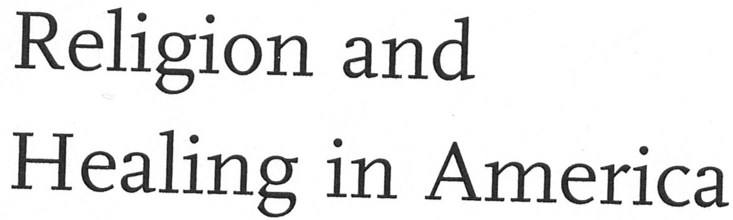

Religion and Healing in America

Edited by Linda L. Barnes
and Susan S. Sered

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2005

10

Making *Wanga*: Reality Constructions and the Magical Manipulation of Power

Karen McCarthy Brown

In August 1997, Abner Louima, a thirty-two-year-old Haitian immigrant living in Brooklyn and working as a security guard, got in trouble with the New York City police. The encounter sparked what is now an infamous case of police brutality. Analyzing the media coverage of the incident and comparing it to the coverage of a more recent case of police violence in New York reveal an elaborate dance of secrecy and transparency, a contredanse, if you will, in which secrecy demands transparency and transparency provokes new forms of secrecy, in spite of itself and at times in the name of justice. So it goes. When raw power and the most fundamental kinds of racism are involved, as they are in the Louima case, both victims and perpetrators are at times compelled to hide the truth and to keep secrets while simultaneously making claims on some of the most rudimentary of institutions created to enhance transparency, the news media and the judicial courts.

The night Louima was arrested, Phantoms, his favorite band, was playing at the Club Rendez-Vous in Brooklyn. Around four o'clock in the morning the almost entirely Haitian crowd spilled out onto the street. As I later heard the story, two women started exchanging ritual insults about each other's clothing. Bystanders playfully urged them on; the shouting increased, and someone called the police. A Haitian friend who had been there assured me that, before the police arrived, no one in the crowd had crossed the line

between play and violence. The police cars arrived with lights flashing and sirens screaming. Officers yelling and brandishing nightsticks pushed their way into the crowd. Before Abner Louima knew what was happening, he was facedown on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his back.

Then, according to witnesses, he was thrown roughly into the back of a police car. By Louima's account, the four policemen involved in the arrest stopped twice to beat him en route to the seventieth Precinct stationhouse; they used fists, clubs, and even a police radio. Once there, Officer Justin A. Volpe rammed the wooden handle of what appeared to be a toilet plunger into Abner Louima's rectum, yanked it out, and, rudely pushing it at his mouth, told him, "Now you are going to taste your own shit."[1] Louima was then placed in a holding cell, where he sat bleeding for a long time, perhaps hours, before being taken to a hospital. Louima's rectum was perforated and his bladder torn. His injuries required a two-month stay in the hospital and three surgeries, including an initial colostomy that later was reversed. He is now in better health than his doctors had predicted.

Eventually it was revealed that Officer Volpe had mistaken Louima for someone else in the crowd who had taken a punch at him. At the time of Volpe's trial, David Barstow reported in the *New York Times*, May 21, 1999, that when a nurse at the hospital where Louima was originally taken referred to him as the man who had beaten up a police officer, Louima replied, "Lady, do you think I'm stupid? I'm a black man. Do you think I would beat a police officer in New York City?" From the beginning, the press was suspicious of Louima's accounts of what happened to him. The jury in the initial trial also did not appear to trust him. It dismissed all charges related to the arrest and to the beatings administered on the way to the police station, events for which he was the only prosecution witness. At times, during the two trials that have so far been occasioned by this incident, Abner Louima was treated as if he were the one accused of a crime.

Mama Lola Reconfigures Louima's Reality

In 1997, shortly after he was released from the hospital, Abner Louima was introduced to Mama Lola, a respected Haitian Vodou priestess and healer living in Brooklyn. She is also my main teacher in the arts of Vodou and my friend. These days Louima occasionally visits Mama Lola at her home, and that is how I came to know him. When Mama Lola first mentioned him to me, she said simply, "He' a very quiet, respectable man. His family always in church." Then she mused on what happened to him: "Maybe they think he some bum in the street. Like he don't have no family . . . no one to help him." If that is what the police thought, they were mistaken because a significant proportion of the

Haitian immigrant community in New York City, along with many non-Haitians, stepped forward to protest what had been done to him.

In April 1999, I interviewed Lola about Louima's situation. It was a strange conversation. At the time, Lola was caught between powerfully conflicting desires. She wanted to discuss Louima with me because we were working on a book on healing, and she considered Louima one of her most interesting and important cases, yet the trial of his attackers was just about to begin, and she did not want to say anything that might compromise that process.

Mama Lola chose to deal with her ambivalence by telling me and my tape recorder substantially different stories. With the tape rolling, she spoke with all the caution of a public figure facing the press, yet at the same time, she signaled further, secret meanings to me. For example, she would occasionally pull down her right eyelid with a finger to signal that I should not take something she said too seriously; if I asked a sensitive question, she would silently draw her thumb and forefinger across her lips as if closing a zipper. Once she shut off the tape recorder and whispered to me even though no one was in the room except the two of us. I have repeated here only the taped version of the interview. For the purposes of this chapter, the contorted progress of the conversation and its modes of secrecy production are far more important than any of the particular topics discussed.

When I asked Mama Lola if she was "doing some work" for Louima, a tactful reference to Vodou healing practices, at first she evaded the question:

ML Oh, we pray. We do prayer! I always pray for him a lot.

KB Right.

ML I . . . uh . . . do something . . . but I don't think he know if I do it or not. . . . I go downstairs to my altar, I pray to the spirits, and do some work with coconut. I use coconut water for clarity. I take the coconut water, and I put some good-luck powder. I take lots of *veven* leaves . . . High John the Conqueror root too. . . . I add olive oil and I make a lamp for him . . . for three days.

KB So, the lamp has to burn for three days, huh?

ML Yes. After three days, I put the coconut [shell, with ingredients] in the sea to sail it away. . . . I go to Coney Island to do that.

KB Why did you have to take it to the sea?

ML To wash all the bad in him, all the bad thing people talking about him. You know, to clear him . . . to clear him . . . in front of everybody.

KB Don't you also take it to the sea because you can get closer to the spirits there?

