

INTRODUCTION

I met Mama Lola in the summer of 1978 while working for the Brooklyn Museum on an ethnographic survey of the local Haitian immigrant community, a project that included photographing altars in the homes of Vodou priests and priestesses. Theodore B., a recent arrival to the United States who had befriended me during my first research trip to Haiti in 1973, offered to introduce me to Haitian spiritual leaders in Brooklyn. The home of Marie Thérèse Alourdes Macena Margaux Kowalski, also known as Mama Lola, was to be our first stop.

I had already made several research trips to Haiti, but the brief drive to Mama Lola's house was my introduction to the Brooklyn outpost of the Caribbean. As Theodore and I inched through the traffic clogging Nostrand Avenue on an intensely hot July afternoon, our nostrils filled with the smells of charcoal and roasting meat and our ears with overlapping episodes of salsa, reggae, and the bouncy monotony of what Haitians call jazz. Animated conversations could be heard in Haitian French Creole, Spanish, and more than one lyrical dialect of English. The street was a crazy quilt of shops: Chicka-Licka, the Ashanti Bazaar, a storefront Christian church with an improbably long and specific name, a Haitian restaurant, and Botanica Shango—one of the apothecaries of New World African religions offering fast-luck and get-rich-quick powders, High John the Conqueror root, and votive candles marked for the Seven African Powers. I was no more than a few miles from my home in lower Manhattan, but I felt as if I had taken a wrong turn, slipped through a crack between worlds, and emerged on the main street of a tropical city.

By the time we reached Fort Greene, a nondescript section of Brooklyn near the naval yard, the illusion had receded. Mama Lola owns a narrow, three-story row house there, in the shadow of the elevated Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. As I parked my car on that hot and muggy day, I noticed that it was the only

house on the block with all the blinds down, the doors closed, and no one sitting on the stoop. Closing up the house is a Caribbean technique for staving off the midday heat. I should have guessed that this was the home of the only Haitian family living in this North American black neighborhood.

Alourdes (“Ah-lood” is the Creole pronunciation), the name by which I eventually came to address Mama Lola, took a long time coming to the door. Theodore and I were about to leave when the door opened a crack and we were scrutinized by a heavy-lidded, thick-jowled face the color of coffee ice cream. “Humph,” she said as Theodore burst into a stream of nervous Creole telling her who I was, why we were there, how important our work was, and how she was the perfect person to help us. Alourdes sucked her teeth and shook her head in disgust at Theodore. “You coming here after I don’t see you for six month—no, almost a year I don’t see you—and you don’t even say, ‘Hello, how are you, Mommie Lola?’ Right away you telling me what I got to do for you!” She opened the door and motioned us inside the musty, cool interior of her home. My eyes were still adjusting to the dim light when she turned abruptly and headed for the basement. As her head was about to disappear beneath the level of the banister posts running along the stairwell, she said simply, “You coming?”

Moments later, standing in the makeshift living room outside the door of her altar room (a door which remained resolutely closed on that initial visit), I got my first good look at a person who was to be central in my life for years to come. Alourdes, who also responds to the nickname Lola or Mama Lola, is a big woman—not tall, but round and solid. That day she wore a loose, sleeveless cotton housecoat. Her hair was covered by a scarf knotted tightly around her head. Floppy bedroom slippers revealed swollen feet and ankles. Even though Alourdes was then in her mid-forties, her skin looked as fresh and smooth as a child’s. Yet she seemed like anything but a child to me; in fact, she made me quite uncomfortable. The fluorescent light in the basement accentuated the broad fleshy planes of her face and exaggerated the expression she wore, one I interpreted as either anger or fatigue. I quickly decided we were intruding. “Perhaps we could come back another time,” I said, smiling politely at Alourdes while nudging Theodore back toward the stairs.

Alourdes looked confused. "You don't want no coffee? Theodore is my friend. Long time I don't see him. Long time. You going make him go before we even got a chance to talk? Eh? Theodore like my child! Even I don't see him, I know he thinking about me. Right, Theodore?" Breaking into a dazzling smile, she enfolded Theodore in her enormous arms, and the two of them did a little dance round and round to the music of their mutual laughter. The thick body was suddenly light and graceful; the sullen face warm, even beautiful. I have come to accept these mercurial changes in Alourdes, and sometimes I enjoy them. But I never know what I will find when I visit her, and I still feel vaguely guilty when she is in one of her dour moods. The observation of an anthropologist friend helped: "That look," she remarked after a joint visit some months later, "is the psychic's torpor."

