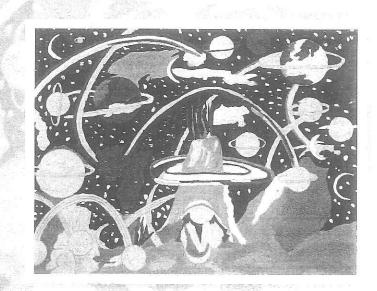# Esotericism in African American Religious Experience

"There Is a Mystery"...

Edited by
Stephen C. Finley,
Margarita Simon Guillory
and Hugh R. Page, Jr.

Aries Book Series

TEXTS AND STUDIES IN WESTERN ESOTERICISM

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CHAPTER 4

Working Roots and Conjuring Traditions
Relocating Black 'Cults and Sects' in African-American Religious History

Elizabeth Pérez

Introduction

I want to tell a story that begins on the South Side of Chicago, and I invite you to board the bus with me, leaving from a stop next to the Red Line train, going west. It is the year 2006, and I am conducting ethnographic research among practitioners of the Afro-Cuban religion Lucumí, or Santería, organized around the worship of the Yorùbá-derived spirits called *orishas*. I am visiting my main interlocutor and mentor, the orisha praise-singer, diviner, Spiritist medium, and adept of the Bantu-inspired Palo Monte tradition Nilaja Campbell, initiated since 1986. I pass a dozen churches with names teased from scripture, one unfolding after another for miles like the verses of an extraordinarily ambitious exquisite corpse: *Believe in Thine Heart, the Holy Rood, Lively Stone, Repairer of the Breach, Sweet's Holy Spirit Free Will, First Anvil Baptist, Baptist Church Without Wrinkle or Spot Inc., the Purchased Church of God.*[1] Already running late, I skipped breakfast and see food everywhere: *Uncle Remus Chicken Shack, Kiki Chop Suey, Seven Star Foods.* The names mounted on the façades of shops also present unmistakable allusions to African-American history and culture: the avuncular ur-narrator of Black folklore, more of a trickster than the wily heroes of his eponymous tales; the defiant survival of Southern regional cuisine in the industrial North; the Black encounter with immigrant groups and embrace of Asian philosophy and foodways; the astro-numerical symbolism of the Nation of Islam, Moorish Science Temple, and Gangster Disciples (Poe 1999, Ho and Mullen 2006).[2]

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[1] I have not put these houses of worship in order of appearance on my journey so as not to give away the precise location of Ilé Laroye.

[2] My interlocutor Hasim Washington became a Lucumí priest in 2005, and I learned in an interview that—as in the case of many young male members of Ilé Laroye—Hasim's first exposure to religious disciplines of the body and devotional memorization came when he was introduced to Islam through recruitment by a local street gang. The El Rukns, or Almighty Black P. Stone Nation, had once been closely affiliated with Chicago's Moorish Science

Nilaja's community is called called Ilé Laroye, in tribute to her patron Eleggua, a fierce warrior and remover of obstacles.[3] Laroye is one of Eleggua's epithets, and ilé means "house" in the Yorùbá language. As in the case of "church," ilé denotes both a religious fellowship and architectural edifice in the Lucumí tradition. There are approximately fifteen separate Lucumí communities in Chicagoland; Nilaja's "house of ocha" is only one. Increasing numbers of Caribbean and Latin American converts to the religion have added to the ilés established by Cuban exiles. But most members of Ilé Laroye are not Latinos or immigrants; they are U.S.-born African-Americans. Several of Ilé Laroye's elders are the children and grandchildren of those propelled North during the Great Migration, and the extremely heterogeneous religious culture to which it gave rise would go on to condition current members' receptivity to Lucumí. As numerous scholars have shown, the civil rights and Black Power movements coincided with a reassessment of African-inspired religious forms, leading to greater Black American involvement in Diasporic traditions, such as Brazilian Candomblé and Haitian Vodou (Hucks 1998, Gregory 1999, Henderson 2007). In reevaluating their collective past, many African-Americans began to associate Christianity with a history of enslavement, colonization, and forced conversion. In the Midwest, separatist groups flourished, and Black theology led many to question the worship of a white-faced Jesus.[4]