ML Yes, my ancestors, that's right. His ancestors too. . . . The pigeon was after that. I do it in my house . . . in the basement. I talk to the pigeon, and then I put Abner' name inside the pigeon's mouth, and I let it fly away.

KB You talked to the pigeon first, like you told it what needs to happen?

ML Exactly. Exactly. Then I sent it away.

KB But when you're with Louima, you just pray?

ML He don't ask me, don't pay me to do nothing. . . .

KB He's afraid if somebody thought he was doing Vodou, it would hurt his case?

ML Oh, that's the truth! They will think maybe he come to me to do something. . . .

KB Something evil?

ML Exactly, yup!

KB Is his name on your altar now? [I knew she did that for her clients.]

ML No, I don't put his name on the altar. I don't want nobody to come in to my altar to see his name there.

KB But otherwise you would have put it there?

ML Yes.

KB Did you put anything else of his on the altar?

ML His name. I put it um . . . um . . . behind the statue, but nobody don't see it.

KB Lola, it's so sad. . . . You're helping him . . . and you have to be so secretive. . . .

ML You know, people take everything in the wrong way. And they just blah, blah, blah, blah the mouth. So, in this world you have to be careful.

Mama Lola set out to change Louima's "luck" through the manufacture of two types of *wanga* (charms) drawn from her repertoire of ritual healing practices, one based on a coconut and the other a pigeon (see Brown 1995). Her intention was to bring about a situation in which Abner Louima and the things that motivated him would be more transparent to those who were judging him every day in the media and on the streets. For her to do this, it was necessary to keep some things secret.

Secrecy and Discretion in the Lives of Haitian Immigrants

If Louima did "serve the spirits," the most common expression for what outsiders call "practicing Vodou," he would have denied it if asked about it by journalists pursuing the police brutality case. Thanks to the advice of his community, practically every time Louima was in front of television cameras he was accompanied by a Protestant minister said to be his uncle. This was a politically astute move if not an absolutely honest one. For Haitians, conversion to Protestantism automatically entails a total rejection of the Vodou spirits. Thus, while the minister's presence communicated many things, chief among them was that Abner Louima is not into Vodou.

Furthermore, even if Louima were not the central character in a major news story, he probably would ask Lola to keep any spiritual work she did for him secret. Healing work almost always deals with personal problems, and so it follows that the most respected healers are those who know how to be discreet. For political, social, and religious reasons, secrecy is an important virtue in the lives of Haitians living in Haiti, a crowded country with scarce resources. In somewhat different ways, secrecy is important in the diaspora communities as well. In general, poor immigrants from Haiti dislike giving out information about themselves. Officially, there are around 250,000 Haitians living in New York City itself, a significant underestimation, since many Haitians living in the city are undocumented and resist being counted. Yet even those who have their papers try to avoid bureaucratic accountability. They routinely have the telephone bill in one name and the mortgage in another. They frequently give misleading information about age, family, and work history. This reflects a deep lack of trust in bureaucracy of any kind, but it also is influenced by everyday social relations. Since so much of what it can mean to be a Haitian (poverty, illiteracy, blackness, Vodou) provokes prejudicial treatment in New York City, immigrants keep their heads down and school their children in secretiveness as a survival strategy in urban America. This old pattern is currently shifting. What happened to Abner Louima and the community response it evoked have contributed to a new assertiveness among Haitians, a new willingness to take a public stand on issues that affect their lives.

The Haitian Community Acts against Police Brutality

Historically, Haitians in the United States have avoided political activity. This attitude began to change when Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a populist candidate for president of Haiti, won the election in 1990. Much of his campaign was financed by expatriates. Aristide's victory galvanized members of the diaspora community, increasing their pride and making them bolder participants

in U.S. and Haitian politics. Even though the United States was complicit in the 1991 coup, afterward, Aristide set up his government in exile in Washington, D.C. Then the Haitian political presence in New York City took on a new character as angry crowds demonstrated on several occasions. The demonstration for Louima in 1997 was in this tradition, but it also marked a new stage in the growing involvement of Haitians in local politics. Many protest signs blamed Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for what happened to Abner Louima. When Louima was first interviewed by the police, he said Officer Volpe, while attacking him, bragged, "It's not Dinkins time anymore. This is Giuliani time now." (David Dinkins, an African American preceded Giuliani in the mayor's office.) Louima later retracted this testimony. A Haitian community leader had told him to say it so what happened to Louima would get the attention of the media and not be quickly forgotten as other cases of police brutality against Haitians have been.

The crowd that marched from Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn to City Hall in Manhattan to protest the brutalization of Abner Louima at the hands of the New York Police Department (NYPD) made up one of the largest Haitian demonstrations ever held in New York City. There were many reasons for the size of this August 1997 event. Al Sharpton, a well-known African American minister and activist, stepped in to help organize the march for Louima, while at the same time a half dozen other Caribbean communities in New York chose to stand in solidarity with Haitians on the issue of police violence. Yet I doubt that either of these circumstances was as responsible for the protest's size and energy as the basic affront to human worth and dignity that the Louima case represented. Haitians were simply fed up. This time the New York City police had gone too far.

Mustering early at the Manhattan end of the Brooklyn Bridge, the police were out in force on the day of the demonstration, and they were nervous. Hours before the protest was scheduled to begin, more than 100 officers, men and women, gathered in lower Manhattan. A dozen police cars were parked in formation at the end of the bridge, a roadblock ready to be deployed if things got out of hand. Helmets, shields, and batons were in evidence everywhere. Metal gates cordoned off areas for the police along the edges of the demonstration route.

As soon as the crowd appeared over the crest of the Brooklyn Bridge, it was clear that the Haitian demonstrators and the NYPD had quite different scenarios in mind. This was not a crowd bent on violence. Colorfully dressed, carrying a wide variety of protest signs, accompanied by energetic dancers and drummers, singing songs and shouting slogans, the protesters articulated a virtual directory of strategies for handling fear and outrage. In order to contain the awful power of the Louima event and turn it toward something more constructive, the Haitian community was calling on every meaning-making system it had access to, traditional or newly acquired.

