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Prophetess of the Spirits

Mother Leaf Anderson and the Black Spiritual Churches of New Orleans

Yvonne Chireau

Mother Leaf Anderson, a thirty-two-year-old missionary, preacher, and prophetess, went to New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1919 to establish a church that would reflect her distinctive vision of sacred reality. In 1927, when she died, she left a legacy of women's leadership and spiritual innovation that had transformed the religious landscape of the city for both blacks and whites. Anderson, a woman of African and Native American ancestry, founded a religion that would carry her signature into the present day. Leaf Anderson's role in the formation of the New Orleans black Spiritual churches reveals the unusual and complex cultural configurations that she embodied in both her life and her ministry. The ways that she redefined gender and religious empowerment for women in the Spiritual tradition influenced all who came after her.

This essay considers gender and race as intersecting categories in its analysis of the churches established by Anderson, a network of congregations that synthesized elements of Protestantism, Catholicism, nineteenth-century American spiritualism, and neo-African religions. My focus on African American women serves as a counterbalance to interpretations of religious history that fail to account for race, class, and gender as determinants of female subjectivity. The contrasting social and cultural realities for black and white women underscore the differences in the religious options that both groups have historically sought and chosen. The black Spiritual movement is one product of those differences.

The New Orleans Spiritual churches were paradigms of female religious empowerment. The churches expanded public roles for women, who were able to benefit from the economic advantages that attended their ministries. Furthermore, the emergence of the Spiritual churches as a loosely organized movement precluded many of the structural constraints to female leadership that have existed historically within denominational systems. Through

the creation of informally associated networks and autonomous local congregations, and the maintenance of female-centered traditions, the unique pattern of women's leadership in the black Spiritual churches has endured.

Unlike their mainstream ecclesiastical counterparts, Spiritual churches were organized around women's leadership from the start. Although black denominations in the United States were initially established as sites of resistance against racial oppression, within many of these churches women have experienced discrimination on account of their sex. While not excluded from leadership roles, women in black Christian denominations have for the most part been denied the status and prestige of the pastorate and clerical ordination. Even in the present day, African American women's visibility as public leaders in black denominations remains, by and large, extremely limited, their activities varying from ceremonial functions to the exercise of "influence" and "surrogate leadership" in congregations.¹

By contrast, female authority in both official and ceremonial capacities is conspicuous within the Spiritual churches, a movement whose evolution occurred apart from that of the mainstream black denominational bodies.² At their inception, the Spiritual churches created standards of leadership that were legitimated by women. The founders of many of the early Spiritual churches in New Orleans were female, their honorary status indicated by such titles as Mother, Reverend Mother, Prophetess, and Queen. Women were represented in Spiritual church hierarchies as pastors, bishops, and archbishops, and in lay capacities many became religious advisers. As with white American and British nineteenth-century spiritualist women who asserted latent feminist claims to social equality, black women in the early-twentieth-century Spiritual churches linked their religious empowerment to alternative visions of divinity, to the establishment of authoritative roles, and to strategies by which they challenged conventional perspectives of race and gender. Members of the Spiritual churches drew from collective cultural resources that incorporated diverse strands from African and American traditions. Woven together, these sources gave New Orleans Spiritualism its eclectic flavor.³

Throughout history, women whose aspirations for leadership have been thwarted by mainstream religions have found appealing alternatives in sects, intentional communities, and so-called marginal traditions. Women-led religious movements have epitomized female dissatisfaction with aspects of male-dominated religion, such as patriarchal language and conceptions of God, and conservative expectations of women's social roles.⁴ In many sectarian traditions, female congregants have accounted for a sizable proportion of church membership, and where the sect's founder was a woman such groups generally accept women as leaders and persons of authority.⁵ While numerically dominating membership in nearly all African American religious groups, black women have also been instrumental within sectarian traditions in the United States. Sometimes described derogatorily as "cults," black sects

tend to be offshoot movements, typically smaller than mainstream African American denominations, usually centered on a charismatic figure and often distinguished by uncommon ritual styles. The female-centered character of the black sects has been noted by numerous scholars of religion.⁶ Like their sectarian counterparts in the early twentieth century, the Spiritual churches in New Orleans were noteworthy for the emphasis they placed on female clergy and church leadership.

