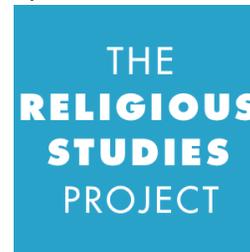


Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 26 January 2018



African American Spiritual Churches

Podcast with **Margarita Simon Guillory** (29 January 2018).

Interviewed by **Dan Gorman**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/african-american-spiritual-churches/>

Dan Gorman (DG): *Professor [Margarita Guillory](#), thank you for joining us today.*

Margarita Guillory (MG): No problem. Thank you for inviting me.

DG: *And today we're going to be talking about your new book on African American Spiritual Churches in New Orleans. Although, I've been reading your book proposal. I understand the final title has changed.*

MG: Yes, instead of *More Than Conjurers* being the primary title, it's now the secondary title. So it's [*Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches: More than Conjurers*](#).

DG: *So, perhaps the reverse order of what you wanted originally?*

MG: Yes! But for marketing purposes, *More than Conjurers* took second place. They really believe that they can market the book better with the Spiritual Churches being in the primary title.

DG: *Now, just so people have some brief background – is this what you wrote your dissertation about?*

MG: My dissertation was actually based upon ethnographic research pulled from spiritual churches in New Orleans. However, the dissertation was a little bit more theoretical, in that it focussed on the ways in which spiritualists in New Orleans utilise rituals and altars – both personal and public altars – to articulate a complex form of subjectivity that I sort of coined in the dissertation, called the “dynamical self”. So the dissertation was little bit more theoretical. I sort-of was able to use the

dissertation to write a peer review article and two edited volume essays. However, it was a little
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narrow for the publisher's taste. So I sort-of had to rework . . . I wrote an entire new book, basically!

DG: *I see. So when you mention the idea of the dynamical self, it brings to mind the grandiose theatrical aspect of religious worship. I mean, you could say there's a dynamic self in many religions. But what's unique about the way that people express their religious beliefs in these churches?*

MG: I would say that the way in which I saw the “dynamic” is this sort of fluidity. Within the dissertation I sort of expand upon this fluid conception of the dynamic – and it's called the dynamical self. But the dynamical self is this identity form that is sort-of the simultaneous expression of both a public collective identity, based upon association with shared qualities with the group, but it's also the construction of a personal identity form that's based upon one's uniqueness. And this is a theory that . . . I didn't go into these communities with this theory. This theory was really formulated based upon the data that I collected from the communities. So it's totally the reverse. I went in with no sort-of expectation of what I would actually find. I just thought the communities were really, really interesting. And the data yielded the theory.

DG: *So, a data-derived argument, rather than a data-driven argument.*

MG: Exactly, exactly.

DG: *Now, you came into Religious Studies . . . it's sort of a second career in some ways. You were a high school science teacher, originally. So, how did your first background in natural science . . . how did that inform how you approached the study of religion?*

MG: That's a great question. And it's a question that I'm asked quite frequently when people find out that I have a Bachelors in Chemistry. I have a profound love of the physical sciences, specifically Chemistry. You know, Chemistry has allowed me to . . . it has armed me and equipped me with a particular interpretive lens. The dynamical self, even though it's derived upon the data that I retrieved from these Spiritual Churches in New Orleans, it's really based upon this equilibrium state that sort-of occurs when you look at certain chemical reactions. So the theory – while based on the data that I retrieved from these churches – the way that I sort of nuanced it, was based upon chemical formulations of just basic equations, something that you'd learn in general Chemistry. So science just gives me a unique lens to view religion. Does that answer your question?

DG: *I think so. I think I'm curious to know, do you identify as a Humanist or do you identify as a Social Scientist?*

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MG: Oh. I don't like to be placed in a box! I think I am a unique scholar in that way, that I still sort-of follow some of the general trends that are going on in Chemistry, I have a great relationship with a couple of Chemists, even on our campus (5:00). I do use sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of religion. And I do consider myself a Humanist. So in that way, I think I'm sort of like a quilt. Which can be problematic for some people, but it works for me. This is why I can have these really collaborative interdisciplinary projects with people across disciplines and not feel uncomfortable. Because I feel like a piece of me as a scholar is vetted in these multiple disciplines.