Some of the protest rhetoric focused on psychological explanations; "Justin A. Volpe is a sexual sadist," one sign declared. Others protesters turned to the authority of the Christian religion, terrain Haitian Americans share with most other Americans.[2] A huge placard, dense with earnest longhand script, argued for the connection of this terrible event to the Second Coming of the Messiah. In addition, rhetorics of justice and human rights were peppered throughout the signs carried by the protesters. Marking it a truly Haitian event were two people in costume, both possessed by Vodou spirits. One had Papa Gede, the spirit of sex, death, and humor, and another had the peasant farmer Azaka, a character valued for his plain speech and blunt truth telling. The first was dressed in black, and his face was covered in white powder. The second wore the embroidered blue denim outfit that in Vodou temples has become emblematic of Haitians from the countryside.

Many homemade placards castigated the current political climate in the city, a problem for which they laid the blame squarely at Mayor Giuliani's feet. Because of his "get tough on crime" policies, many people, not only Haitians, hold the mayor responsible for a general increase in racial discrimination in New York City and specifically for an increase in police harassment of blacks and Hispanics. The mayor was depicted on one sign with his head in a toilet bowl. Other signs showed Giuliani, not Louima, as the one whose pants got pulled down. This was not a crowd that was going to gloss over the details of the attack on Louima or turn away from its shaming aspects. At short intervals along the route of the march, a theater group reenacted the brutalization of Abner Louima, albeit in a somewhat abstract way.

Several Haitian marchers had drawn caricatures of the offending police officers on their placards; many other demonstrators carried toilet plungers, which they used in creative ways to comment on the frightening events in the Seventieth Precinct. A couple of men in the crowd fixed the rubber cup of the plunger to the top of their heads. Other Haitian men communicated more directly and attached it to their crotches. Three men carried a coffin with a toilet plunger handle emerging from its lid, positioned like the erection of a corpse, a further signal of the presence of the randy Vodou death spirit, Gede. Dozens of people in the crowd painted their plunger handles red, and sign after sign depicted toilet plungers with blood dripping from the stem.

Late in the afternoon, the crowd gathered near City Hall to listen to speeches about police violence. On the stage were the Reverend Al Sharpton and several leaders of the Haitian community, including the Reverend Philius H. Nicolas, Louima's putative uncle and pastor of the Evangelical Crusade Church in Flatbush, Brooklyn. When one of the speakers made an especially powerful point, a sea of toilet plungers bobbed enthusiastically over the heads of the crowd. A marcher told me it was impossible to buy a toilet plunger in Brooklyn that day. He reported that all the hardware stores were sold out before

the march began. The *New York Times*, which otherwise covered the demonstration in detail, made no mention of toilet plungers.

I remember thinking at the time that there was something very *wanga*-like about the way the Haitian protesters used the toilet plungers. One of the most important things this demonstration accomplished was changing the emotional valence of an instrument of torture. Prior to the march, the toilet plunger was a sign of shame and pain, but on that hot August day, Haitian immigrants took what they feared most, brought it out into the light of public scrutiny, and turned it into an instrument of resistance. What initially appeared to be mere play with the plungers was actually what Vodou practitioners call "working the *wanga*." It is true that, as a rule, the making of Vodou charms is a private matter, yet in some circumstances, it is the public exposure of such a secret thing that gives it real clout. For example, I once heard a story of a shop owner in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, who was trying to ruin the business of a competitor by telling false stories about her. A trail of yellow powder across the doorway of the gossip not only served as a serious warning but also moved that person's offense into the realm of the larger community's responsibility.

Black Magic and the Making of *Wanga*

Issues of secrecy, especially the malevolent kind, are overdetermined in relation to anything that has to do with Haiti, a country and culture that, in the eyes of white America, is virtually synonymous with black magic. Haitians have absorbed the colonial language about magic. These days they refer to both "white magic" and "black magic" in their traditional African-based religion, Vodou.[3] In spite of this superficial rhetoric, Haitian Vodou actually tends to avoid the good-evil dichotomy. Vodou priests and priestesses make *wanga* to help clients with love, health, money, and, not infrequently, legal problems, and giving such help is often morally complex. Helping one person may mean limiting or controlling another. Those who specialize in the Vodou arts of healing are as likely as not to refer to all dimensions of these practices as *maji* (magic). Because this is such a deeply rooted part of the culture, it is understandable that the larger Haitian community turned to a kind of *maji* to deal with the trauma of the Louima incident.

Wanga, such as Mama Lola made for Abner Louima, are simultaneously representations of troubled relationships and the means for solving the problems they represent. The High John the Conqueror root in Lola's coconut *wanga*, for example, points both to the fact that Louima is under attack and to the resources he has to fight that battle. The coconut "water," a clear, sweet liquid, prefigures the power of the ancestors and spirits to improve the vision of those having trouble seeing Abner Louima clearly and to sweeten their attitudes toward him. Ideally, the person with the problem should "work the *wanga*," that is, maintain a prescribed regimen of ritual practices such as praying and lighting candles before the *wanga*, but I have seen Lola take over this responsibility for clients other than Louima when they could not conveniently keep a *wanga* in their own home. This was the case, for example, with a *wanga* Lola made for a woman whose husband was unfaithful. Lola made a soft, pliable little doll, complete with male genitalia, out of an article of the husband's clothing and then, using heavy wire and a padlock, bound the doll into a small wooden chair. For months it was Mama Lola who kept an oil lamp burning next to the bound figure of the woman's husband. Here, also, the *wanga* describes both the problem and the solution. Lola predicted that sooner or later the wandering husband would "bow his head" before his wife just as Santa Clara bowed her head in the image of the saint that, as a finishing touch, Lola placed on the wall directly in front of the male doll. Bringing an imagined change into reality is what working a *wanga* is all about. The making of *wanga* and related diaspora practices are venerable, old traditions. I will never forget the emotional impact of an eighteenth-century *wanga* I saw in the Port-au-Prince ethnographic museum on one of my first trips to Haiti. It was composed of an old pitted glass bottle and a short section of slave chains. *Wanga* can be traced to ritual practices found throughout West and Central Africa. Among other sources, Haitian Vodou *wanga* have roots in Dahomean *bocio* (Blier 1995) and Kongo *minkisi* (MacGaffey 1993). Bocio and minkisi are wanga-like creations—charms used to heal, protect, or otherwise remedy undesirable social situations.