The beginnings of the Spiritual movement coincide with the rise of African American religions in northern cities shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century. One of the earliest Spiritual churches, the Eternal Life Spiritualist Church, was established in Chicago by Mother Leaf Anderson in 1913. Chicago, the archetypal "black metropolis," was a veritable mecca for thousands of blacks who departed the South between 1914 and 1918 and between 1939 and 1945, during what was known as the Great Migration. Fleeing poverty, labor exploitation, a devastated agricultural economy, and political and social repression, masses of black southerners poured into the cities to fill a demand for cheap labor by northern industries, seeking promising futures and economic opportunity. Concurrent with the rising tide of migration, an increasingly pluralistic religious situation developed in Chicago's African American neighborhoods.⁷

In Chicago, blacks founded and joined Baptist and Methodist denominations, storefront holiness congregations, Muslim temples, Afro-Judaic sects, and numerous missionary organizations. Within this religiously diverse and rapidly growing population, the first black Spiritual churches appeared.⁸ In the same decade as the founding of Leaf Anderson's church, several Spiritual congregations emerged in other parts of the country. Scholars have noted the presence of Spiritual storefronts in several metropolitan areas in the United States early in the 1900s, but it is not clear whether these churches were related to one another.⁹ In New Orleans, however, the Spiritual churches developed an independent and culturally distinct character, spreading via a chain of congregations through that city's black and poor ethnic communities.

Leaf Anderson moved to New Orleans before the third decade of the twentieth century, possibly in 1919.¹⁰ Before her arrival, it is believed that she had organized churches in St. Louis, New Jersey, and Indiana. The establishment of those mission churches was essential to the early growth of the movement. Eleven congregations grew out of Anderson's original Eternal Life Spiritualist Church, including churches in Chicago, Memphis, Little Rock, and Pensacola. Yet of all the cities where black Spiritualism flourished, New Orleans became the integral center for the movement, with at least 175 churches established there over the fifty years following Anderson's initial appearance.¹¹

It is possible to create only a sketchy portrait of Leaf Anderson's life before 1918. According to some reports, Anderson was born in Balboa, Wisconsin, in 1887.¹² Other sources say that she had been married once and divorced,

and that she had traveled to numerous locations before settling on New Orleans as the site of her Spiritual headquarters. She is listed in Chicago's city directories for 1914, 1916, and 1917 as residing in the southside ward, where she operated a lunch counter. Only a few other historical facts have been uncovered regarding Anderson's background before arriving in New Orleans, when she began to attract a following among black and white residents of the city.¹³

Shortly after establishing her first church in New Orleans, Anderson started a class to instruct others in the doctrines and practices of spiritualism. Anderson taught students how to prophesy, heal, pray, see spirits, and interpret selections from the Bible. Alumnae of these classes were considered qualified to start their own Spiritual ministries. According to one of her students, Anderson influenced a great number of those who would follow her as ministers: "there was eighty-five to a hundred of us in her first class and she charged a dollar a lesson. She taught healing and prophesying and calling up spirits. Of course most of them didn't ever finish, because everybody ain't got the power, but most of the Mothers in New Orleans now learned what they know from Mother Anderson."¹⁴

From the beginning, the advancement of female authority was an integral feature of the Spiritual movement. Leaf Anderson's class system functioned as a training center for novices to acquire valuable skills. As a teacher, she helped proficient students to develop their own nascent ministries; many second-generation Spiritual churches in New Orleans began through the work of women who had attended her classes. Early churches grew out of the accumulation of clients of Spiritual ministers, as well as others who had been instructed by Anderson. As the client bases expanded, many eventually coalesced into congregational bodies. Thus, by supporting their church-building initiatives, Leaf Anderson conferred a ministerial status upon students who had once been under her tutelage.¹⁵

The black Spiritual churches provided institutional support for women in their pursuit of meaningful careers as preachers and pastors and in private settings as "readers" and "spirit advisers." Spiritual ministers offered services such as healing, counseling, and guidance on secular and religious matters for church members and non-church members alike. These extra-ecclesiastical businesses were an important means of economic self-determination for black women. Severely hampered by segregation, sexual and racial discrimination, and threats to their personal security, black women could not travel as freely as their white counterparts in American spiritualism, who had constituted the majority of itinerant mediums in the nineteenth century. An effective alternative was the establishment of Spiritual ministries in homes, storefronts, and other settings, where ministers offered advice and counseling on matters of health, employment, relationships, and other personal con-

cerns. Unlike many of the mainstream denominations, in which the women engaged in lay ministries were only infrequently compensated for their duties, Spiritual women were free to establish profitable ventures that ensured their economic security. Because the average black female in 1920s and 1930s New Orleans was likely to be employed in a low-wage, unskilled job, spiritual advising offered some women the means for redefining their status as professionals and exercising some financial autonomy.¹⁶