While it would be difficult to overstate the importance of this historical turning point and the trails it blazed in the Black religious imagination, the foundation for Ilé Laroye was laid decades earlier, in the midst of what historiographers still, for the most part, dismiss as "cults and sects." In this chapter, I want to *relocate* African-American religion in those very same cults and sects that conventional narratives of the Black experience have been organized to exclude. Taking Chicago as my geographical point of departure and the history of religions as my disciplinary center of gravity, I argue that, along with the phenomenon of storefront churches, the Great Migration fostered a

strategy of ambiguation, or tolerance for diversity, among African-Americans that met their pressing need to balance conflicting social relationships and associations. I begin by offering an overview of the religious landscape rearranged by the Great Migration, in order to provide cultural context for the advent of such communities as Ilé Laroye. I then briefly characterize Ilé Laroye as a site of inquiry that can give rise to a more expansive understanding of what is religious in the African-American experience (Long 1986, 7). In closing, I explain that it is imperative to de-center the Black Church in order to appreciate the heterogeneity and richness of lived religion, throughout the twentieth century and in our own time.

Religion in the "Street Universities" of Canaan-land

The landscape of Chicago's South Side, dubbed the "Black Metropolis" in the early twentieth century, is the work of many authors. Above all, its contours were hewn during the Great Migration, in what was actually a wave of migrations between 1915 and 1940 that carried tens of thousands to Chicago in search of new beginnings. African-Americans in the U.S. South faced lynchings, Jim Crow, and chronic economic problems that combined with environmental crises—including natural disasters that became human-made tragedies due to the apathy, incompetence, and woefully inadequate emergency response of the federal government—to render their everyday hardships impossible to bear (Tolnay and Beck 1990, Griffin 1996, Rivera and Miller 2007). As Milton C. Sernett writes, "The city became the critical arena in which the struggle of African-Americans to find the 'Promised Land' took place" (Sernett 1997, 3). For those steeped in the Biblical imagery of sermons and Spirituals, the South was an Egypt tormented by plagues and the scourge of bondage—or, at best, a desert in which they were condemned to wander. Migration acquired the aura of a religious pilgrimage, with the journey itself compared to "crossing over Jordan," a reference to the Israelites overcoming the last major, seemingly insuperable, barrier between themselves and the land of milk and honey. Southerners discerned the hand of Divine Providence in the synchronized movement of so many kinspeople. Urban areas with established Black populations, such as Harlem and Detroit, beckoned like electrified Zions. Their "second Exodus" would also be a "second Emancipation," an act of eschatological redemption for the entire race, one 'chosen' family at a time (Reed 2005, 52; Drake & Cayton 1993 [1945], 8–9).

Countless blues and vaudeville songs extolled "sweet Chicago" as a taste of paradise; poets and painters celebrated migrants' exhilaration, solidarity, and

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Temple; allied gangs continue to expose Midwestern youth to Arabic phrases and Islamic practices.

3   Her son Santi is the second 'godparent', or leader, of this community. Most subsequent ethnographic references to Ilé Laroye are based on four years of IRB-approved fieldwork, 2005–2009. I have changed the name of this community and all my interlocutors for reasons of confidentiality.

4   See, for example, the Nation of Islam and Albert Cleage's Shrine of the Black Madonna in Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), and Edward I. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

resolve to succeed. Chicago thus emerged as a Black Metropolis with distinctively African-American institutions and forms of association. But there is no doubt that the most important of these were religious. Prior to the First World War, Chicago was already "a religious mecca for African Americans," with historic African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), A.M.E. Zion, and Baptist congregations that remained dominant social and political forces well into the twentieth century (Sernett 1997, 156). During the Great Migration, these churches grew exponentially (Tuttle 1970, 98; Grossman 1989). Since the mid-nineteenth century, A.M.E. churches in Chicago had enjoyed a reputation for their proclamation of the Social Gospel and progressive activism. However, their tentative embrace of migrants cost them dearly, as ministers sympathetic to the Southerners' plight abandoned the denomination to establish Community Churches (Sernett 1997, 165–166; Denino Best 2005, 134–135). Having let a golden opportunity for congregational growth slip through their fingers, A.M.E. churches steadily increased in size, but their gains lagged behind those of the Baptists.