In all cases the practices associated with *wanga* are used to manipulate power by changing human relationships. When looked at in this way, it is clear that the power of the *wanga* is largely discursive; it is the power to rewrite the existential narrative at issue. The *wanga* Mama Lola made for Abner Louima are not, therefore, all that different from newspaper accounts of Louima's experience with the police, or from arguments made by defense and prosecuting attorneys in the courtrooms where the crimes committed against Louima were adjudicated. All, including Mama Lola's *wanga*, are competing narratives empowered by their various abilities to convince key audiences (including spiritual ones) of their points of view and therefore shift problematic situations. This process is complex because each new narrative is unavoidably launched into a sea of old ideologies, automatic associations, and rigid interpretations. Some people have to work against this situation; others profit from it. While some masters of narrative must anticipate and guard against possible points of deliberate misunderstanding, *meconnaissance* (perhaps by keeping certain things secret), others work at making a narrative say things indirectly, things that otherwise would be unspeakable in this particular place and time. The discussion now turns to what I will call "word *wanga*," and thus to the many ways in which the person and the experience of Abner Louima were reconfigured in the press and in the courtroom. Following the path of the African *wanga* has

led to the magical practices of largely white, bureaucratic institutions in the United States.

The Media Construct Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo

On February 4, 1999, eighteen months after Louima's encounter with the officers of the Seventieth Precinct, Amadou Diallo, a West African immigrant who worked as a sidewalk merchant in New York City, was fired upon forty-one times at close range, late at night, while standing in the entryway to his Bronx apartment. He was unarmed. All shots came from four NYPD officers, members of an elite anticrime unit that traveled in plain clothes. According to a *New York Times* editorial of February 12, 1999, the macho slogan of this unit is "We Own the Night." Nineteen bullets entered the body of Diallo, who died shortly thereafter.

Approximately two months after Amadou Diallo's death, in a guest editorial in the *New York Times*, April 19, 1999, titled "For Most Brutality Isn't the Issue," New York City police commissioner Howard Safir called the shooting of Diallo "a tragedy" that "only the judicial system can produce answers for." He added that, even though he did hear complaints about the police, "the complaints . . . are not of officers being brutal, but of officers being brusque." He concluded with the announcement of a police "civility campaign." "We are giving officers tips on how to be more polite," Safir wrote. He made no mention of Abner Louima. Nevertheless, the two cases were immediately linked by the media and by the general public.

The Louima and Diallo cases both involved police violence against recent immigrants to the United States; both victims were black. Given these similarities, it was initially puzzling that the two cases received significantly different treatment from the public and the media. The Diallo case was in the news continuously beginning the day he was killed. There were dozens of events protesting the shooting of Diallo: a memorial, demonstrations before and after the memorial, vigils, religious services, and concerts. These events attracted people from across New York's social, racial, and ethnic spectrum. There were several demonstrations for Abner Louima, one of them sizable, yet Haitian immigrants made up the great majority at all events. Also, in contrast with Diallo, Abner Louima disappeared from the newspapers and the evening television news rather quickly. His case actually got more coverage later, during the second trial, for obstruction of justice. By then, the offense against Louima had become so involved with other incidents of police violence, including Diallo's death, that jury verdicts often seemed to be responding more to the larger context of police brutality in New York City than to the specific events the jury members were asked to judge.

A U.S. film crew followed Diallo's mother at the height of her grief back to Africa, to Guinea, where she took her son's body for a traditional funeral and burial. Long segments of this footage were broadcast on the evening news on several U.S. channels. Since her first visit, occasioned by her son's death, Kadiatou Diallo has become something of a public figure in the United States, speaking out repeatedly against police violence and for gun control. An "interfaith prayer and community healing" service was held for Diallo, a Muslim, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At the service, according to David M. Haiszenhorn, in a *New York Times* article of March 15, 1999, titled "Mayor Expresses Regret over Police Shooting of Immigrant," Mayor Giuliani referred to Diallo's death as the "loss of an innocent person." He also called the event "a terrible rending tragedy." I do not recall anyone in the media characterizing Louima as an "innocent" person. However, a *New York Times* story on the Web, June 8, 1999, reported that one of the attorneys defending the police officers did refer to him as "a 'professional victim' looking for big money damages from the city." Furthermore, the newspapers I read never mentioned the names of Louima's parents, his children, or the place where he was born in Haiti. On the contrary, parts of Louima's identity—his Haitianness in general and especially his religion—had to be muted and handled with discretion. In spite of the fact that the great majority of people in Haiti serve the Vodou spirits in one way or another, any possible Vodou connection to Abner Louima had to be thoroughly hidden so that, in a context of prejudice, he could remain a credible witness against his attackers.

Mayor Giuliani and Commissioner Safir honored Diallo by going to his memorial service at the impressive Islamic Cultural Center of New York on East Ninety-sixth street in Manhattan. That event and the one at the Brooklyn Academy of Music became occasions on which multicultural and religiously pluralistic New York City was put on display, but Abner Louima's case represented nothing about the city that the larger public wanted to honor.

The cases of Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo differed in other ways. Diallo came from Africa, and in death he conveniently went back there, sounding an end note for the whole affair. Louima survived the sadistic sexual attack against him and thus must continue to be dealt with, like all the other impoverished people from his country who will not stop knocking at the back door of the United States. Furthermore, Louima has a personal damage suit pending against the NYPD.

Deeper and more trenchant reasons for the different media treatment of Louima and Diallo have to do with the hypersexualized black body. Viewing blacks in this way is a historically deep habit of mind for Euro-Americans. Reason might never have been crowned in the aftermath of the French Revolution if Africans, and a few others, had not long been designated to carry the burden of sexuality, with its inherent irrationality and potential for untidiness

and loss of control. Partly because Louima was already in place to carry the burden, Diallo escape being branded in this way. His sexuality simply got erased by the media. It was never an issue. Diallo's body-under-attack was configured as a clean, fully clothed body. Visually it was at times represented by an anonymous two-dimensional outline of a human body crosshatched by nineteen bullet trajectories. The more common visual icon of the violence unleashed against Diallo, however, was a photograph of the empty, bullet-pocked entryway to his Bronx building. Diallo, doubly contained (both safely buried and on the other side of the ocean), is gone from this picture, and thus he could be reconfigured as deemed necessary by the media. Thus, Diallo approached the type of pure victim that motivates politics on both the Left and the Right in America.