Black Spiritual women preachers were distinctive for the ways they combined religious authority and community activism. An ardent concern for social justice appears to have characterized the work of female missionaries in the black Spiritual tradition. In its early days, Spiritual church founders were among those actively involved in grassroots charitable endeavors in the city of New Orleans. Mother Catherine Seals, founder of one of the largest Spiritual churches after Leaf Anderson's, established a sanctuary in her church, the Temple of the Innocent Blood, for unwed mothers. Seals was unyielding in her opposition to the practices of local abortionists and the "shedding of innocent blood" and provided facilities for the care of women and their babies until her death in 1930. Other Spiritual ministers were active in the climate of social and economic distress of the 1920s and 1930s. Mother Kate Frances, an early student of Anderson's, led a barefoot procession of congregants through the city streets in protest during the Great Depression. Another Mother, Maud Shannon, pastor of St. Anthony's Helping Hand Divine Spiritual Chapel, founded her church in the heart of one of New Orleans's poorest neighborhoods, distributing food, gifts, and money to destitute families.¹⁷

An emphasis on religious self-empowerment functioned for black women in the New Orleans churches in much the same way that it did for white women in a previous movement, the nineteenth-century American Spiritualists. Visionary experience and revelation were primary sources of authority for women in the Spiritual churches. One of Leaf Anderson's assumed responsibilities was to identify for her students who their particular spirit mediators were, thereby reinforcing each woman's acknowledgment of her own guiding forces in the spirit realm. The practice of "calling up spirits," which Anderson taught, was central to black Spiritual theology. In Spiritual belief, unseen beings called "saints," "spirit guides," and "forces" communicated directly with individuals through inner voices, dreams, or visions. Every person, taught Anderson, possessed a spirit guide, an entity who might live on the earthly plane or exist in the realm of the dead. Another central conviction in the black Spiritual tradition was belief in the Divine Spirit, identified with the Holy Ghost of revivalistic Christianity, who spontaneously "possessed" believers during worship ceremonies. The Divine Spirit, understood by Spiritualists as a composite of the third person of the Christian Trinity and other

unseen beings, prompted those spiritually possessed to perform healings, speak in tongues, and deliver prophetic messages.¹⁸

Healing was a dominant concern for practitioners in the black Spiritual churches. Catherine Seals, one of the early Mothers in New Orleans, helped expand the traditional roles of domestic caregivers by institutionalizing public healing ministries. Seals was a missionary organizer who had worked with Leaf Anderson in the 1920s. Spiritual lore alleges that Seals was "called" after being miraculously cured of a paralytic stroke, but other sources suggest that she and Anderson might have parted after disputes over personal differences in leadership style.¹⁹ In 1930 Seals founded a settlement on the outskirts of the city that housed her church, her home, and a small hospital. Pilgrimages were made to her church by a predominantly female following who sought cures through the power of an elixir Seals prepared with castor oil and salt. On the strength of her reputation as a healer, Mother Catherine Seals became one of the most famous charismatic ministers in New Orleans. She passed on her knowledge of healing and spiritual principles in much the same way that Leaf Anderson had, by training selected followers who became her apprentices before starting out on their own. After her death in 1930, several new congregations were formed in connection with Seals's Temple of the Innocent Blood. In this manner vital traditions were continued by those who came after Seals and other successful female leaders. According to folklore, both Catherine Seals and Leaf Anderson (who died in 1927) appear periodically in spirit form with instruction for the women who carry on their work.²⁰

The establishment of female-centered traditions contributed profoundly to women's authority in the black Spiritual churches. An emphasis on feminine imagery, including birth and motherhood, characterized the religious perspectives of both Leaf Anderson and Catherine Seals. For example, when anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston visited the Temple of the Innocent Blood in the 1920s, she observed that Seals was "strongly matriarchal." According to Hurston, Seals considered herself an equal with Christ. In their adaptations of sacred myths and stories, both Seals and Anderson focused on birth imagery and feminine metaphors that were appropriated in conjunction with the traditional biblical accounts. From one sermon, Hurston recounted Seals's re-rendering of the creation story: "It is right that a woman should lead. A womb was what God made in the beginning, and out of that womb was born time, and that fills up space. So says the beautiful spirit."²¹