DG: *Which brings me back to your book, when the publisher releases it in a few weeks, what . . . not genre – we know it's a non-fiction monograph – but, the little stamp on the top cover that says what genre it is and what topic: how is it being sold? Is it history? Is it religion?*

MG: Yes. Very good question. It has multiple genres. Because the book I wrote, like I said: a lot of the data that I collected while doing research for the dissertation will be used, but the approach is different. It's different than the dissertation. The book basically examines the socio-political activities and the spiritual-therapeutic elements that are found in the Spiritual Churches in a really, in a coalescing sort of way. And so, in that way, because the book is political – looking at the political and social activism of these churches – and because it looks at the therapeutic function of these churches, the sort-of tag lines will be history – because I start with the first church in the 1920s and by the end of the book, the chapter on Post Katrina Spiritual Churches – so it's historical but it's also being publicised as religion in society. So you see that sort-of band where the sociology is also coming in. So they have marketed it in a variety of fields. Interestingly, they've even promoted it in what we would call like “Africana Religions”, So if you do a google search with my name under [Voodoo](#) or [Hoodoo](#), my book will actually pop up. So they really cast a wide net when publicising the book.

DG: *So I suppose the next question is, what is a Spiritual Church? Aren't all churches spiritual?*

MG: That's a great question. African American Spiritual Churches that I research are a blended religious group. And I like that term “blended”. And what they've done, they have conjoined all of these various elements from institutionalised religions – and I'll talk about them in just a moment – and they've created their own, unique religion. Specifically, the Spiritual Churches in New Orleans have conjoined Protestant traditions with a focus on Pentecostalism; they draw from their worship style. Catholicism is a major bedrock in spiritual churches in New Orleans, just because Catholicism is still the predominant religion that's practised in New Orleans, in particular, and Louisiana, in general. They also incorporate American Spiritualism: the ability to communicate with the dead, that was

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[birthed in Western New York, in Hydesville](#); and they also sort of conjoin and mix into their faith Hoodoo and Voodoo. And this notion of Voodoo is derived directly from [Haitian Vodou](#). So when you look at sort of their belief system, and their ritual practices, you can see a little of all of these religions.

DG: *So when we talk about Hoodoo – this was sort of an older white term used to describe it in some cases. I'm thinking of sort-of 1920s, white attempts to understand black religion. But Voodoo itself is sort of a combinative thing. You've got influences of Islam, Native American and Caribbean religions, Christianity. And, of course, there's a longstanding debate in the study of African American religions: are these religions more – quote unquote – “African” or are they more “American”? Do you have any thoughts on that?*

MG: Well I would say, if we specifically look at the system of Voodoo and I mean V-o-o-d-o-o, I would totally say that that is an American religion (10:00). It is a blended religion that is primarily based – even though you have these other elements like Christianity – it's primarily based upon Haitian Vodou, V-o-d-o-u, that Haitian immigrants who emigrated very early to New Orleans after the [Haitian Revolution](#). A large population of Haitians immigrated to New Orleans and they took with them the religion. So, even though you have these other elements in Louisianan voodoo, the backbone of that religion is Haitian Vodou. And, of course, we know that Haitian Vodou -o-u- was derived from this combination of Catholicism but it comes directly from Benin.

DG: *In West Africa?*

MG: Exactly: [Vodun](#). So, in that way, once the Vodou sort-of lands in New Orleans, in the South East, yes, it becomes this syncretic – and that's not the term I like to use – but this sort-of blended type of religious tradition.

DG: *So let's walk through the genealogy from the top, then, beginning in Benin in West Africa. So this would be what kind of religion there? Are we talking about Islam or are we talking about traditional spiritual beliefs?*

MG: So, Benin Vodun is an indigenous religion. It is a combination of – and that word might be seen as maybe a little charged – but it is sort-of a combination of the traditional religions that are being practised in Benin. But the scholarly term for it becomes Vodun.

DG: *I see. So, then when slaves were brought to Haiti those indigenous religions are brought there. And then they encounter Spanish and French Catholicism, depending which side of the island they're*

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on.

MG: Exactly, yes.

DG: *And then that finally goes to America, where you have the collisions that you're describing.*

MG: Right. Particularly in New Orleans.

DG: *So how big a population are we talking about?*

MG: That's hard for me to say, like, quantitatively.

DG: *Hundreds? Thousands?*

MG: That's hard for me to say quantitatively, off the cuff. But I could definitely have these sort of conversations, qualitatively. But that's sort-of tough to derive. We can sort-of search and crunch the numbers but those numbers would be hard to derive.

DG: *So let's talk about some of the churches you studied, then. Were they packed to the gills on a Sunday?*

MG: What's interesting: pre -[Katrina](#), the churches were packed. You had fifty-plus churches. Post-Katrina, those fifty-plus churches dwindled down to two churches in New Orleans.

