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Abstract: Vodou is frequently invoked as a cause of Haiti's continued impoverishment. While scholarly arguments have been advanced for why this is untrue, Vodou is persistently plagued by a poor reputation. This is buttressed, in part, by the frequent appearance in popular culture of the imagined religion of "voodoo." Vodou and voodoo have entwined destinies, and Vodou will continue to suffer from ill repute as long as voodoo remains an outlet for the expression of racist anxieties. The enduring appeal of voodoo is analyzed through its uses in touristic culture, film, television, and literature. Particular attention is given to the genre of horror movies, in which voodoo's connections with violence against whites and hypersexuality are exploited to produce both terror and arousal.

Résumé : Le Vodou est souvent invoqué comme une cause de la misère persistante d'Haïti. Bien que les arguments académiques ont été avancés pour prouver le contraire, le Vodou en générale est toujours mal compris et souvent décrié. Les idées erronées du Vodou sont étayées, en partie, par l'utilisation fréquente dans la culture populaire de la religion imaginaire du « voodoo ». Le Vodou et le voodoo possèdent des destins enlacés, et le Vodou continuera à souffrir d'une mauvaise réputation aussi longtemps que le voodoo reste un instrument pour l'expression des anxiétés racistes. L'attrait durable du voodoo est analysé ici à travers ses usages dans la culture touristique, le cinéma, la télévision, et la littérature. Une attention particulière est donnée au genre des films d'horreur, dans lequel les connexions du voodoo avec la violence contre les blancs et l'hypersexualité sont exploitées pour produire, en même temps, la terreur et l'excitation sexuelle.

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. . . the prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type. Most were seamen, and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattos, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands, gave a colouring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult. . . . Degraded and ignorant as they were, the creatures held with surprising consistency to the central idea of their loathesome faith.

H.P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" (2008 [1928])

Introduction and Theory

Following the *Goudougoudou* of 12 January 2010,¹ Haitian culture and religion fell, once again, under the focus of the international media and opinion makers. Not surprisingly, many succumbed to the seemingly irresistible temptation to recycle many of the stereotypes about Haitian Vodou. This urge is exemplified by David Brooks's *New York Times* op-ed, in which he opined that Haitian Vodou was the cause of many of Haiti's woes. Citing Lawrence Harrison as his inspiration, Brooks wrote (on 14 January 2010),²

Haiti, like most of the world's poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences. There is the influence of the voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile. . . . We're all supposed to politely respect each other's cultures. But some cultures are more progress-resistant than others, and a horrible tragedy was just exacerbated by one of them.

The implication was that, in a country rife with superstition, our well-meaning efforts would succeed only in wasting dollars, as Haiti would inevitably backslide into its heathen ways.

These views of Haitian Vodou do not, however, exist in a kind of suspended animation, latent until activated by crisis. Rather, they are continuously at play in our popular culture, where they manifest most frequently in references to an imagined religion called "voodoo." Principally an invention of Hollywood—and of travel writers long before that—voodoo has power in the imaginations of many, in spite of the fact that it has little or no basis in fact. This imagined religion serves as a venue for the expression of more-or-less undiluted racial anxieties, manifested as lurid fantasies about black peoples. I suggest that these two religions—Haitian Vodou and imagined voodoo—have entwined destinies. While it is of enormous value to rehabilitate the tarnished reputation of Haitian

Vodou, the real battle to be won is in the popular arena, where voodoo continues, unabated and mostly under the radar, to disseminate and reinforce centuries-old racist tropes about blacks and black religiosity. In this paper, I analyze some of the ways that these tropes are expressed in primarily American films, literature, television shows and touristic culture, and suggest possible directions for future research. I also theorize about some of the reasons that voodoo has enjoyed such enduring appeal in popular cultural productions.

The topic of popular representations of Vodou and voodoo has received very little scholarly attention (Murphy, 1990; Bartkowski, 1998; Hurbon, 1995). Perhaps most notable is Joseph Murphy's essay "Black religion and 'black magic'" (1990), which offers exceptional insights into the reasons behind the enduring appeal of voodoo in popular culture. Although some of my terminology differs from Murphy's, I find that I have little cause to depart from his theoretical insights. However, in the intervening twenty years, voodoo has been so routinely and diversely evoked that the scholar of this topic must now contend with magnitudes more material than did Murphy. This is perhaps related to Cosentino's prediction in 1987 that future years would experience an emergence and boom of what he called "Voodoo chic" (an idea to which I will return later).