Partly because of the comparison with the murdered Diallo, Louima, who is alive, has not been allowed to be an innocent victim. What is more, his body-under-attack was highly problematic; it had trousers pulled down around the ankles. The media's visual icon of the violence against Louima, like Diallo's vestibule, was empty of a human presence. In this case, however, the iconic photograph did not show a neutral, public space but an empty precinct bathroom. This scene-of-the-crime photo, printed in newspapers and shown on television several times during the early coverage of the attack on Louima, functioned as a highly suggestive erasure, daring the reader to imagine what happened there. The hypersexual, penetrable, and penetrating, black (read colonized) body, made excitingly vulnerable and accessible through extremes of social power and physical control, is positioned at the center of Abner Louima's story of torture, as it was at the center of slavery.

In another, related dimension of media word magic, homosexuality can be detected as a partially submerged theme in the narrative of Louima's torture. A *Washington Post* article of May 28, 1999, repeatedly refers to Louima having been "sodomized," a word whose common usage neatly erases the violence from the incident and accentuates the fact that it occurred between two men. During the two years following Louima's torture by the police, the verb "to sodomize" appeared in several articles such as the one just cited, yet more recently members of the press (including more than one writing for New York's *Haitian Times*)[4] have almost unanimously fallen into this extended, half-conscious fantasy that Abner Louima is gay. "To sodomize" is now, across the board, the verb of choice in the frequent articles on police brutality that mention Louima's case. In such word *wanga*, some degree of unconsciousness (a form of keeping secrets from oneself) on the part of the writer is essential. Were the language more transparent to its meaning, its foolishness and lack of integrity would also be more apparent.

A more straightforward charge of homosexuality was at issue in the first trial of Abner Louima's attackers. In his opening statements, Marvyn Kornberg, Justin Volpe's attorney, suggested that Louima might have sustained his injuries prior to arrest, from consensual gay sex in the bathroom of the Club Rendez-Vous. In the weeks of testimony, this stunningly irrational argument did not made it back into the courtroom. Nevertheless, the damage had been done. Kornberg's underlying point, coyly signaled to the jury, was that if Louima had sex with men, then what happened to him, grotesque as it was, was in some way his own fault. Robert Volpe, Justin Volpe's father, spun his own tale about how Louima shared the blame with his son.[5]

Abner Louima's moral stature was attacked in other ways as well. For example, he was called a liar because of discrepancies between his description of the attack when he was first interviewed in the hospital and his current version of it. According to Joseph P. Fried, in a May 17, 1999, *New York Times* article on the Web, one issue was his comment about it being "Giuliani time"; another concerned his body posture at the time of the attack. Was he crouched down and bending over, as he now claims, or was he pinned down on the floor, as he said when first questioned? It is not difficult to see how Louima might have initially hedged his story, feeling his manhood at stake in these postural differences. Either way, such goings-on do not produce good victims. Sexual tension lies just below the surface in practically everything written about Louima's story, and it is fed by secrecy, silence, and erasure. The biggest erasure was what I kept expecting to see in print, but never did: "Justin Volpe raped Abner Louima."

Reconfigurations from the Judge's Bench and Jury Box

The trial of May and June 1999 led to acquittals for all officers involved on charges related to the immediate circumstances of Abner Louima's arrest and to the beatings he received on the way to the police station. This is significant because these are the dimensions of the crime against Louima that connect with patterns of police violence widely experienced in the Haitian (and other) immigrant communities. The Louima case, like Diallo's, involved racial profiling (suspecting people of color for no reason other than their color) and street justice (precipitous and unjustified use of force by police on the streets). When these dimensions of the Louima case are taken away, the whole affair shrinks to a weird event that happened in a precinct bathroom, a onetime thing to be dealt with and quickly forgotten. In the first trial Justin Volpe, who did the deed, got thirty years; Charles Schwarz, who assisted, received the same sentence. Even though neither Volpe nor Schwarz pleaded insanity, as a result of the way the jury sorted out the evidence and decided whose claims were credible and whose were not, these two men were transformed from rogue cops who were part of a larger pattern of behavior in the police force to idio-

syncratic sick individuals. Due to the individualism on which the U.S. justice system is founded, making sense of institutionalized violence is not something it does well.

In February 2000, Amadou Diallo's attackers were on trial for murder. By this time, the case had become *the* police brutality case, the lightning rod for a city's fear and suspicion of its police force. Around the same time, three of the four former police officers who attacked Louima went on trial again, this time for conspiracy to impede a police investigation. In Diallo's trial, it was also the way the event was reconfigured—what evidence was admissible, what was not, and how the defense and prosecution shaped their cases—that determined the outcome. During the trial the defense repeatedly discredited witnesses who were not present for the entire event because they did not have the context to interpret what they saw and heard. There were, however, no witnesses who were present the whole time except the officers themselves. The case against the men who shot Amadou Diallo thus came to rest entirely on the state of mind of the four defendants. It all came down to whether the officers believed Diallo had a gun and continued to believe he had a gun and was dangerous for the entire time it took them to fire forty-one bullets. It was no surprise that all four testified in the affirmative on that point, and no surprise that all were acquitted. After the verdict, groups of young men stood a silent and angry vigil in Diallo's Bronx neighborhood, holding up their black wallets. It was a black wallet Diallo had in his hand, not a gun.

A leaflet, written in Haitian Creole and circulated in Brooklyn shortly after the Diallo verdicts, announced a protest demonstration and encouraged people to come: "Pote tanbou! Pote plonje twalet!" (Bring drums! Bring toilet plungers!). The tie between the Louima and Diallo cases lived on among the people. I am convinced that it was the offense caused by the acquittals in the Diallo case that ricocheted into the second Louima trial courtroom, producing unexpected guilty verdicts there. Three officers involved in the Louima arrest, Charles Schwarz, Thomas Bruder, and Thomas Wiese, were indicted on charges of conspiracy to obstruct justice. Volpe confessed and plea-bargained halfway through the first trial, so he was out of the picture by the time of the second trial, even though he was worse than any of the other officers when it came to impeding the internal police investigation. For example, he never provided the name of the other man who was in the bathroom with him when he assaulted Louima. In the second round of verdicts, Schwarz got another fifteen years and eight months, and Bruder and Wiese each ended up with a sentence of five years in jail. Again, police officers received what were probably well-deserved sentences, but at the same time, a larger, structural source of police brutality, in this case the undercover police units who claim to "own the night," sidestepped accountability. As the Haitian proverb says, "Konplo pi fo passe wanga" (conspiracies are stronger than magic).

