the timeline of the traditions themselves. The practitioners in Place Emelie-Gamlin or at the west end café negotiate continuity and change in a way that is characteristic of the city. As Kieran Bonner points out, scholars often observe a “tension between the city as a stable home which enables a meaningful connection between past deeds and future renewal, and the city as an un/willing participant in the

celebration of constant change and consumerism” (5). Unofficial religions are uniquely vulnerable to the “constant change and consumerism” of the city.

Unlike other cultural commodities religions are often left out of models of global cultural analysis. Perhaps this is due to unease with religiosity itself, which is often represented simultaneously as both a subset (or counterculture) and a metanarrative of culture. So-called unofficial religious practices create links between religiosity and other aspects of urban life. These unofficial, in-between, practices can function as vernacular religions; “the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly liturgical forms of the official religion (6)”⁷. But such a definition does not explain the interaction of such informal structure with more formal religiosity, nor does it account for that in-between space in which a concurrence of beliefs seem to create new and plural moments of identification. What is also of interest is how and why these identifications are adopted. If unofficial religions, like formalized religion are, as Geertz⁸ has argued, an expression of a cultural system that engages in an ongoing process of change, then what are the raw materials of that cultural production in the city? How are these materials made available or public in the urban environment? And how does publicity fuel change? Is it possible to ascertain a knowledge of non-institutionalized religion that is a subset of a larger metropolitan knowledge, a knowledge gleaned (and enacted) through lived experience in shared space? City dwellers share experiences of a pervasive religiosity that circulates in the metropolis. And even if those experiences are submitted to varying interpretations, they form a collective negotiation not only of moments of religiosity but also of the hectic traffic routes which convey individuals to that intermediary space where the intensity of the city demands the concurrence of multiple beliefs.

While many cultures, not bounded to metropolitan locals may make epistemological space for the concurrence of belief systems the city generates institutions which both allow these multiple beliefs to circulate and controls its circulation. In the

⁷ Sutcliffe, S. and Bowman, M., eds. *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative, Spirituality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

⁸ Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

city—where diversity is collected, commodified and disseminated—a range of religious practices is easily accessible to those who have no genealogical or geographic ties to these religions. To suggest that the proliferation of religious signifiers that flood the city of Montreal is solely a manifestation of urbanism runs the risk of negating the role of globalization and potentially de-emphasizes the scope of the movements between religions and the spaces created by such movements. However, it is equally arguable that urban religion interacts with the specificity of a city's history, including its global connections. The commodification of religious markers has been an oft-cited impetus for religious and cultural appropriation. But like the crowd at Place Emelie-Gamlin or the gathering at a west end café, urbanites who move between moments and signifiers of diverse spirituality may also forge new *communitas*, new experiences of ritualized human interrelatedness. Moments of concurrent and seemingly disparate signification may be read not as copies of an “other” religiosity but strands and strategies of identification, methods of being in the city.

The Nuits D’Afrique festival and the pagan drum circle are part of the culture of Montreal, a city where disparate and unofficial religions jostle for ground. But an analysis of religion in the city, of urban religion, requires an exploration of the implications of these seemingly disparate events. Do such moments generate a place of naming and claiming that constitutes subjects with the power to transform urban space and present an alternative social order? One that critically interrogates the historicity evoked by such names and claims? Or do these moments instead articulate the reassertion of a particular set of universals, reifying them, forestalling the possibility of admitting new and more inclusive definitions of what constitutes religion? Is the city, Montreal, a place of active tolerance where the other is embraced/desired, or is it a place of passive tolerance, where the illusion of non-interference is upheld and boundaries are policed? The fragments of description of religiosity in the city in this essay are hardly substantive enough to be case studies illustrative of these questions. Nonetheless, these fragments open up possible analysis of not only religiosity in the city, but of the ethical implications embedded in how religiosity has been, is, and will be treated in the city. They suggest that at any moment, in any place, unofficial religions forge and are forged

out of discourses of appropriation and contestation. And they also suggest that the circulation of unofficial religions allows for the coexistence of commodity and tradition, tolerance and competition, and continuity and change, in the city.

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