For the sake of this paper, when I use the term "voodoo" with a lower-case V, I will be referring to the imagined religion. When referring to the religious practices of actual people, I will use an upper-case V. Thus do I attempt to draw a distinction between voodoo and Vodoo, the complex of indigenous African religions practiced in West Africa, particularly in the region centered around Togo and Benin. Both of these are different from the use of the word Vodoo by religious reconstructionists in New Orleans (and increasingly, throughout the United States) for their religious practices. It is unavoidable that these shared names be a bit confusing, since that is precisely the point. While I am sympathetic to attempts to make a clearer distinction between the religion of Vodou and its imaginary doppelgänger of voodoo (Murphy, 1990; Courlander, 1988a, 1988b; Cosentino, 1987, 1988a, 1988b), it sidesteps the circumstances that have generated the need for such a discussion in the first place—namely, that cultural agents routinely and at times purposely utilize precisely these malapropisms. Therefore, I feel compelled to utilize and attempt to make sense of these vexing terms, rather than adopt others (such as Murphy's "black magic") that have heuristic value but little application outside of that. I have attempted to bring some clarity by observing the above rules of capitalization. This is an orthographic distinction of my own devising, however. While "voodoo" has been the most common spelling one finds in Anglophone popular culture, it is occasionally the case that one finds alternative spellings even though the reference is still to this imagined faith.

In New Orleans in the summer of 2009, I had dinner with friends in Muriel's, one of the finer restaurants in the old French Quarter. Muriel's occupies the northeast corner of Jackson Square and serves French-inspired Southern food. Its front dining room, overlooking Chartres Street, is decorated with antiques. The central bar area is made to look like an outdoor courtyard festooned with vines and flowers. Upon entering the men's bathroom, I found its stalls and urinal dividers painted with large-scale reproductions of *vèvè* (Figs. 1 and 2). *Vèvè* are the sacred designs that are traced on the ground during Haitian Vodou ceremonies to welcome the *lwa*, the divine spirits. Each *lwa* has a distinct