For many Southerners, joining these churches upon arrival in Chicago formed part of a strategy of upward mobility, as they availed themselves of the social connections available to them within women's auxiliaries, choirs, men's clubs, and lay ministries.[5] Yet Pentecostal churches and newly minted charismatic denominations made impressive gains. In 1933, 144 of the 344 churches in Chicago were Baptist, but there were already 86 Holiness churches (Sanders 1996). The expressive and participatory character of Pentecostal, Apostolic, and Sanctified church services stood in stark contrast with mainline Black Protestant congregations' high-church formality and "high-brow pretensions" (A. Philip Randolph, quoted in Taylor 2002, 30). Many migrants clamored for revival-style services with "foot-stomping and hand-clapping up-tempo songs," rousing chants, ecstatic shouting sessions, and an immediate connection with a communally defined source of divine power, made manifest through speaking in tongues, faith healing, and the ritual dissociation, or "slaying in the spirit," of congregants, collectively called saints (Cusic 1990, 87). Pentecostals adopted strict prohibitions on behavior, dress, consumption, and spectatorship, practicing corporeal disciplines intended both to purge their flesh of worldly desires and to prepare it to serve as a medium for God's salvific purpose. But their rituals allowed for a much greater acceptance of the Southern body's materiality than did those of more established Black churches.

Residential segregation intensified in Chicago during the Great Migration, and it was with considerable disenchantment that many heart-sick migrants in the "Black Belt" of the South Side realized that they had delivered themselves into another type of captivity, that of the modern ghetto (Ruble 2001, 258). Yet migrants turned to religion not only as a refuge from the "vice districts, gambling houses, unemployment, and racial tensions" of Chicago.[6] They also wished to engage in fellowship with others similarly affected by the sojourn North, with comparable experiences of dispossession from their land, vulnerability to mob violence, and race, gender, and class-based prejudice (Baldwin 2007, 166). Out of necessity, migrants from a host of smaller denominations convened in spaces designed for business purposes, and in the process gave birth to a new institution: the storefront church. Storefront churches were not always housed in former retail shops, but also in empty houses, garages, and theaters. They were pedestrian yet approachable, promising a spontaneous, unaffected, and visceral style of worship in a modest space reminiscent of the humble one-room church buildings of the South.

The clapboard sign fought the spire on corner after corner of Chicago's Black Belt, as poured concrete competed with stately edifices for the loyalty— and incomes—of Southerners. Although mainline denominations ultimately attracted more migrants than the storefronts did, theirs was a Pyrrhic victory, due to the latter's wholesale overhaul of the city's religious and cultural landscape. Interwar Chicago and its environs served as a "gate of tradition" for African-inspired narrative, plastic, and ritual arts, particularly from the Gulf Coast (Wehmeyer 2008). Storefront churches acted as "institutional bases for conjuring traditions" also called hoodoo or rootwork: the medical and magical techniques developed by plantation slaves that combined West and Central African, Amerindian, and colonial European ethnopharmacopeias, folklore, and ritual knowledge (Chireau 2003, 139). In Northern homes, hoodoo doctors, also called rootworkers, became Professors, Teachers, and "God sent healers"; in church, the same individuals were rechristened Prophets, Reverends, Elders, Fathers, or Mothers (Chireau 2003, 139). The clairvoyant, curative, and entrepreneurial abilities of such migrants were mobilized liturgically in Pentecostal and other churches, with scriptural foundations for their "spiritual gifts" cited chapter and verse if textual legitimization was called for.

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5   Roman Catholicism among Black people in Chicago rose steadily during the same period (See, Sernett 1997, 94).

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6   On the "Red Summer of 1919," when race riots flared in twenty-five cities and whites lynched seventy Blacks, ten of whom were uniformed soldiers, see Tuttle.

Working the Roots of "Cults and Sects"

In search of a moral-ethical community in which to address the here-and-now, those with a longer history in the urban North also rejected mainline denominations and contributed to what has been called "the rise of cults and sects" (Gallagher 2007/2008, 205–220). Among the Black bourgeoisie—whom we may define as cultural elites in the demographic upper-middle class, yet not exclusively those employed in white collar professions—the churchly self-assertion of their "country cousins" was nothing less than a scandal (Dorman 2007). African-American religious historiography has reproduced the mainstream critique of storefront churches as merely colorful and idiosyncratic, their leaders as flamboyant charlatans, and their followers as gullible, hapless rubes (Denino Best 33–34).