Seals's female-centered interpretations corresponded with the beliefs of Leaf Anderson, who was strongly opposed to the concept of a male supreme divinity. Anderson's disciples were not even permitted to use the name of Jesus in prayer or for healing because, according to one of her students, "Jesus as a man was not important—he was merely the earthly body of a 'spirit' by which name the deity is always addressed." Accordingly, in church hymnody

Spiritualists replaced "Jesus" in the song "Jesus Is the Light of the World" with the word "Spirit," at Anderson's request.²²

Historians have noted that the earlier spiritualist movement in the United States, American spiritualism, articulated theological conceptions that attracted many white, middle-class women, who made up a majority of the professional mediums in the nineteenth century. It has been argued that the spiritualist notion of divinity, a radically transcendent, nonpatriarchal being, represented an ideal for female radicals who had repudiated Christianity's emphasis on the incarnation of the deity as a male, or the androcentric *imago dei*.²³ In direct contrast to the impersonal god of the white spiritualists, black Spiritual practitioners emphasized multiple aspects of divinity. Leaf Anderson taught her mediums to "manifest" or incarnate a variety of gendered beings, for in the black Spiritual tradition, spiritual possession by male and female spirits was equally significant, as was the operation of the Holy Ghost, a nongendered spirit, within the experience of the believer.

The social distance between black and white women's lives reflected the disparate motivations behind female interest in the two spiritualist movements. According to historians, members of the earlier spiritualist movement consisted primarily of women who unselfconsciously exalted traditional ideals of piety, passivity, purity, and Victorian notions of femininity. Accordingly, nineteenth-century spiritualist mediumship became identified with gender values that equated true womanhood with domesticity and virtue.²⁴ By this same ideology, however, African American women could not aspire to the ranks of true women. Prevailing racist and sexist stereotypes devalued black womanhood and designated most African American females as morally depraved, sexually corrupt persons. Conventional definitions of femininity, including conceptions of chastity, purity, and beauty, were rarely applied to black women.²⁵

These normative conceptions of gender were subverted in African American Spiritual traditions. Leaf Anderson appears to have treated gender as a fluid concept, adopting both "male" and "female" characteristics in her role as preacher and prophet in equally powerful ways. For example, Anderson's spirit guides included two male personalities, Black Hawk and Father Jones, and on occasion she wore an Indian chieftain's mantle or a man's dress suit during services in which these spirits would manifest themselves. The alliance of ecstatic religion and cross-dressing, a combination signifying liminality and the blurring of categories, illustrates the manner in which Anderson simultaneously engaged sexuality and spirituality as dual sources of authority. By dressing "as a man" while possessed by a male spirit, Anderson symbolically enacted masculine privilege within the domain of her church. These transgressive gender strategies contrasted with Anderson's public behavior outside the Spiritual churches, where her "womanly" street attire, including elegant jewelry and lavish, expensive wardrobe, served to contest

derogative representations of African American feminine beauty in the public sphere.²⁶

Equally important to the gender representations of black women in the Spiritual tradition were the figures that Leaf Anderson exhibited as medium. Powerful women such as Queen Esther, the heroic matron of the Old Testament, figured prominently in Anderson's repertoire of spirit forces. The biblical Queen Esther, a virtuous female character, was an important source of authority for black women. Queen Esther has historically functioned as a prominent symbol for African Americans, especially within black Freemasonry, where in the women's counterpart of the men's fraternity, the Order of the Eastern Star, Esther presides over the third degree of initiation, symbolizing fidelity and courage. The presence of Queen Esther in the pantheon of spirit guides evoked conceptions of black female dignity, poise, and leadership. A dominant spirit, Esther was identified with feminine aspects of the gendered identities that Anderson explored in ritual contexts.²⁷