I went back to see Alourdes several times before the project for the Brooklyn Museum was completed. She finally let me photograph her amazing altars: crowded tabletops with tiny flickering flames; stones sitting in oil baths; a crucifix; murky bottles of roots and herbs steeped in alcohol; shiny new bottles of rum, scotch, gin, perfume, and almond-sugar syrup. On one side was an altar arranged in three steps and covered in gold and black contact paper. On the top step an open pack of filterless Pall Malls lay next to a cracked and dusty candle in the shape of a skull. A walking stick with its head carved to depict a huge erect penis leaned against the wall beside it. On the opposite side of the room was a small cabinet, its top littered with vials of powders and herbs. On the ceiling and walls of the room were baskets, bunches of leaves hung to dry, and smoke-darkened color lithographs of the saints.

The lithographs included several different images of the Virgin Mary and one each of Saint Patrick with snakes at his feet; Saint Gerard contemplating a skull; Saint James, the crusader on his rearing horse; and Saint Isidore, the pilgrim kneeling to pray by a freshly plowed field. These I recognized as images of the Vodou spirits. Each of these spirits has both a Catholic and an African name: Mary is Ezili, the Vodou love spirit; Saint Patrick is the serpent spirit, Danbala; Saint Gerard is Gede, master of the cemetery; Saint James is the warrior Ogou; and Isidore is the peasant farmer Azaka. Vodou, the new religion that emerged

from the social chaos and agony of Haiti's eighteenth-century slave plantations blended several distinct African religions with French colonial Catholicism. Dozens of the resulting Vodou-Catholic spirits continue to thrive in the twentieth century, where they reign over one or another troublesome area of human endeavor and act as mediators between God (Bondye) and "the living."

In this altar room, Alourdes practices a healing craft that has been passed down through at least three generations of her family. She is a priestess (*manbo*) in the Haitian Vodou tradition. As such, she is not unique or even rare. Rather, she is one of hundreds of similar professionals who minister to the approximately 450,000 Haitian immigrants living in New York City.¹

Many other Vodou leaders—mostly men—operate on a much grander scale. For example, I know a priest (*oungan*) who rents the basement of a large apartment house on one of the main arteries in Brooklyn, where he stages dancing and drumming events attended by two to three hundred people. In contrast, Alourdes, like the great majority of Haitian healers in New York, works in her home. Much of her time is spent consulting with clients, one or two at a time, and the spirit feasts she holds several times a year rarely draw more than thirty people. She does not usually have drummers; they are expensive, and, more to the point, she does not want to attract the attention of her neighbors. Given the negative image Vodou has in the United States, many devotees prefer that their Vodou "families" operate on a small scale.

Alourdes does have an enviable reputation, however. She has a group of steady followers who appreciate her for being trustworthy and discreet as well as effective. It is also widely known that she adheres to a tradition that discourages making large profits from healing work. Her reputation, spread by word of mouth, has led to invitations to perform "treatments" throughout the eastern United States and Canada and in several places in the Caribbean and Central America. In these respects, there are not many like Mama Lola.

Healing is at the heart of the religions that African slaves be-

¹Michel S. Laguerre, *American Odyssey: Haitians in New York City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 31.

queathed to their descendants, and Alourdes's Vodou practice is no exception. She deals both with health problems and with a full range of love, work, and family difficulties. Like healers in related traditions found throughout the Caribbean and South America, Alourdes combines the skills of a medical doctor, a psychotherapist, a social worker, and a priest.

It can be argued that Haitians are more religious than people from many of the other former slave colonies and also that Haitian Vodou is closer to its African roots than most other forms of New World African religion. Vodou's closer ties to its African origins are primarily a result of Haiti's virtual isolation from the rest of the world for nearly a century following its successful slave revolution (1791–1804). The strength of religious belief in Haiti can be accounted for, in part, by the poverty and political oppression that have characterized life for most Haitians from independence to the present. Haiti is currently the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, a country whose inhabitants are beset by disease and malnutrition. The wonder of Haiti is that its people seem to have responded to suffering throughout history by augmenting their stores of aesthetic and spiritual riches.