In fact, despite the stereotype of the migrant as a rural peasant, Southern migrants had a relatively high rate of literacy, and they tended to be skilled and semi-skilled artisans from urban areas.[7] The "vibrant experimental religious scene" they ushered in incorporated a variety of far-flung influences from both material and print culture. African-Americans of every economic and educational level availed themselves of communal settings in which to explore Western esoteric traditions—such as Freemasonry—interpreted in light of local trends (Nance 2002, 125). Completely new religious movements gaining a foothold in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Harlem, such as the Black Hebrew Israelites, appealed to Chicagoans conversant with scripture, responsive to Garveyite claims of the African-American *volk* as a new Israel, and disposed to view themselves as a Lost Tribe. Committed to the ideals of racial equality and integration, Father Divine's Peace Mission broadcast a message of prosperity, self-sufficiency, and cooperative living, along with the gospel of a flesh-and-blood Messiah (Primiano 2004, 3–26).

In *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), authors St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton noted that "spiritual advisers and readers" living in Chicago's Bronzeville numbered in the hundreds (Drake and Cayton 1993[1945], 642). Among them was an "Astro-Numerologist" named Professor Edward Lowe, a seller of policy numbers, oils, herbs and roots, such charm ingredients as the magnetic ore called lodestone, and a selection of occult books, including his own *Key to Numerology*. While Lowe was not typical, he was far from unique. Occult publishing of such volumes as *The Egyptian Secrets of Albertus Magnus* (ca. 1725) blossomed in Chicago during the Great Migration

(Long 2001, 16). It may seem hard to believe that Southerners with grade-school educations could find anything of value in these texts. Yet there is ample evidence for their use as how-to manuals throughout Harry Middleton Hyatt's monumental five-volume *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, and in narratives told to the Federal Writer's Project by Black "doctors". "It becomes obvious," Carolyn Morrow Long writes, "that they were borrowing and interpreting charm formulae," even in liturgical contexts (Long 2001, 122).

Chicago was one of the cities, including New York, New Orleans, and Philadelphia, with a dense concentration of manufacturers specializing in healing and magico-religious products such as charms, talismans, candles, and hex-removing items, sold primarily through mail order. Newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* advertised the graphically flamboyant and exuberantly worded mail-order catalogs produced by Chicago-based supply companies, including Doctor Pryor's Japo-Oriental Company and Lama Products. These catalogs capitalized on the associations of Gulf folkways with home for migrants by highlighting the "voodoo" qualities of their wares, elaborating on the concept of mojo (Long 2001, 194). These products also appealed to Northerners by connoting the tantalizingly mysterious, and harnessing the symbolic power attributed to 'authentically' Black cultural forms considered debased in other circumstances. Whether out of curiosity or sheer need, mainstream church members regularly crossed denominational lines for consultations, divinations, and therapeutic treatments.

The same social and cultural currents that buoyed the popularity these products—the desire for self-improvement and refashioning; insistence on this-worldly solutions for problems in the here-and-now; the discovery of the autochthonous in the exotic; the impatience with white models of religiosity and grands récits—also combined with a thoroughgoing critique of the political status quo in the African-American encounter with Islam. The Nation of Islam moved its headquarters to Chicago from Detroit in 1934, and enjoyed considerable success among new migrants (Lemann 1991, 64). The foundation for the NOI's success had been laid in the 1920s, with the establishment of the Moorish Science Temple by Noble Drew Ali.[8] Born in South Carolina, Drew Ali began his career as an "Angel of Allah" in Newark, instructing his Black followers that they were descended from the same exalted racial heritage as the urbane and accomplished Moors. Turning the Orientalism of his day to his

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7 They were also young, between the ages of 24 and 34. See Carole Marks, *Farewell—We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

8 One of Noble Drew Ali's disciples was Wallace Dodd Ford, renamed Ford-El, to whom he entrusted the Chicago Temple before his death. Ford-El later relocated to Detroit, began to go by the names Wallace D. Fard and Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, and organized the Nation of Islam.

advantage, Drew Ali argued for Islam's superiority to Christianity largely on the basis of its association with Egypt and wisdom from the East (Deutsch 2001, 193–208). By redefining fellow African-Americans as "Asiatics", he strove to distance them rhetorically from the stereotype of the sub-Saharan savage, swinging from jungle vines. In Chicago, he inspired a large number of converts and sympathizers, many of them Southerners such as himself.