The black Spiritual churches adopted an eclectic blend of beliefs and practices that drew from a variety of cultural sources. New Orleans Spiritualists instituted numerous innovations that derive from spiritualism, Protestantism, occultism, Afro-Caribbean *vodou*, and Italian American folk religion. Another possible source was Anderson's alleged Native American ancestry, which might have influenced her Spiritual beliefs early on.²⁸ Native American culture, it is certain, inspired the design of the ceremonial garb that Anderson wore. In addition, the great spirit Black Hawk, one of Anderson's favorite spirit guides, emerged as the preeminent saint of the Spiritual churches in the South, and his statues are found even today in church sanctuaries, along with other Native American symbols. Yet even with the identifiable presence of Native American accoutrements in the Spiritual churches, it is uncertain that these originated with Anderson. Spirit guides such as Raging Bull, Red Cloud, and White Eagle were popular characters who made frequent appearances at public readings and seances within Spiritualist circles in the nineteenth century. Ironically, the tradition of Native American spirit guides in the New Orleans Spiritual churches is more likely to have been drawn from the nineteenth-century American spiritualists, whose movement and membership was predominantly white.²⁹

Significant parallels between practices of the earlier white spiritualists and the African American churches in New Orleans indicate that the members of the two movements may have had some contact with each other. In particular, Leaf Anderson's activities in the early 1920s, which included the patronage of a number of white spiritualists' functions and events, suggest more than a passing acquaintance with their practices and beliefs. Even considering these shared associations, it is difficult to ascertain the precise nature of the relationship between Anderson and the other American spiritualists.³⁰ Mutual practices of spirit mediumship and possession, which link the two

movements, evolved in different forms in the New Orleans churches. In both traditions, communication through psychics and mediums (called prophets, divine healers, and advisers) was established by deceased persons, spirits, and other entities who had "passed on." Although Leaf Anderson instituted the custom of calling up spirits through trance and meditation, possession by the Holy Spirit appears to have been a hallmark of black Spiritual worship and points to the strong influence of revivalist Christianity.

Leaf Anderson was said to have brought her favorite saints and spirit guides with her to New Orleans from Chicago. These included the aforementioned Black Hawk, Father Jones, and Queen Esther, as well as other beings who were invoked to bring messages or deliver prophecies from the other world.³¹ A possible link exists with the sensational practices of "manifesting" established figures that occurred within white Spiritualist circles during public readings and seances in the latter part of the nineteenth century.³² However, in the African American Spiritual churches of New Orleans the prominence of Black Hawk demands an alternative explanation, since he eclipsed many of the other spirits and was celebrated with an honorary place in a "cult of saints" that included Roman Catholic figures as well.

Spiritual traditions that revere a cult of saints appear to have been the consequence of cross-cultural exchanges between ethnic groups in New Orleans during the early twentieth century. Interactions between blacks, Italians, and immigrant groups in New Orleans had significant consequences for the formation of the black Spiritual religion. Catholicism, in particular, played a vital role in the cultural development of the New Orleans churches. With patterns that have persisted to the present day, Spiritual churches are distinguished by their Catholic-style iconographic representations, including church sanctuaries that are decorated with statues of the Virgin Mary, Saint Anthony, Saint Jude, and two favorites particular to the New Orleans churches, Saint Raymond and Saint Rita, patroness of women's ailments.³³ Spiritual altars adorned with crucifixes, votive candles, and other decorations provide a visual link with Catholicism, and the robes and vestments of Spiritual ministers resemble the elaborate finery of priests and clerics.

It is difficult to determine whether these innovations were the product of the Catholic confluences in *vodou*, an Afro-Caribbean religion that fused African and Christian elements, or traditions inherited directly from the folk practices of ethnic Italians in New Orleans. The latter possibility is not implausible, considering that in its early history Anderson's church had a representative Italian American membership and that interracial unions between immigrant Italians and blacks were not uncommon within these two communities, which shared much in terms of their social and class status. Affinities between the folk beliefs of Italian Catholics and the traditions of the Spiritualists indicate a reasonable possibility of syncretism. Similarities with regard to occult worldviews, beliefs in supernatural forces, miraculous cures and faith

healing, and the efficacy of magical formulations indicate some degree of overlap. Other practices possibly derived from popular Catholic traditions include prayers to the Blessed Mother and the Trinity, the use of Holy Oil, and the celebration of saints' feast days, especially the feast of Saint Joseph, a shared holiday that remains popular in New Orleans among black Spiritualists and Italian American women today. Nevertheless, although many practices appear to have been linked, and some black Spiritualists refer to themselves as "sanctified Catholics," the religious content and significance of their traditions hold vastly different meanings for the two groups.³⁴