A well-worn joke claims, with some truth, that of Haiti's six million people 85 percent are Catholic, 15 percent are Protestant, and 100 percent serve the Vodou spirits. Among Haitians living in the United States, the few who have made a place for themselves in the middle class have tended to leave Vodou behind—except in times of crisis. But the vast majority of Haitian immigrants are poor, and these people maintain the habit of turning to healers like Alourdes for help with their stressful lives.

Half a dozen times a year, on or around the saints' days set by the Catholic calendar, Alourdes holds "birthday parties" for her favored spirits, or *lwa*, as they are also called. Clients, friends, and relatives gather around a decorated "niche," whose centerpiece is a table laden with food. Here they pray, clap, and sing until the crowd is sufficiently "heated up" to entice a Vodou spirit to join the party, to "ride" Alourdes. In a trance state from which she will later emerge with little or no memory of what has transpired, her body becomes the "horse" of the spirit, her voice the spirit's voice, her words and behavior those of the spirit.

These possession-performances, which blend pro forma actions and attitudes with those responsive to the immediate situation, are the heart of a Vodou ceremony.² The spirits talk with the faithful. They hug them, hold them, feed them, chastise them. Group and individual problems are aired through interaction with the spirits. Strife is healed and misunderstanding rectified. At these ceremonies, crucial community bonds are reinforced through the process of giving gifts of food and entertainment to the Vodou spirits.

Haitians, like their African forebears, operate from understandings of the divine and the virtuous that are markedly different from those of mainstream Catholicism. Bondye does not get involved in the personal, day-to-day affairs of human beings. "He is too busy," Alourdes told me. Instead, it is the spirits and the ancestors—neither properly referred to as gods—who handle day-to-day problems and who, if necessary, mediate between the living and God.

Although the *lwa* who possess Alourdes are often called *sen-yo* (saints), they are not saintly types in the traditional Christian sense. For example, in stories about the soldier spirit Ogou/Saint James, he not only liberates his people but also betrays them. Ezili Dantò/Mater Salvatoris, the mother, cradles and cares for her children but also sometimes lashes out at them in rage. The Vodou spirits are not models of the well-lived life; rather, they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside. Failure to understand this has led observers to portray the Vodou spirits as demonic or even to conclude that Vodou is a religion without morality—a serious misconception.

Vodou spirits are larger than life but not other than life. Virtue for both the *lwa* and those who serve them is less an inherent character trait than a dynamic state of being that demands ongoing attention and care. Virtue is achieved by maintaining responsible relationships, relationships characterized by appropriate gifts of tangibles (food, shelter, money) and intangibles (respect, deference, love). When things go as they should, these gifts flow in continuous, interconnected circles among the

²I use the term *possession-performance* not to indicate that possession is playacting but to emphasize the theatrical quality of visits from the Vodou spirits.

living and between the living and the spirits or ancestors. In the ongoing cycle of prestation and counter-prestation, each gives and receives in ways appropriate to his or her place in the social hierarchy—an overarching, relentless hierarchy that exempts neither the young child nor the most aged and austere spirit. Moral persons are thus those who give what they should, as defined by who they are.

These days, the little room Alourdes calls her “altar” feels bigger to me than it did when I first saw it. It has become familiar, its contents no longer confusing. During ceremonies in the living room outside, I am sometimes sent into the altar room to fetch a particular bottle, image, or implement. Occasionally I sit in on diagnostic card readings and ritual treatments performed in the altar room itself. Furthermore, some of the contents of the room have changed because I have entered Alourdes’s gift-exchange network. The room still contains the rock that whistled to Marie Noelsine Joseph, Alourdes’s maternal grandmother, as she walked near her home in the remote mountainous interior of Haiti; but now it also contains things I have given Alourdes. The dingy skull candle on top of Gede’s altar has been replaced by one I bought in the New Orleans airport gift shop, a clean white one with bright red wax-blood dripping over the face. Next to Ogou’s altar hangs a photograph I took of Alourdes while she was possessed by this spirit.

It was neither an easy nor a direct path that brought me to such familiarity. During the fall and winter after I first met her, I visited Alourdes every few weeks. I usually brought some small gift, often her favorite bread from an Italian bakery near my home. During this early period, neither of us was sure why I was there, and, although Alourdes was hospitable, she never seemed especially happy to see me. More than once, I waited for hours while she talked on the phone or worked with clients, only to be told that she did not feel like talking that day.