Derided as "primitive", "hysterical", and "frenzied", the worship styles of the storefront churches violated middle-class models of female virtue, restraint, and decorum (Higginbotham 1993, 15). Yet churches were often among the few "safe spaces" available to migrant women, in which their humanity as both Black and female was acknowledged.[9] The Black Spiritual Church provided perhaps the greatest degree of authority and prestige for women, as well as gay men (Dianteill 2006, 177–178). Born in Chicago, Alethea 'Leafy' Anderson, called Mother Anderson by her followers, founded Eternal Life Christian Spiritualist Church on the South Side in 1913. About seven years later, she relocated to New Orleans, where she established a second, racially integrated church. Spiritual Churches spread to Chicago and throughout the Midwest along with Southern migrants. From the beginning, they incorporated key aspects of Roman Catholic material culture and popular religiosity, including holy water, crucifixes, votive candles, statuary, and brocaded ceremonial vestments for ministers. Catholic devotional practices, including praying the rosary, genuflecting, and blessing oneself with the sign of the cross were performed in church, yet worship services bore strong traces of Pentecostalism, such as an emphasis on conversion experience, ritual anointing, a declamatory mode of preaching, and a "verse by verse" exegetical style (Wehmeyer 2007, 15–74). Musically, members added another set of references, preferring to sing Dr. Watts hymns of the Methodists and Baptists from the late-nineteenth-century revival period.

Such aesthetic and religious bricolage was controversial. It also became a sensation. By 1938, one in every ten churches in Chicago was a Black Spiritual Church. Its healing practices and spirit idiom responded to a range of needs felt by migrants. Another aspect of the Spiritual Church that distinguished it from mainline Christian denominations was its acceptance of spirit possession, most famously by Native American personages (Jacobs 1989, 46). For this reason, among others, it has been held up as the quintessential storefront, devoid of theological rigor, redeeming social value, and cultural merit (Baer

1984, 10). Yet corporeal wellness and physical welfare through healing have been central to the Spiritual Church from the outset. White and Black followers alike seek sought the mixed-race leader Mother Catherine Seals out for cures; in the origin myth of Seals' congregation, race, gender, and the importance of healing are inseparably intertwined ("Physicking Priestess" 1931, 63–64). Some Spiritual Churches have sponsored hoodoo nights, and in bless services, ministers have conducted public divinations for individual congregants, sometimes as a prelude to private consultations. As Stephen Wehmeyer writes, in both their communal rituals and domestic routines, members wove together "a rich pharmacopeia of herbs, sacred oils, incenses and other materia sacra" derived from both Afro-Diasporic and European sources (Wehmeyer 2007, 18).

Religious Ambiguation in the Black Metropolis

Black Chicagoans can lay claim to an extensive embodied and cognitive cultural patrimony of discursive practices that arose in the context of the Second Exodus. Chief among them, and most germane to my argument here, are those associated with the attitude and technique of ambiguation. Citing Sidney Mintz's observation concerning the Caribbean "learned openness to cultural variety...an openness which includes the expectation of cultural differences," Huon Wardle writes, "[A]mbiguation typically comes into play in an attempt to negotiate, evade, in some cases to explore without extreme cost, the volatile interface of social formations and cultural values" (Wardle 2002, 498). Ambiguation as a rhetorical device involves strategically blurring the semiotic content of an utterance in order to ensure that its import is not entirely clear, often by emphasizing one possible social meaning while not explicitly denying that others exist (Lessig 1995). This decrease in denotative specificity acts to obscure the precisely correct interpretation of an interlocutor's statement, and thereby neutralize antagonisms that may result from the awareness or unequivocal expression of disagreement. Ambiguation as a linguistic technique has had a social corollary in the willingness to enter unfamiliar situations; belong to groups whose aims are at variance with one another's; conceal identifying traits for the purpose of harmonizing with others; and maintain seemingly incompatible relationships.