Similarly, the practices of the New Orleans Spiritual churches and those of vodou practitioners suggest possible cultural and religious interrelationships but no definite connections. Some scholars have speculated that most of what appear to be Catholic ritual influences were actually derived from vodou when it was widely practiced in New Orleans during the nineteenth century. Influences from vodou in the Spiritual churches can be discerned from similarities in organization; for example, the strong commitment to female leadership and spiritual mediumship is a conspicuous feature of the Afro-Caribbean religion.³⁵ Other early practices provide clues of an informal relationship between belief systems in which saints and spirits were freely exchanged. Black Hawk, Leaf Anderson's personal spirit guide, was believed to have been adopted by vodou and voodoo practitioners in the city during the era of his appearance in the 1920s. Distant kin to the African-derived religion from Haiti, voodoo was a popular system of magic and supernaturalism that was embedded in New Orleans spiritual consciousness from its earliest days. Among black practitioners, voodoo and vodou were entwined in unusual and innovative ways. Robert Tallant noted that two of the early Mothers from Anderson's school set up temples to Expédite, a popular spirit from Louisiana's nineteenth-century voodoo cult.³⁶ Kaslow and Jacobs report that Catherine Seals and several of the early Mothers wore blue cords or ropes around the waist of their robes in the tradition of early voodoo saints. Numerous Spiritual practitioners and Mothers proudly trace their spiritual lineage back to Marie Laveau, the great nineteenth-century voodoo priestess of New Orleans who was shrouded in legend and mystery. Sources also mention the contemporary custom of placing sacred stones and glasses of water on altars in black Spiritual churches, a custom that is identical to that of some New World African religions.³⁷

Black American folk traditions explain some of the elements that exist in the Spiritual churches. While it is possible that early African-derived religions such as vodou were the foundation of many Spiritual beliefs, another possible connection can be assumed from the tradition of hoodoo, the complex of southern magical arts. Hoodoo is an uninstitutionalized system of healing, charms, and other occult practices that developed from the merging of African and European beliefs among blacks during slavery. However, wide-

spread negative associations among hoodoo, witchcraft, and conjuring have caused wary black Spiritualists to publicly repudiate such traditions in connection with their own beliefs. Nevertheless it is possible to speculate on the possible connections between them. For example, ritual items commonly used by black Spiritualists, including candles, incense, and sacred oils, were and continue to be easily obtained in occult shops and drugstores frequented by hoodoo practitioners. Practices traditionally favored by African American conjurers, including the use of "roots," countermagical spells, and supernatural healing techniques, have been documented by observers in the early black Spiritual churches. In a detailed article on black folk religion written in the early twentieth century, Zora Neale Hurston noted that eleven of the early Spiritual congregations were "stolen" by hoodoo doctors, and she found "a strong aroma of hoodoo" hovering about the churches she visited in the 1930s.³⁸

Despite evidence of shared traditions, black Spiritual practitioners in New Orleans deny that a formal historical relationship exists between themselves and the American Spiritualists, vodou devotees, or practitioners of black folk magic. By the 1940s many of their congregations officially became known as Spiritual churches rather than Spiritualists, ostensibly to disassociate themselves from members of the American spiritualist movement, who were perceived by many in the African American community to be "ungodly."³⁹ Despite the practice of mediumship, spiritual readings, and advising among ministers and churchgoers, black Spiritualists today emphasize liturgical styles that corroborate their genealogy as part of the African American Protestant tradition.

Living in a patriarchal and racially oppressive society, African American women have historically turned to their religious faith as a source of validation, strength, and healing. In so doing, they have also restructured their religious roles and asserted their own claims to sacred authority within their church institutions. Defying sexual discrimination and racism, women in the New Orleans Spiritual churches exercised power in ways often denied them by the larger society. The Spiritual movement provided women who aspired to religious leadership with the opportunity to lead based upon their own charisma and initiative. Spiritual churches thus created a haven for black women who sought public religious roles. Through their promotion of local missionary work and professional ministries, they also provided ecclesial structures within which women could assume some control of their social and economic circumstances.