For the first year or two, my visits to Alourdes’s home and my presence at her ritual events were met with suspicion by some members of her Vodou family. Fortunately for me, Haitians usually keep such judgments to themselves, and the tension and drama that surrounded my entry into the community became known to me only later. Maggie, Alourdes’s daughter, told me one story. “You know, they had a bet on you,” she said. “Mommie won a lot of money!” In response to my confused expres-

sion, Maggie explained: "You remember that day I made a *manje Marasa* [a feast for the Vodou twin child spirits]? Everybody was suppose to take off their shoes and sit on the floor and eat with their hands, right? Some people tell Mommie, 'Karen never going to do that; she is too proud. White people don't do that.' But you know my mother, nobody gonna tell her who can be her friend. So when they say, 'Karen too proud to sit on the floor,' she just say, 'You wanna bet?' She won a lot of money on you." Maggie laughed. "She don't ever tell you?"

Alourdes and her family are all either citizens or legal residents of the United States, but many of the people she works with are not. Such a community is tightly knit, protecting its own and sharing few intimacies with outsiders. During the early years of my contact with its members, I felt their resistance; at the birthday parties for the spirits, I ventured no further than the edge of the crowd.

But things are different these days. Although a few still keep their distance, I now have many friends among the people who "serve the spirits" under Alourdes's tutelage. Today, Alourdes seats me near the center of the ritual action at her ceremonies, and I often assist in saluting the Vodou spirits. My change in status is a result of the initiation I underwent in the summer of 1981. Under the watchful eyes of Alourdes, I entered the initiation chamber in a small temple on the coast road south and west of Port-au-Prince. I am now one of the "little leaves" (*ti-fèy*) on Alourdes's Vodou family tree, and she introduces me as her "daughter." Her offer of initiation and my decision to accept marked the culmination of two inseparable processes. One was the growth of my friendship with her. The other was a shift in the way I understood my professional work.

The friendship grew despite our early halting and not always successful efforts to trust each other and to share the contents of our lives. Alourdes and I went through a great deal, singly and together, in the three years between the July day in 1978 when Theodore took me to her door and the July day in 1981 when she guided me through the taxing initiation rituals. We traveled to Haiti together once before the initiation, sleeping on the same pallet, talking late into the night, and discussing our dreams in the mornings. We also faced serious problems during that three-year period: I went through a divorce; Maggie was hospitalized with stomach trouble; and Alourdes's son William

was arrested for purse snatching. Each of us sought to help the other when and how we could.

Like her altar room, Alourdes herself gradually became less exotic to me. As the shape of her character emerged, I began to feel considerable admiration for her. Alourdes is a strong woman who provides the main financial and emotional support for a hard-pressed family. She is also a fighter, a survivor who has had a hard life but nevertheless shows little trace of bitterness from her suffering. She is a presence to be reckoned with, someone who commands the respect of others. And her self-respect is palpable. But Alourdes is also a giver, a caring and empathic person who takes pleasure in helping others. By necessity, she has become adept at balancing this desire to help others with the need to care for herself.

Alourdes lives with her daughter, Maggie; her son William, who is mentally retarded and requires monitoring, although he is an adult; and three young children: her own son Kumar and Maggie's two small ones, Michael and Betty. Often there are others temporarily living in the house: new arrivals from the extended family in Haiti, clients from her healing practice, and family members or friends down on their luck. Except for the early, quiet hours when the adults are at work, the older children are at school, and Alourdes is babysitting with Betty, the house hums with activity. During my visits in the late afternoon and early evening, children clamber over me. Haitian music pours from the radio, and the television may be on at the same time. The doorbell rings frequently, with each new arrival raising the energy level in the house. Holidays and other special occasions fill the tables with food and the house with people a dozen times a year. I enjoy being part of this group; Alourdes treats me like family.

As Alourdes and I became friends, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain an uncluttered image of myself as scholar and researcher in her presence. This difficulty brought about a change in the research I was doing. As I got closer to Alourdes, I got closer to Vodou. The Vodou Alourdes practices is intimate and intense, and I soon found that I could not claim a place in her Vodou family and remain a detached observer.