Racism in the Shadow of the Fetish

It seems that whenever Haitians are in the news, a reference to Vodou cannot be far behind. In a June 20, 2000, *Village Voice* article titled "Police Brutality and Voodoo Justice," Peter Noel, a black journalist whose byline appears frequently in the that publication, wrote that "the father of Justin Volpe, the white cop who was accused of sodomizing Louima . . . told friends he was warned by Haitian spiritual healers that Louima is a wicked voodoo high priest bent on deadly revenge." In the same article, Noel also reported that a cop improbably named Ridgway de Szigethy, who spends his time investigating occult organizations, told Noel that to protect his son during the first trial Robert Volpe carried "a little purple crystal . . . and a little vial of holy water." By virtually equating crystals and holy water with Vodou *wanga*, Noel exhibits a democratic disdain for all religions, but as a result he misses the depth and significance of the racism in Robert Volpe's attempt to condemn Abner Louima through references to the African-based religion of his homeland. This is an old ploy and one with a long, continuous history. This maneuver is in fact a cornerstone in the historic and current structure of European and American racism. A look at the history of the term "fetish," a word that is in most cases interchangeable with *wanga*, will give a glimpse into the depth and complexity of the racist tropes peppered throughout the coverage of Louima's encounter with the officers of New York's Seventieth Precinct.

More than 400 years ago, Europeans chose the term "fetish" to stand for powerful material objects used in traditional African religious settings. Chief among these objects were charms related to what would later become Vodou *wanga*. Not long after, the term "fetishism" or "fetish religion" began to be routinely applied to all aspects of all indigenous African religions. To this day the Vodun (Fon spirits or deities found in the Republic of Benin, formerly Dahomey) are called *fetiches* and their priests, *feticheurs*, another instance of a colonized people swallowing colonial rhetoric. Diviners throughout Benin are called *charlatans*, yet another remnant of the French presence in the former Dahomey.

According to William Pietz, who has written an important series of articles on the history of the concept of fetishism, "The fetish, as an idea and a problem, and as a novel object not proper to any prior discrete society, originated in the cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (1985:5). Fetish theory, Pietz says "was fully established in European intellectual discourse by 1800" (1987: 25). The term subsequently became an unusually influential one in a wide range of intellectual, political, and economic interactions between Europe and Africa. For a remarkably long time, fetish theory has provided the most pervasive and broadly influential rationale for racism, colonialism, and general Western cultural chauvinism.

Newton and Locke, figures of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, both had in their libraries copies of the book that introduced "fetish religion" to the European world, Wilem's Bosman's 1702 publication, *A New and Accurate Account of the Coast of Guinea* (Pietz 1988). According to the theory of fetishism, "consecrated at the end of the eighteenth century by no less than G.W.F. Hegel in *The Philosophy of History*, Africans were incapable of abstract and generalizing thought; instead their ideas and actions were governed by impulse," and as a consequence, it was commonly assumed that "anything upon which an African's eye happened to fall might be taken up by him and made into a 'fetish,' absurdly endowed with imaginary powers" (MacGaffey 1993: 32). In the nineteenth century, the concept of fetishism became theoretically indispensable to three of the founders of social science: Comte, Marx, and Freud. It is my purpose here to demonstrate that this intellectual arrangement has, from the beginning, been devastating for black people, and that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the fetish trope still covertly and overtly shapes the images Euro-Americans hold of Africans and African Americans in cosmopolitan New York City.

A "theoretically suggestive" term (Pietz 1985), the word "fetish" provided the rubric under which all of Africa came to play the Other to Enlightenment rationalism. Most important was the role the European idea of the fetish played in crystallizing the notion that so-called primitive thinking was characterized by a false theory of causality, a mistaken belief that material objects could be manipulated in such a way as to change the conditions of a person's life (Pietz 1988). When the presumed immorality of the *feticheur* was added to this mix, the fetish became the perfect foil for making the (illogical) connection so crucial to the Enlightenment, the connection between reason and righteousness. When seen from this perspective, it appears the humble, antiaesthetic fetish was nothing less than a midwife to the Enlightenment.

Two things are thus important to remember from this short history of the fetish/*wanga*: first, the act of almost unbelievable meconnaissance that led Europeans to characterize all African religions, each one different from the other and each a rich moral universe, as nothing but instrumental magic carried out by bumbling sacerdotes paradoxically characterized as both childlike and evil; second the equally inappropriate characterization of African religion as bad science, that is, as primitive thinking or mistaken reasoning.

The European indictment of the African fetish was not merely a matter of slander. The configuration of African religion as fetishism had very tangible political and religious effects. This was the story in Haiti, for example, from the beginning of the eighteenth century until long after the end of European domination. In the early eighteenth century, Haitian slaves found making the benign protective charms called *gad-ko*, (bodyguards), which usually consist of herbal mixtures put under the skin or small cloth bags pinned inside clothing, were tortured brutally as sorcerers who gained power by deception." Even after the Haitian slave revolution (1791–1804), what Anna Wexler (forthcoming) calls "the long shadow of the fetish" did not lift. President Jean-Pierre Boyer Of Haiti, 100 in his 1835 Penal Code, outlined punishments for all religious practitioners who "nourish in the hearts of people the spirit of fetishism," that is to say, all "makers of wangas, caprelatas, vaudoux, donpedre, macandale and other sorceries" (Metraux 1972: 270). In 1935, President Sténio Vincent "single[d] out for persecution priests and others who make and possess *wanga* and exploit the public by making them believe that it is possible to change life situations by 'occult' methods" (Hurbon 1988).