As prophet and preacher, Leaf Anderson embodied the values of the Spiritual tradition. Appropriating her model of leadership, African American women in New Orleans became ministers and church founders, creating

alternative communities in which conventional gender constructions were transformed. Their continued prominence as religious authorities was validated by the emphasis that black Spiritualists placed on "carrying forth" the customs instituted by Anderson as the first Mother and exemplar of the church. In providing African American women with alternative possibilities for spiritual, economic, and social development, the Spiritual religion, as conceived by Leaf Anderson, instituted a black sectarian women's church in which female-centered traditions were established and perpetuated.

NOTES

1. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 274-308. On women's ordination, see Jacqueline Grant, "Black Women and the Church," in . . . *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria Hull et al. (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), pp. 142-44. See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Cheryl Gilkes, "Together and in Harness: Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 678-99; Jualynne Dodson, "19th-Century AME Preaching Women," in *Women in New Worlds*, ed. Hilah Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1981).

2. The Spiritual churches of New Orleans have been examined by scholars of anthropology and sociology, but none have taken an explicitly historical approach. See Andrew Kaslow and Claude Jacobs, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans: Origins, Beliefs and Rituals of an African American Religion* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). Hans Baer devotes a section to a discussion of the New Orleans churches in *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), as does Zora Neale Hurston in her monograph "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 44 (1931): 317-417. Michael Smith documents contemporary Spiritual churches in his photo essay *Spirit World* (New Orleans: New Orleans Urban Folklore Society, 1984). Authors with more literary interests include Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (New York: Collier Books, 1946); and recently, David Estes, "Ritual Validations of Clergywomen's Authority in the African American Spiritual Churches of New Orleans," in *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 149-71; and Jason Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk: A Mystery of Africans and Indians* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

3. See Hans Baer, "The Limited Empowerment of Women in Black Spiritual Churches: An Alternative Vehicle to Religious Leadership," in *Gender and Religion*, ed. William Swatos (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994); see also Estes, "Ritual Validations of Clergywomen's Authority."

4. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Outside the Mainstream: Women's Religion and Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (June 1980): 207-31.

5. Ibid. See also Barbara Brown Zikmund, "The Feminist Thrust of Sectarian Chris-

tianity," in *Women of Spirit*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

6. Miles Mark Fisher, "Organized Religion and the Cults," *Crisis* (January 1937): 28. See also Ira D. Reid, "Let Us Prey!" *Opportunity* 4 (1926): 168-70; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 60; Joseph Washington, *Black Sects and Cults* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 2-18; Arthur H. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

7. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), pp. 58-64.

8. A sociological study of Chicago's Bronzeville District noted that in 1928 there were seventeen Spiritual churches on the south side. By 1938 that figure had grown to fifty-one. This count did not include the vast number of unaffiliated Spiritualists who operated house altars and served as advisers, whose number was said to be more than a hundred in the district on the eve of World War I. See Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 642.

9. Edith White, *The Spiritualist Sect in Nashville* (New York: Vantage Press, 1970), p. 27; Alan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 177.

10. Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," p. 319; cf. Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, p. 173.

11. Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, p. 19; Federal Writers Project, *New Orleans City Guide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938).

12. *Louisiana Weekly*, December 17, 1927; other sources list her birthplace as Norfolk, Virginia. For a general background of Anderson's early life, see Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, p. 57-78.

13. Biographical information on Leaf Anderson is gathered from the following sources: Robert Tallant Collection and Papers, New Orleans Public Library; Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers Project files, New Orleans Public Library; *Louisiana Weekly*, 1926-30. I am grateful to David Estes and Claude Jacobs for providing residence information on Anderson from the Chicago city directories located in the Newberry Library, Chicago.

14. Mother Dora Tyson, "Mother Letha or Leaf Anderson," Robert Tallant Papers, reel 8, n.d., n.p. See also Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, p. 169; and Michael Smith, *Spirit World* (New Orleans: New Orleans Urban Folklore Society, 1984), p. 46.

15. As David Estes has pointed out, the Spiritual emphasis upon a hierarchically organized clergy challenges Mary Farrell Bednarowski's model of marginal, women-headed religions that deny the need for a traditionally ordained clergy. Although rejection of the male-dominated structures of churches seems to have motivated some women to join the African American Spiritual movement, many of its members embraced the densely stratified clergy structure that evolved, an episcopacy governed by pastors, bishops, and archbishops. See Estes, "Ritual Validations of Clergywomen's Authority," p. 150.

16. Kaslow and Jacobs, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, p. 153; Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, p. 80.