Participating in the ceremonies in her Brooklyn home ironically brought me close to a form of Vodou older than the form I had been studying in urban Haiti. It brought me closer to the

family-style Vodou of the countryside, where the patriarch of the extended family functions as priest and all those who serve the spirits under his tutelage are either blood kin or honorary members of the family. In rural Haiti and in Alourdes's Brooklyn living room, the group itself provides the content and drama of Vodou ceremonies in much more obvious ways than it does in the large-scale ritualizing common in Port-au-Prince.

My presence in Alourdes's Vodou world brought other insights. I had long been aware that Vodou priests and priestesses performed divination, administered herbal treatments, and manufactured charms and amulets, but I had initially seen their healing work as one of several priestly functions, one distinct from communal ritualizing. After some time with Alourdes, I realized that this perception was off the mark, that there is no Vodou ritual, small or large, individual or communal, which is not a healing rite.

It is no exaggeration to say that Haitians believe that living and suffering are inseparable. Vodou is the system they have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts. The drama of Vodou therefore occurs not so much within the rituals themselves as in the junction between the rituals and the troubled lives of the devotees. People bring the burdens and pains of their lives to this religious system in the hope of being healed. I realized that if I brought less to this Vodou world, I would come away with less. If I persisted in studying Vodou objectively, the heart of the system, its ability to heal, would remain closed to me. The only way I could hope to understand the psychodrama of Vodou was to open my own life to the ministrations of Alourdes.

I entered gradually. I accepted Alourdes's invitations to salute the spirits and pour libations for them. On occasion I brought her dreams and asked for interpretation. Sometimes I requested card readings. At one difficult point in my life, she suggested that I undergo a ritual "marriage" to two of the Vodou spirits, Ogou and Danbala. I did that. And in 1981 I went through the rituals of initiation.

No Haitian—and certainly not Alourdes—has ever asked me if I "believe" in Vodou or if I have set aside the religious commitments and understandings that come from my childhood

and culture. Alourdes's approach is, instead, pragmatic: "You just got to try. See if it work for you." The choice of relinquishing my worldview or adopting another in its entirety has therefore never been at issue.

Nevertheless, I soon realized that my personal involvement in Vodou represented both gains and risks in relation to my work. The potential gains were in depth of understanding. One of the major risks involved losing the important distinction between Vodou interacting with the life of a Haitian and Vodou interacting with my own very different blend of experience, memory, dream, and fantasy. My experiences with Vodou both are and are not like those of Haitians. The stories I tell about these experiences have authority only in the territory between cultures. I have attempted to stay clear on this point and even to use these stories quite self-consciously as bridges for my readers, most of whom will be more like me than like Alourdes.

My increasing participation in Vodou also necessitated changes in research techniques. Initially, I used a tape recorder with Alourdes. In the beginning, she submitted reluctantly and tended to answer my questions about her life with portraits that were somewhat idealized, though fairly accurate. To my delight, however, she was far too spirited a storyteller to remain cautious for long. Soon she began to unfold rich stories about her early days in New York, about the difficult life in Haiti that had forced her to emigrate, and about her ancestors, the healers who had preceded her.

I eventually had to stop relying on a tape recorder, because it was unsuited to the casual rhythms of our growing friendship. Alourdes would often give me the best information when we were working together to prepare a ritual meal or when we were riding in my car. So I began to work in another way. After speaking on the phone with her, or spending an afternoon drinking coffee at her kitchen table, or passing most of the night at one of her birthday parties for the spirits, I would sit down at my desk to write. It seemed important to capture not only what she said but also how she said it. I found I could use her mnemonic devices, the repeated refrains of her stories, and some of my own memory tools—such as especially poignant visual images. Beginning with these condensation points and working myself into the rhythm of her speech, I could construct a record

by moving both backward and forward and in this way reproduce accurate, if selective, accounts of conversations that had taken place hours earlier.