It is sobering to realize how important maneuvers such as the misrecognition of African religion and its equation with bad science are to the representation of the African-based religion practiced in Haiti and by Haitians in diaspora today. A small example: the *New York Times* currently refuses to spell "voodoo" with a capital *V* (spelling it "Vodou," as Haitians prefer, is out of the question) even though it capitalizes the names of other religions, including other African-based Caribbean religions.[6] This commitment to a deeply compromised form of the term keeps it handy for use in put-down phrases such as "voodoo economics."[7]

A more complex and weighty example is to be found in the language of Stephen Worth, a lawyer from the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (PBA). On the same day jury selection was completed for the Louima case, May 3, 1999, the official coroner's report on Diallo was finally released—three long months after the shooting. An earlier autopsy, requested by lawyers engaged by the Diallo family, concluded that the police continued to shoot after Amadou Diallo was already down and immobilized. The coroner's report confused this issue by initially making no judgments about which shots came first or how fast they were fired.[8] Kevin Flynn, in an article in the *New York Times*, May 4, 1999, reported that Stephen Worth, attorney for one of the men charged with second-degree murder in the death of Amadou Diallo and at the same time attorney for one of the officers accused of beating Louima, celebrated the second coroner's report, crowing that it "puts the lie to the Dream Team's voodoo autopsy and shows it for the pseudoscience that it is." Thus Worth called on one of the oldest and most enduring "voodoo" tropes, its equation with bad science, and in so doing managed simultaneously to compromise the authority of scientific evidence in the Diallo case and, in his other case, to cast doubt on the credibility and morality of both the lawyers and the main witness, Abner Louima. Worth sent a potent racist message that demeaned the lawyers working for Louima and the Diallo family (initially Johnnie L. Cochran's infamous Dream Team served as counsel for both) by making an invisible reference to the O. J. Simpson murder case while simultaneously linking the lawyers to a religion whose name is synonymous with "black magic" and as a result with Haiti, Abner Louima's country.

Conclusion

Our language and the habits of our bodies and minds carry our history. Such habits as race prejudice, sexual fundamentalism, and even habitual disdain for all things Haitian are prominent in the U.S. *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The latter prejudice is pervasive among Euro-Americans[9] and has endured since blacks and mulattoes in Haiti had the temerity to win their freedom and dignity by fighting for them, and had the further rudeness to do so during a period when the United States and many European countries were still holding slaves. Such habits of heart and mind exercise a downward pull on transparent civic values such as those represented by a free press, trial by jury, and police accountability. In the events surrounding Abner Louima, the strategies of transparency set in place actually spawned elaborate strategies of secrecy, and vice versa.

In theory, secrecy and transparency are opposing power dynamics, yet in the Abner Louima case, they appear to have worked together, evoking one another in a paradoxical dance of increasing complexity. Major players in this drama, convinced of the importance of their ultimate goals (or at least equipped with those goals as rationalizing devices), competed for the control of institutions of transparency, such as the press, the judicial system, and police review processes. In the name of keeping peace, Commissioner Howard Safir painted a ridiculously mild, even insulting, picture of the problems between police and civilians in New York City. Police Benevolent Association lawyers Kornberg and Worth, in the name of providing their clients with the best defense possible, began to mount that defense in the press through innuendo, secrecy, and erasure. The news media, in the name of covering the news, repeated what Kornberg and Worth said and eventually laid the Louima case to rest in order to focus on Arnadou Diallo's death. In the name of revealing all the dirty secrets, Peter Noel reported that Robert Volpe carries a bottle of holy water and uses it to make crosses on his own forehead to protect against Louima's Vodou powers.

The way that race interacted with these complex impulses was especially visible in the repeated connection of the Louima and Diallo cases, a linkage that remained in the minds of Haitians and other immigrants even as the second eclipsed the first in the news. The dense, racially charged images that public personalities and journalists called up so effortlessly in commentary on the cases are representations constructed "in the shadow of the fetish." Like the charms Mama Lola made to help Louima, they are *wanga*.

Like *wanga*, these representations of Louima—spoken out but also present in the silences within the words of police, lawyers, and journalists—characterized complex relational situations with the intention of influencing them. The police commissioner, the press, and lawyers involved in the Louima case deployed their own word *wanga*. The Haitian community, in turn, responded to the affront to Louima, and to decades of mistreatment at the hands of New York City officials, by putting their universe of explanations on display, including their much maligned religion, Vodou. More to the point, they put their fear-charged, blood-soaked toilet plunger *wanga*, an externalization of their most intimate and most horrific relational nightmares, on public display. They literally thrust their plungers in the face of the NYPD. This process of exposing *wanga* power in public worked to some extent, like sprinkling yellow powder across the threshold of a troublemaker. It brought Abner Louima's experience to public attention. It threw down the gauntlet in a challenge to the city government to do something about police brutality, while simultaneously tempering the fear of the Haitian community and increasing its political capital. It also contributed to a lengthy legal process that finally got jail sentences for the four men directly involved in the arrest and brutalization of Abner Louima.

In the year 2000, a focus on *wanga* and *wanga*-like constructions does a surprisingly good job of revealing the everyday workings of power on all levels of society in New York, an ethnically diverse city with a heritage of racism. One of the most interesting aspects of this comparison is the similarity between the workings of Mama Lola's *wanga* and workings of what I have called the word *wanga* of politicians, journalists, and lawyers. All are narrative reconfigurations, and all are constructed to control those key narratives. It is ironic that the homely African *wanga*, the very objects used by Europeans at the dawn of the Enlightenment to draw absolute boundaries between themselves and primitive others, should reveal themselves as close cousins of Euro-American "charms" and other "magical" maneuvers.

To some extent, the Haitian community won the battle only to lose the war. The police conspiracy of silence and especially Volpe's withholding of crucial testimony, the evidentiary rulings of the courts, the unconscious racism and homophobia of the press, the ancient racist tropes buried deeply in the speech of just about everybody who got near the case proved more powerful than what either Mama Lola or the Dream Team could do to bring justice not only to Abner Louima but also to the larger Haitian community that experiences continuous police harassment. Institutionalized patterns of abuse, including what could be called racial profiling and street justice, were identified in the 1994 Mollen Commission report on corruption in the NYPD, but nothing was done to address these problems at that time, and nothing has yet been done to address them. While convictions in the Diarlo case would at least have raised these issues of institutionalized racism, the convictions of the four men who brutalized Louima were never seen as relevant to such concerns.