17. Kaslow and Jacobs, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*; "When the Thunder Is

Over Mother Kate Francis Will March Right through Hebbin's Door," November 1939, and "Dora Tyson Interview," Robert Tallant Papers, reels 7 and 9.

18. Ibid.

19. Louisiana Writers Project, *Gumbo Ya-Ya* (Boston: Johnson Reprint Company, 1945), p. 399; cf. Smith, *Spirit World*, p. 46.

20. Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, p. 169; Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," p. 319; Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, p. 20. On Mother Catherine Seals, see Louisiana Writers Project, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, p. 399; Smith, *Spirit World*, p. 46; Federal Writers Project, *New Orleans City Guide*, p. 199; Edward Laroque Tinker, "Mother Catherine's Castor Oil," *North American Review* 230 (1930): 148-54; and Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, Calif.: Turtle Island Press, 1981), pp. 23-29.

21. Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, p. 26.

22. Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," p. 319; Kaslow and Jacobs, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, p. 52.

23. Bednarowski, "Outside the Mainstream," p. 214.

24. See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), and Braude, "Spirits Defend the Rights of Women: Spiritualism and Changing Sex Roles in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and Ellison Findley (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Bednarowski, "Outside the Mainstream"; and Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Women in Occult America," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

25. See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; see also Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Linda M. Perkins, "Black Women and Racial Uplift prior to Emancipation," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomena Steady (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1981); Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of the Cult of True Womanhood on the Education of Black Women," *Journal of Social Issues* 39 (1983); see also Deborah White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (New York: Norton, 1985), pp. 27-61.

26. Anderson's ritual transvestism also led to numerous rumors of lesbianism and public accusations that she was "really a man" in disguise, according to one of the early Spiritual Mothers. See "Mother Letha or Leaf Anderson," interview with Mother Dora Tyson, reel 9, Robert Tallant Papers.

27. Claude Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches," *Journal of American Folklore* 102 (1989): 45-67; see esp. p. 50.

28. One researcher has suggested a geographic link between the Wisconsin-born Anderson and the historical Black Hawk, leader of the Sauk Nation in Illinois in the late nineteenth century. See Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, pp. 68-69. See also Smith, *Spirit World*, p. 81.

29. Ruth Brandon speculates that the Native American component may have first been adopted by Indian-influenced Shakers in upstate New York, many of whom were active Spiritualists. See Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 37; and Geoffrey Nelson,

Spiritualism and Society (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 162, 201. For a discussion of African-Indian relations in the context of the world of Leaf Anderson in early New Orleans, see Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, pp. 80–86.

30. Lily Dale was the name of the Cassadaga Free Lake Association, one of the most famous camp-meeting sites for Spiritualists after the Civil War. See Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 67. The event spoken of occurred in 1927 when Leaf Anderson invited a white minister from Lily Dale to speak at her church in New Orleans. *New Orleans Weekly*, January 22, 1927, p. 8. Estes, "Ritual Validations of Clergywomen's Authority," p. 170.

31. Claude Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession," p. 49. Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, p. 168. See also Smith, *Spirit World*, pp. 81ff.; Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk*, pp. 69–72; "Saint Black Hawk—Indian Worshipped by Spiritualists," Robert Tallant Papers, reel 9.

32. See Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists*, p. 37; see also Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, pp. 162, 201; Kaslow and Jacobs, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, p. 129.

33. See Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (New York: Century Company, 1928), pp. 306–7; Baer, "Black Spiritual Churches," p. 218; Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession," p. 48.

34. See David Estes, "Across Ethnic Boundaries: Saint Joseph's Day in a New Orleans Afro-American Spiritual Church," *Mississippi Folklore Register* 21 (1987): 11–12; Louisiana Writers Project, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, p. 105. On Italian American occult worldviews, see Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. xiv, 6; Rudolph Vecoli, "Cult and Occult in Italian-American Culture," in *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America*, ed. Randall Miller and Thomas Marzik (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), p. 29.

35. See especially Karen McCarthy Brown, "Women's Leadership in Haitian Vodou," in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), pp. 226–34.

36. Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, p. 201; Louisiana Writers Project, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, p. 210.

37. Kaslow and Jacobs, *Spiritual Churches of New Orleans*, p. 28.

38. "Saint Black Hawk," Robert Tallant Papers, reel 9; Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," p. 319.

39. Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, pp. 51, 115.