To these records of conversations I added contextual descriptions as well as some of the more traditional contents of an ethnographic journal. Unavoidably, as I brought more of myself into conversation with Vodou, I put more of myself into my field journal. Sometime in the early 1980s, I stopped editing out my reactions to Alourdes. My affection and gratitude, guilt and impatience began to appear as ingredients in her story, at least partly responsible for evoking her expansive hospitality, infectious humor, or sullen withdrawal. Paying attention to myself in relation to her became both a learning device (had I not brought some of my own dreams to Alourdes, I would never have learned as much about dream analysis in Vodou) and a way of staying honest (when my field notes included my own moods and motivations, I was more likely to take account of my filters and interventions when I returned to those notes in the future). Yet, putting myself on the line in my field journal and in my relations with Alourdes and with Vodou was, in the end, even more than that. It was an acknowledgment that ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship. When the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant-observer and informant break down, then the only truth is the one in between; and anthropology becomes something closer to a social art form, open to both aesthetic and moral judgment. This situation is riskier, but it does bring intellectual labor and life into closer relation.

The academic world has cultivated in me a healthy respect for the limits of the intelligibility of other people and other cultures. Most of the time, whether I am working in Haiti or visiting Alourdes in Brooklyn, I appreciate the wisdom of this stance and try to operate from it. For example, because I assume that I do not always understand what is going on, my tolerance levels are higher when I am with Haitians than when I am with, for example, my university colleagues. Because reaction always presupposes interpretation, I will sit and wait longer, put up with more delay and chaos, and generally bend more when I am with Alourdes and her family than I would with my own family. Nevertheless, I have thought many times that academics

have overemphasized those things that separate individuals and cultures from one another.

For Haitians, one of life's major challenges lies in distinguishing themselves as individuals in the context of an extended family. The extended family tends to take over, defining status, controlling assets, and apportioning time. As a result, in Haiti, human connection is the assumption; it is separation that requires both effort and explanation. That is why a Haitian may quiz a beggar on the street in Port-au-Prince before giving alms. What family is it that does not provide food and shelter for one of its own?

To a great extent, Alourdes is a product of her culture. She too operates on the assumption of connection. Because of this trait, she is not afraid to incorporate elements from other cultures into her own worldview. When a woman from the English-speaking Caribbean came to her for help in interpreting a dream in which "Mister Bones," a death spirit, had appeared, Alourdes did not miss a beat: "Oh, Mister Bone—that's Papa Gede!" Alourdes's universe expanded, and she now frequently refers to Gede as Mister Bone. A friend of mine once visited Alourdes with me. In her handbag were chromolithographs of the Hindu deities Krishna and Kali. "Let me see!" cried Alourdes, grabbing the images. "You going to get me some for my altar?" Alourdes did ask questions (why Krishna was blue), but she knew instantly what category she was dealing with. In a sense, her whole life is about movement between cultures and about understanding and coping with cultural difference. She does not waste much time wondering if and how such connection is theoretically possible; she gets on with it because she has to.

I recognize that there is a difference between the understanding and skill required to live in a culture other than one's own and the understanding and skill required to write about such a culture. I therefore do not want to throw away the hard-won insights of anthropologists into the limits of intelligibility and the reality of diversity. But I do want to balance them with my own experiences. I want to give full respect to my friendship with Alourdes. It is one example of the kind of connection and understanding that is possible across cultural lines. And I want to avoid substituting a theoretical picture of Haitian culture, one with firm boundaries, for the experiences I have had both in

Haiti and in New York, experiences that attest to a constant overlapping of cultures and a good deal of routine culture mixing.

The methods used in researching and writing this book have roots in the work of other scholars. I think of myself as working within a tradition of interpretive anthropology. According to Clifford Geertz, humans are “suspended in webs of significance” they themselves have created.³ We can speak of culture in a general sense (that is, I can talk about Haitian culture) because human beings in relation, over time, tend to evolve shared styles of web-spinning. The individual life—Alourdes’s life, for instance—while open to infinite variation, is nevertheless recognizable as a version of one or more of these traditional web-spinning styles we call cultures. Even more to the point, such a view makes interpretation both the subject matter and the end product of ethnographic work. What the ethnographer studies is how people create meaning or significance in their lives, how they interpret objects and events. An ethnographic study such as *Mama Lola* is thus an exercise in bridge building. It is an interpretation within one web-spinning tradition (in this case, my own) of the interpretations of people who follow a largely different aesthetic in their spinning (in this case, Haitians).

A corollary of this position is that the people who are being studied should be allowed to speak for themselves whenever possible, for they are the only true experts on themselves. That is why I quote Alourdes frequently and, often, at length. In passing her stories along, I also reproduce her way of speaking—English, wedded to the structure, rhythm, and cadence of Haitian Creole—to bring the reader a fuller sense of her and of the creative cultural mix in which she lives.