Ambiguation in the Black Metropolis has been not a luxury, but a daily necessity, for almost a century. Despite its depiction as parochial and insular, the Black 'ghetto' has served as a nexus point of intellectual sophistication and urbanity, borne of a vibrant print and material culture blossoming in the midst

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9   This definition of "safe space" reflects Griffin's gloss of the term, coined by Patricia Hill Collins, 9. See also Anthea D. Butler, "A Peculiar Synergy: Matriarchy and the Church of God in Christ" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2001), 2.

of economic disparity and racial discrimination (Nashashibi 2007, 123–131). The South Side bred cosmopolitan virtues such as tolerance and ecumenism, partly as a by-product of cultural heterogeneity in a context of racial segregation and marginalization (Turner 2000, 129–147; Zorbaugh 1929, 151). Ambiguation at the level of everyday social interaction and linguistic exchange has been most crucial, and perhaps most conspicuous, in the religious arena due to the distinctive role of Christianity in African-American life. To put it bluntly, it has seldom been an option to declare oneself completely 'unchurched', for the Black Church has traditionally been a semi-involuntary institution (Hunt and Hunt 2000, 569–594). Despite the formality and ubiquity of religious distinctions that seem categorically exclusive, ambiguation has tended to mitigate the rigidity of moral valuations—a discourse of 'good' versus 'evil'—that leads to the calcification of religious identifications and the erosion of racial solidarity (Wardle, "A Groundwork," 577).

Both anecdotal and sociological evidence suggests a widespread exchange of tropes, techniques, materials, and personnel between religious communities in the Black Metropolis as a result of ambiguation. Religious variation and intercourse within a given Black community is not a twentieth-century development; among African-Americans, writes Charles Long, "extra-church orientations" such as conjure have historically offered "great critical and creative power" as a complement to regular participation in mainstream Christian congregations (Long 1986, 7). Tracey E. Hucks has described African-American religion more generally in terms of "religious coexistence and dual or multiple religious allegiance" (Hucks 2001, 90). To offer one example, religious ambiguation in Black Chicago has gone hand in hand with African-American "therapeutic pluralism," as in the case of those used to consulting both hoodoo doctors and licensed physicians in cases of illness. The heterogeneity of the religious sphere has been an accepted part of the cultural landscape, facilitating dialogue and energetic activity across denominational lines, as well as augmenting the number of resources for crisis management, emotional satisfaction, intellectual stimulation, and corporeal well-being that African-Americans have had at their disposal.

Ambiguation has also opened a way for Afro-Atlantic traditions such as Lucumí to make significant inroads among African-Americans. I found in the course of my research that many members of Ilé Laroye had been christened as Roman Catholics, yet an equal number began their religious lives as followers of the Black Spiritual Church or the Black Nationalist Pan African Orthodox Christian Church established by theologian Albert Cleage in 1967, founded as the Shrine of the Black Madonna. For the most part, my interlocutors in Chicago had pursued the worship of African spirits after the Mariel boatlift of

1980, when large numbers of Cuban-born practitioners of Lucumí, as well as Palo Monte and Espiritismo, emigrated to the United States. Initiated and prepared for leadership by a Havana-born Lucumí elder, Nilaja has negotiated the survival of Ilé Laroye in a complex urban landscape. She has rallied to the standard set by the storefronts in reconceiving her home's floor plan to capitalize on every square foot of available space. And just the storefronts have, Nilaja's "house of ocha" has converted impediments into conditions of possibility. This has been accomplished in part by relying on neighbors to adopt the ambiguating attitude of the 'G' or 'gangster' code—"I didn't see nothing, I ain't saying nothing...I ain't ratting anyone out"—that was glossed as "a cultural thing in the Black community."[10]

Today, those in search of a Lucumí community in Chicago today need only type these words into an internet search engine to find Ilé Laroye. But arriving there has not been merely a matter of traversing the South Side and reaching a fixed address, but of first becoming sympathetic to a reappraisal of Afro-Diasporic religious forms. This is the context in which ambiguation has become of vital importance for social organization, for it was in the religious atmosphere of groups judged to be cults and sects that the future members of Nilaja's house of ocha developed their religious sensibilities, and their family histories run parallel to those of the storefront churches' faithful. (Pérez 2010) During one of my first conversations with an African-American Lucumí practitioner, a priestess named Frances said, "I love me some Jesus!" She had decided long ago, however, that serving the Jesus she adored was not enough to secure her well-being. On another occasion, Nilaja condensed the complex matter of her disaffiliation from Roman Catholicism into a sentence, musing on her childhood as a "wannabe nun," her short adult career as a catechism teacher, and continued participation in her local parish choir. Nilaja told me, "If they could've handled me, I would've stayed."[11] Nilaja's experience was representative of many whose disaffection from the religious traditions of their births occurred as a reaction to limitations placed on their ministry and full membership. For several of Ilé Laroye's members, Christianity became their extra-church orientation.