Brian Stevens, writing for *Haitian Times* (July 19–25, 2000), acknowledged that Volpe and his new lawyer had already been to court seeking to cut Volpe's sentence in half. So far such efforts have not succeeded. Abner Louima turned down more than one offer to settle his civil suit because it involved no promises

for reforms in New York police practices. In the summer of 2001, Louima finally accepted an offer for $7.125 million from the city and $1.625 million from the PBA. Although the PBA payment involved no admission of guilt, it was the first time a police union anywhere in the country had been forced to pay in a police violence incident. Yet Louima still got no official promises for police reform. He had to settle for informal promises that had more to do with public relations than with a commitment to change oppressive police practices.

On February 28, 2002, a federal appeals court threw out the obstruction of justice convictions for Schwarz, Bruder, and Wiese because of a technicality. In addition, Schwarz's conviction for aiding Volpe in the attack on Louima was set aside because of another technicality, a conflict of interest on the part of his attorney, Stephen Worth. From the moment Schwarz was freed on $1 million bail, the district attorney made it clear he would be indicted and tried again on these charges.

During the 1999 trials of the cases concerning Louima and Diallo, a large percentage of New Yorkers was deeply concerned about police violence. It was a high-priority issue, but the atmosphere had changed drastically by the time Schwarz's convictions were set aside. Jeffrey Toobin, writing for the *New Yorker* (June 10, 2002, 34–39), described the *Times* coverage of Schwarz's return to the Staten Island home of his mother as "a dewy portrait." He also noted that the three leading New York tabloids—*New York News, Newsday,* and *New York Post*—were also Schwarz boosters. "Free," trumpeted *New York News,* while *Newsday* and *New York Post* cried out, "He's Home" and "He's Out." The events of September 11, 2001, caused this dramatic change. Because of 9/11, every policeman, including former officer Charles Schwarz, automatically became a hero, a person larger than life, someone no true patriot would even consider criticizing. In July 2002, Schwarz's third trial ended in a single perjury conviction with a possible five-year sentence, while the jury was unable to reach verdicts on any of the charges that concerned Schwarz's participation in torturing Louima. There may well be another trial, whether or not justice is served by it.

After the attack on the World Trade Center, the United States plunged with astonishing speed into a period of feverish patriotism. The words "At War" appeared in the *New York Times* headline of September 12, 2001. What transparency there had been in the U.S. media and the criminal court system is rapidly being crowded out by yet another word *wanga,* the War on Terror. On a daily basis, irrational acts of war are being simultaneously revealed and concealed, justified and obscured in the U.S. media and, at times, in its courts of law.

NOTES

1. It was later revealed that the instrument Volpe used to torture Abner Louima was actually the broken-off handle of a broomstick. The toilet plunger, nevertheless, continued to be mentioned in newspapers, and its image became the icon of the protest movement that developed out of this case of police brutality.

2. Most of those who serve the Vodou spirits also consider themselves to be good Catholics.

3. The most basic difference between white and black magic, as the terms are used in Haitian Vodou, is that the first is practiced for the good of the family or a larger community, whereas the second is about the pursuit of selfish and/or individualistic goals.

4. The *Haitian Times,* an English-language newspaper started by former *New York Times* reporter Gary-Pierre Pierre, routinely refers to the "sodomizing" of Abner Louima.

5. David Barstow, in *New York Times* Web article of June 2, 1999, reported that Robert Volpe claimed his son's trial was a "modern day lynching." Barstow quoted the senior Volpe as saying, "This was not an unprovoked situation There was no innocence on the street that night." Barstow continued: "He said his son took Louima to the bathroom that night because he wanted to hit him, to continue the fight. After assaulting him with the stick, Officer Volpe, his father said, yelled, 'Look what you made me do' at Louima."

6. The oddness of this practice was apparent in a January 10, 2000, *New York Times* article, "Catholics Battle Brazilian Faith in 'Black Rome,' " in which the following sentence appeared: "Like Santeria in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean or voodoo in Haiti, Candomble merges the identities of African deities and Roman Catholic saints." An example of the usefulness of the generic "voodoo" comes from the June 15, 2000, edition of the *New York Review of Books,* which carried a full back-page ad for Robert Park's book, *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness and Fraud,* published by Oxford University Press. A blurb from Richard Dawkins promises that "Park does more than debunk, he crucifies. And the result is huge fun . . . Not only will you enjoy reading it. You'll never again waste time or your money on astrologers, 'quantum healers,' homeopaths, spoon benders, perpetual motion merchants or alien abduction fantasists."

7. The low-budget film *Voodoo* released in the 1990s is a textbook example of the first part of the operation by which Europeans positioned Africans in relation to themselves, the one whereby all Africa-related religion becomes fetishism. Oddly enough, there are no black characters in this film, and an atmosphere of fear and dread is created entirely with drumming and quick glimpses of dolls, lighted candles, bits of raffia, and knotted pieces of rope—all the materials of wanga making. That is the only way in which anything connected to Vodou appears in the film that bears its name.

8. A fuller report from the Coroner's Office issued at a later date agreed with the first autopsy report that Diallo was fired on after he had been knocked down by police bullets.

9. According to Roosevelt Joseph, writing for the *Haitian Times* (22–28 March 2000), Dorismond, a twenty-six-year-old security guard, was shot to death by a mem-

II

"Our Work Is Change for the Sake of Justice": Hope Community, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Mary Farrell Bednarowski

Several years ago I was working at articulating a definition of healing that had both sufficient content and enough versatility to fit the multiple interpretations of healing I was encountering in many women's theological writings. It was St. Joseph's Hope Community in Minneapolis, an enterprise that began as a homeless women's shelter, that helped generate the definition I eventually came up with: that, individually and communally, to be healed is to have hope. To offer healing is to offer hope. And hope is that state wherein we know that some kind of response or change or reconciliation or transformation is possible. Whatever the trauma of the present moment or of our circumstances and our histories, there is something more to be said or to be understood, to be experienced or to be accomplished.

I have been aware of the Hope Community for many years, almost since its beginnings, and have had some modest connections with it. It was not until I received an opportunity to participate in the Center for the Study of World Religion's conference on healing in the urban setting that I began to think about Hope as a compelling example of some of the new forms that healing is taking in cities—healing, particularly, of neighborhoods whose earlier capacity to sustain a good, if not affluent, life for its residents has declined to a state that is not only lacking in basic necessities but dangerous. My particular interest in Hope emerges from my work in the theological