In *Mama Lola*, I am most interested in telling rich, textured stories that bring Alourdes and her religion alive. Rather than simply trying to refute the negative stereotypes often associated with Vodou, I have chosen to enter the public discussion of Vodou by another route: constructing a portrait of this religion as it is lived by Alourdes and the people closest to her. My aim is to create an intimate portrait of three-dimensional people who are not stand-ins for an abstraction such as “the Haitian

³ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

people" but rather are deeply religious individuals with particular histories and rich interior lives, individuals who do not live out their religion in unreflective, formulaic ways but instead struggle with it, become confused, and sometimes even contradict themselves. In other words, my aim is to create a portrait of Vodou embedded in the vicissitudes of particular lives.

I am aware that my material connects with larger discussions going on in the academic world, discussions about such things as immigrant experience, Third World women, and even micro-economics. I have chosen, however, not to make these connections explicit. I am also aware that several of the Vodou spirits I describe have archetypal dimensions and appear in similar forms in other places. But, because I want Vodou to speak on its own terms, I have also avoided drawing these parallels.

Yet this book has in fact been motivated by some theoretical concerns. I have deep interests in how Haitian Vodou functions in relation to family, gender roles, and social change. These issues weave their way in and out of the entire book, but, for the most part, I have left my theorizing embedded in stories. To do this, I developed a style of narrative analysis in which the flow of the text is determined by story lines that from time to time evoke an analytic voice. This voice most often speaks in asides designed not to break the momentum of a story. I agree with Geertz that ethnographic writing has its greatest integrity when it stays close to the small slices of social interaction that provide its data: "Only short flights of ratiocination tend to be effective in anthropology; longer ones tend to drift off into logical dreams, academic bemusements with formal symmetry."⁴

Another sort of theoretical argument is implicit in the structure of the book, a structure designed to make its own point about the creative role that Alourdes's multiple, and often contradictory, spirit voices play in orchestrating her life. The longer chapters, those with even numbers, are organized to reflect the major Vodou spirits who possess Alourdes. These spirits, who preside over particular life domains, serve admirably to give order and definition to the different levels on which the drama of her life has unfolded. Chapter 2 deals with the Vodou spirit Azaka, a peasant farmer who reminds Alourdes of her roots

⁴Ibid., 24.

and therefore of her connections to, and need for, family. With Ogou, the focus of Chapter 4, the themes of risk taking, assertion, and anger are explored through the stories of Alourdes's move to New York and her interactions there with various officials and bureaucracies. Chapter 6 deals with Kouzinn, a rural market woman; this section reviews the economic dimensions of Alourdes's life.

The Vodou spirit Ezili, the subject of Chapter 8, provides the context and language in which the stories of Alourdes's relationships with men and her role as a mother are told. Chapter 10 focuses on Danbala, the serpent spirit. As the most ancient and most conservative of the Vodou spirits, he provides the context for stories about the efforts of Alourdes and Maggie to preserve their spiritual heritage. Papa Gede, the trickster spirit, the master of the cemetery, the guardian of sexuality and protector of small children, presides over Chapter 12, which concerns healing and other transformational arts.

I also have debts to feminist scholarship. When I began to diagram Alourdes's family tree, nearly a year after I started working with her, I realized that what she had traced for me with her family stories was a matrilineage. True, the most distant ancestor she acknowledges was a man, her great-grandfather, Joseph Binbin Mauvant. After him, however, all of her stories follow a line from mother to daughter. After Mauvant, men appear as husbands and lovers who enter the lineage as separate individuals. No stories seem to exist in Alourdes's memory about the parents or siblings of these men. Memories of sons born to the central women have also faded.

Instead of dismissing this as an accident of memory or a result of the vicissitudes of a "broken" family (after all, such sudden disappearances routinely befall women on patrilinear family trees), I chose to follow the feminist maxim that when gender is taken as a primary category of analysis it reveals levels of meaning otherwise unsuspected. In the case of Alourdes's family tree, this direction proved wise. I discovered a women's history and a parallel kinship structure buried beneath the official versions. It is "buried," because children in the family, following Haitian law and custom, were usually given their father's name, making the family tree that lives in Alourdes's mind quite different from the one documented in such things as birth certificates.

As a result of aligning my picture of Alourdes's family tree