Relocating Cults and Sects

While Lucumí would seem to be a stark divergence from the traditions of practitioners' upbringings, like the storefronts, this tradition recognizes the

10   Personal communication, October 8, 2005.
11   Personal communication, September 22, 2006.

enfleshment of the religious subject in a particular historical moment and demands the cultivation of moral-ethical 'potentialities' through corporeal disciplines (Asad 2003, 92). Lucumí also affirms the leadership of women and gay men as only fitting, if practitioners are redefined as the brides and wifely helpmeets of their deities in initiation (Clark 2005). As in the storefronts, in Ilé Laroye folks seek resolution for real-world problems, embrace the materiality of the sacred, and seek the succor of intercessors between themselves and an ultimate source of divine power, for whom they act ritually as vehicles. In fact, within Ilé Laroye, pioneers from the South are called on ceremonially as ancestors and in everyday conversations as living repositories of wisdom—including, for instance, Nilaja's father, still called "Geechee [Country] Joe" as an octogenarian. The oral traditions, cultural contributions, and social practices of Southern migrants have continued to mold their descendants' attitudes, forms of association, and religious sensibilities well into the twenty-first century, and deserve serious consideration in any account of Ilé Laroye's membership and ethos.

This argument for the importance of cults and sects within the Black experience challenges dominant understandings of the Church's role in African-American religious history. The project to situate mainline denominations at the center of the Black religious experience began as a retort to those who claimed that Africa had no religion—only fetishism, as in G.W.F. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*—and that "the Negro" has no history or past (Pietz 1988, 105–123). But it has operated to silence traditions that have fallen outside regnant post-Enlightenment understandings of religion as "faith," and models of religious subjectivity that conceptualize the self as multiple and materially constituted. This has meant that, for the better part of a century, African-American religion has been deemed synonymous with Christianity, and the institutional Black Church in particular (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 6–7). The literature on twentieth-century African-American religious practice teems with hostility to what have been termed cults and sects—relatively new movements that, by and large, sought to render gods too concrete for the comfort of bourgeois Northern elites heavily invested in the politics of respectability. Scholars have shared a prejudice against Southern migrants, denying them agency in the making of their own history, favoring economically and politically deterministic explanations for their attraction to non-mainstream religious groups (Denino Best 2005, 33–34). W.E.B. DuBois was one of the first to refer to the "the Negro Church" in the singular, in 1897, and since that time, this entity has governed the discursive production of Black identity.

It is perhaps to be expected that theologians would define the Church as normative, sealing the boundaries of what may be called religious within the constructive dimensions of their prophetic agenda. But examples of bias against counter-hegemonic Black religious expression in African-American history are legion, with analyses driven by complementary ideological and 'ultimate' concerns.[12] Official accounts of the Black Church's formation and development have tended to elide regional and class differences, as well as erase moral-ethical practices and liturgical regimes not deemed sufficiently liberatory. The recognition of Black religious heterogeneity has been perceived as threatening to the unity of the African-American *volk*; its embarrassment of riches has been viewed simply as an embarrassment, an excess that must be excised if it is to be demonstrated that Black people are civilized citizens of the modern nation-state. In fact, one could say that African-American religious historiography has defined the Black Church against cults and sects, setting them up as foils for its idealized self-representation. It bears recalling that when the *American Journal of Sociology* published its first article about the Nation of Islam in 1938 it was called, "The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit" (Beynon 1938, 894–907). Such groups have been construed as Black Christianity's Other, although members of new religious movements have also frequented the most venerable of established churches, and practices of ambiguation have encouraged African-Americans to consider themselves at home—or at least welcome—in different communities at once.