DG: *Is that because of population displacement?*

MG: That's part of the problem. So, part of the problem would be population displacement. And seventy percent of the fifty-plus churches that were operating in New Orleans pre-Katrina were located in the [9th Ward](#).

DG: (Whistles)

MG: So they were destroyed. And the last chapter of my book sort-of talks about that. The ways in which not only were some of them structurally destroyed but, because of some very difficult economical and political and structural changes that occurred in post-Katrina New Orleans, the lands of these churches – even if they were in a position where they could have restored the church – they were taken, and they were converted to green spaces.

DG: *So was that [eminent domain](#)?*

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MG: Eminent domain. Many of the churches – I calculate about forty percent of the churches that were located in post-Katrina 9th Ward – were sort-of taken back by the City, via eminent domain.

DG: *I see.*

MG: So, there are multiple factors sort-of feeding into why these churches have dwindled down to two.

DG: *Has gentrification also occurred?*

MG: In the higher elevated levels of 9th Ward, gentrification is now occurring. They sort-of called this area Holy Cross. They built a school, they have a private developer that's coming in. And I'm saying higher elevation, but it's still below sea level! But it's higher than the dominant part of the 9th Ward. It's being gentrified.

DG: *So they're pushing out the poorer, mostly African American . . .*

MG: Well they never let them back in, really. Because they never built In the 9th Ward, for people who did choose to come back they had no businesses, no stores. I think within the last two years they might have a health clinic. So the infrastructure wasn't rebuilt for people to come back (15:00). So we can argue, was this intentional? Was this: “We're going to let the 9th Ward return to nature so it can sort-of serve as the buffer, or the retention land, for other parts of New Orleans? So they won't flood if we have another major storm, and if we have the breaching of the levees?” So it becomes very . . . and I try to unpack that in chapter five of my book. The ways in which the changing landscape around Spiritual Churches If you look at the changing landscape of spiritual churches it tells us a lot about other landscapes and shifting landscapes in New Orleans: demographic landscapes, social landscapes, economic landscapes, political landscapes. If you just focus on the Spiritual Churches we can see all of these sorts of dynamics that are going on, post-Katrina.

DG: *So I'm assuming that the flood water has destroyed substantial amounts of material culture: archives . . .*

MG: Oh, definitely.

DG: *So what's left? I mean, were you working in people's attics, were you working in libraries?*

MG: So no, actually, what was interesting is: when I first went to New Orleans it was in, maybe 2010,

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and many of the churches were still standing. They were in horrible condition, but they were still filled with all the material culture – covered in all sorts of mould and everything else. And of course I was in those places. So, some of the spiritual leaders who were really respected leaders in the city: Bishop Jackson, Bishop Stokes. He came from Detroit, to give me a tour. So before they began to tear these structures down Like, these structures are no longer standing in 2017 but I had the fortune to go while they were still there. Not only was I able to see what was in the inside, I took photos of the inside, I took photos of the outside. I do plan on publishing a book of photos of the before and after, so people can actually see what is happening in New Orleans, still today.

DG: *But Spiritualists tend to be quite private. How did you gain this access? And this is something I've talked about in my past interviews: [Douglas Brooks](#) studying The only way to study some Hindu rituals is to gain the trust and become part of the community. Or [Candy Gunther-Brown](#), who I spoke to – watching Evangelical yoga, but not participating. How did you get access to these communities?*

MG: Well actually, one of the first scholars to publish a comprehensive work on Spiritual churches of New Orleans is [Claude Jacobs](#). He's now retired. He was at the University of Michigan. Him and my adviser at the time, Dr [Anthony Pinn](#) who's also done some work on Spiritual Churches, they basically He went to Dr Jacobs and told him, "I have a student who's interested in the Spiritual Churches." And I was introduced to Archbishop William Stokes who has now passed on – as the Spiritualists say – to the other side. And it was through him. Because he had been a part of the Spiritual Churches. So he came to Houston – we flew him to Houston – and he and I basically spent two weeks together in Houston, just getting to know one another. I took him to different archives, I interviewed him. And so, basically, it was through him. But we had to sort-of He had to decide, in those two weeks, whether he was going to trust me, and actually introduce me and open the door or not. So, I guess, at the end of the two weeks – considering I'd published . . . like eighty percent of my scholarships is on Spiritual Churches – I must have gained his trust. Because he was coming from Detroit, he said he would be really excited about introducing me to people in New Orleans. So I won a Ford Dissertation Fellowship and I was able to pay for his travel and we spent a summer – this is how I actually first thought of it – we spent a summer in New Orleans together. And it was remarkable.

DG: *Generating trust. . .*

MG: Generating trust, and because

DG: . . . *that you're not stealing their stories.*

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MG: Exactly. And because he did not Because he had been a part of the Spiritual Churches, by that time over five decades, people trusted him. And they knew that he wouldn't just bring, you know, anyone into the community that wasn't going to sort-of take their religion and do something with it, in a really fundamental positive way (20:00).

DG: *That's the line between being curious and then between past scholars, who basically were stealing.*

MG: Exactly. And I invested a lot of time. So this was like the groundwork. I wasn't even really collecting data at this point. I was just building relationships. So, you asked me how did I get in – because they are very secretive. This is why there hasn't been a lot of scholarship surrounding spiritual churches, because some people have mishandled what they've given the scholar. So I had to spend quite a bit of time building relationships. But once I'd built those relationships it was like the floodgates opened. They were so excited about sharing their faith with me.

DG: *Professor Guillory, we're almost out of time. I'd like to ask briefly: several of the early chapters in your book focus on female leaders in the church. Women like [Mother Leafy Anderson](#). Could you just speak briefly about female leadership in the churches?*

MG: I can. This is why I like the book that I've published, instead of turning the dissertation into a book. This book really highlights the political savviness, the entrepreneurial spirit of women in New Orleans, specifically from the early 1920s through the 1940s. These were women, women like Mother Leafy Anderson, [Mother Catherine Seals](#), these were women who not only purchased property, but they built structures from the ground up. For instance Mother Leafy Anderson, she built her church from the ground up, property that she purchased, and the organisation that actually financed the building of her very lovely church for the 1920s, was the Italian Homestead Association. If you go and look at the history of the Italian Homestead Association in New Orleans they were not freely giving money to African Americans to build businesses and structure. That wasn't their social function. They were committed to Italians, and Sicilians in particular, who were coming into New Orleans, actually utilising them as a pipeline to build and to invest in these communities. So it was really interesting that she was able to get them to finance

DG: *And a completely different religion!*

MG: Well what's interesting is that her church – and I talk about this a bit in the book – was about thirty percent Sicilian.

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DG: *Well, that's interesting! Which means the church was racially integrated in the 1920s.*

MG: It was. And also, Mother Catherine Seals, the manger was about twenty-five to thirty-five percent. We can't get our hands wrapped around the exact number, but hers was also an integrated religious compound. And during her time there were segregation laws about cohabitation.

DG: *And not only that, you had lynching!*

MG: Exactly, exactly. And so these women – and this is what I love about the book – the book sort of highlights the courageous activities. And they were really savvy when it came to business, too. They had an entrepreneur sort-of model of earning money using a religion, in a way that was just . . . they were ahead of their time! They were like – I guess we would call them like our large megachurches today. They were like the megachurches of the 1920s, though the book really highlights the social activism and the ways in which these women also met the spiritual needs of the individuals, both black and white – which is amazing. The book sort-of talks about that, they were . . . Yes, they wanted to be an anchor for the black community, but they also served the white population who were being marginalised by class and by ethnicity. They also served those populations as well.

DG: *So just to wrap up, I'll say that reminds me of – it's a quite old book – but [Arthur Fauset's Black Gods of the Metropolis](#)*

MG: Yes!

DG: *So, for those of our listeners who aren't familiar, Arthur Fauset, an African American scholar wrote this book in the 1940s about the urban religions, mostly in Philadelphia. And these were – like your Spiritual Churches – many of them small groups led by women, and they're exercising creativity in ways that white society doesn't want to allow them. And so Fauset also discusses the idea of, you know, foreign religions being translated in America. So, clearly, these questions are still viable and thought-provoking seventy years later.*

MG: A perfect ending! (25:00)

DG: *So, I will ask, what's the next project?*

MG: Oh. The next project? African American Religion in the Digital Age. So, while I'm still publishing essays and peer-reviewed articles on Spiritual Churches, I'm sort of moving in the direction of digital religion. Specifically, I'm looking at the ways in which people of African descent are

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utilising technical advances to express multiple forms of religion. So I'm working on a chapter now on black humanism and black atheism, and the way in which it's promoted among Millennials using social media platforms.

DG: *Be careful, you'll be getting into [transhumanism](#) next!*

MG: I know! (Laughs)

DG: *Professor Guillory, thank you very much.*

MG: Thank you very much, Dan.

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