As an historian of religion and ethnographer, I train my analytic lens not on the deeds that religious subjects ought to perform—from the perspective of a particular tradition—but on the things they actually do. Rather than treating religion as a realm separate from politics or sui generis—that is, so private as to lie beyond empirical scrutiny and therefore uniquely inexplicable—I am intent on accounting for religious phenomena in terms of the social, cultural, and ideological contingencies that both enable and foreclose human action in a given historical moment.[13] My concern with the quotidian affairs and everyday reality of religious communities determines both my programs of research and engagement with the body of scholarship on Africana religions. The inescapable fact that Afro-Diasporic traditions have seldom numbered among the major world religions or appeared on syllabi in university religious studies departments cannot be understood apart from the racial, ethic, and gender bias at the foundation of religion as an academic discipline (Masuzawa 2005). This chapter is one small attempt to move Africana and African American

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12   For only one example, see James H. Cone, "They Sought a City: Martin's Dream or Malcolm's Nightmare," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 98, 99.

13   My comments are informed by the contributions of Bruce Lincoln, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Jonathan Z. Smith to the history of religions, in too many volumes to enumerate here.

religious studies in a direction of inquiry less indebted to assumptions about what religion should be, and toward the investigation of ordinary, lived religious experience.

To return to the title of this chapter, what I mean by suggesting that we 'relocate' cults and sects is to reconsider what is religious in the African-American experience, and to think twice about where we seek religion as scholars—and not to look merely where there is the greatest available light. Studies of congregational practice have trumped the study of religion within the home, and ignored the street as a site for the formation of religious subjectivity. Historians of religion are not usually trained to linger on the corner or in the kitchen—the part of Nilaja's home that ultimately became the micro-site of my ethnographic research. Yet it is on the bus and at the stove that we find the bricolage or polyculturalism of Black religious expression and the diversity of its influences, growing more numerous by the day as novel technologies and processes of mediatization enable local, deterritorialized traditions to go transnational. We are only starting to fathom the extent to which African-American religious practice has been inspired not just by Islam, but also Judaism; Buddhism; Freemasonry; widely disseminated occult texts such as *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* and *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*; Midwestern spiritualism; Afro-Caribbean initiatory traditions; and a strain of Orientalism that runs zig-zag from Noble Drew Ali to the Five-Percenter anthems of the Wu-Tang Clan (Miyakawa 2005).

If we wish to understand the relationships between the traditions I have mentioned above, we have to reevaluate the grand narratives of African American religion and entertain the thought of de-centering the Black Church. This remains an almost heretical notion, bearing in mind the role of prominent pastors, deacons, and devout in not only the civil rights and Black Power movements, but also in the crystallization of African-American religious history as a field of study. Perhaps some clarification on the idea of "de-centering" would be useful. Rather than pushing the Black Church to the periphery, I would advocate viewing it as one of multiple historic centers for African-American religious expression. In fact, we can extend the study of mainline congregations well beyond our present knowledge of them by leaving the pews and listening for its cadences at the kitchen table and on the pavement, in front of the barbershop and basketball court. Traditions that have blossomed outside mainstream Protestantism—such as "Sweet Daddy" Grace's United House of Prayer for All People, the Black American Yorùbá Movement, and now-burgeoning Kemetic[14] Reconstructionism—have borne complimentary

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14   That is, Egyptian.

fruit, and continue to be irrigated by the subterranean longing for suffering to have meaning and for the divine to assume concrete form.

The types of ambiguating social practices and forms of religious transformation I have outlined above go against the grain of the notion that religious affiliation is definitive and predictive of future religious activity. One of the implications of this approach is pedagogical. In the classroom, we can present African-American religion not according to a chronology of congregational development—beginning with the invisible institution, slave religion, the Second Great Awakening, and so on, up until the present day—but instead, examine undertheorized themes in African-American religion through their geographical sites and conditions of emergence. We can challenge the teleology of Black emancipation through Christianity that has undergirded African-American history and racial identity formation. We can conceptualize "cults and sects" as traditions that merit intersectional analysis, and favor genealogical accounts over the quest for stable origins. And in our scholarship, we can investigate the way that religious practitioners have aggregated mutual identifications in order to enlarge their resources for everyday living. I have taken pains to dwell on the specificity of Chicago as my point of departure, yet in analogous urban centers we also find religion in unaccustomed guises. To understand the transformation of Black religious subjects, it may be necessary to revise our understanding of religion, and in the process, embrace the possibility of unsettling ourselves.