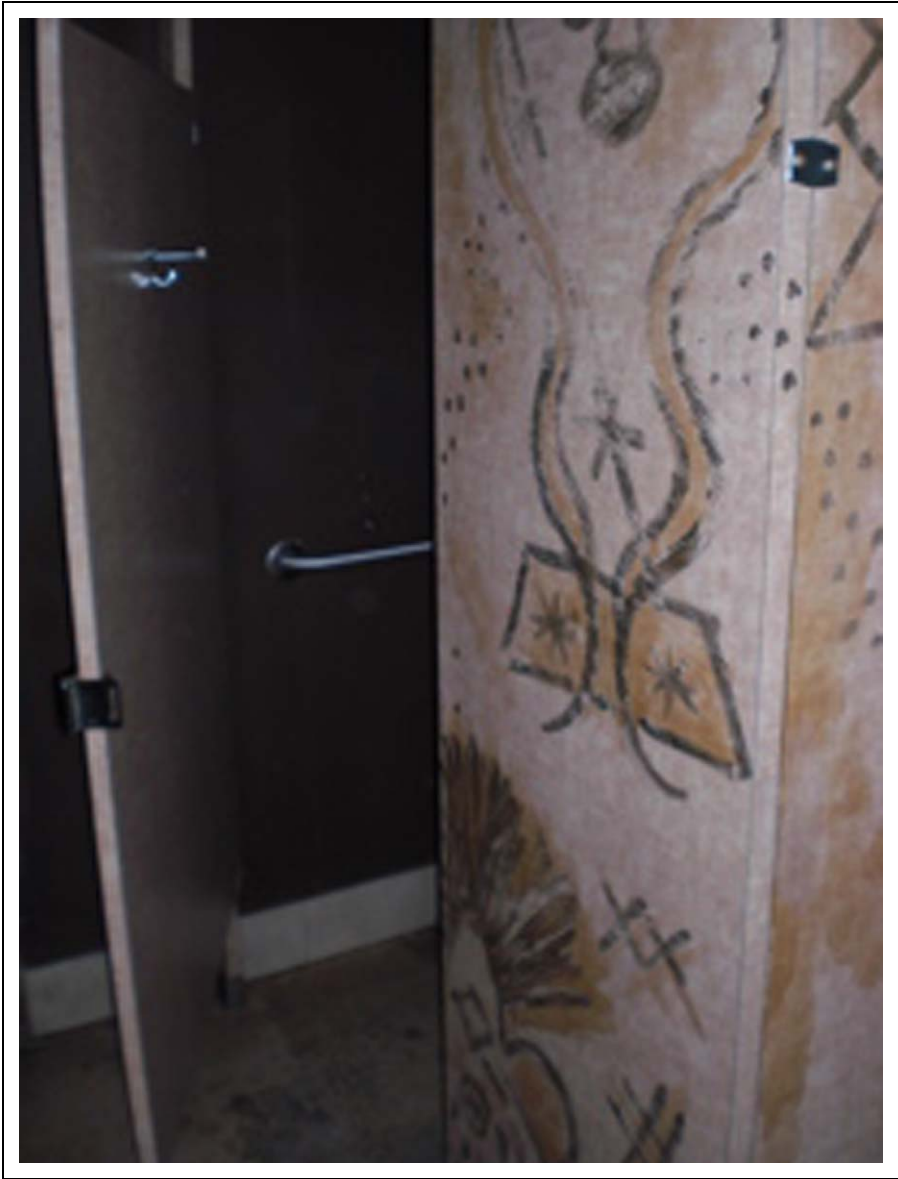


Figure 1. Vèvè painted on a toilet stall of Muriel's, New Orleans, LA. The top half is a distressed (and distressing) depiction of a vèvè for the spirit Danbala Wedo.

vèvè; the design serves as a connection between the physical world and *Gine*, the world of the spirits. Vèvè are therefore considered sacred and esoteric.

While the appearance of vèvè in a bathroom was especially shocking, New Orleans is a city full of references to Vodou, and its near-relative voodoo. To make matters more



Figure 2. Vèvè painted on a toilet stall of Muriel's, New Orleans, LA. The ornate heart is a vèvè for the spirit Ezili Freda.

confusing, one often finds terms such as Vodou, Voodoo and Hoodoo used interchangeably, with little consideration paid to how these might differ. Such distinctions matter little to shop owners and barkeepers whose primary interest in Vodou is as a marketable commodity. Tourists come to New Orleans in part to be shocked by the presence of

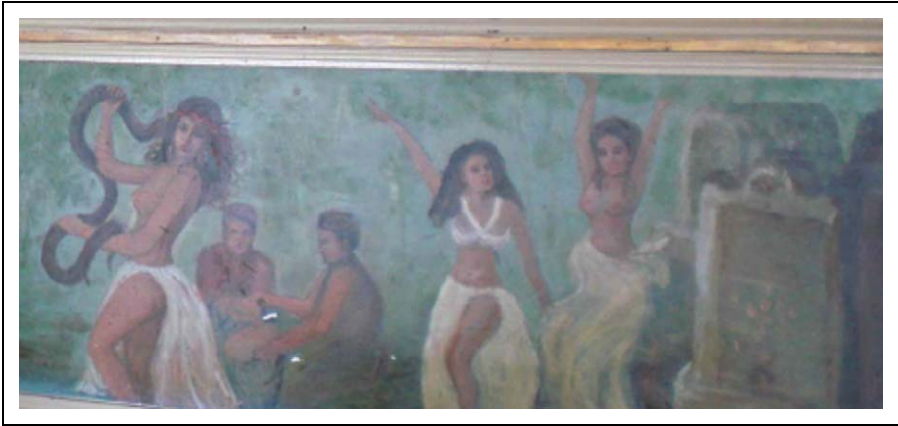


Figure 3. Voodoo-themed mural in Marie Laveau's Bar, New Orleans, LA.

Vodou and other mysterious rites (they also come to get drunk). They often know little enough about these traditions, and can be eager to have their wildest fantasies sold back to them. Businessmen and women are happy to oblige. One will find bars such as Loa, which features a voodoo altar, and Marie Laveau's Bar on Decatur Street, decorated with murals of the famed Voodoo queen writhing in various stages of undress with buxom female coreligionists (Fig. 3). Stores like Rev. Zombie's House of Voodoo and Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo (both in the French Quarter) purport to cater to the needs of Voodooists. In fact, they make their coin primarily selling trinkets and plaster saints to tourists. These stores compete with nearly every generic tourist trap, none of which are complete without a display of voodoo dolls. The Historic Voodoo Museum in the French Quarter, while presenting itself as a serious museum, has little sophistication and plays heavily on the belief that the more dusty and soiled a voodoo altar, the more authentic and powerful it must be. Even the Bourbon French Perfume Company, a serious business with an impressive historical pedigree, includes amongst its offerings a scent called "Voodoo Love" that is claimed to be from one of Marie Laveau's recipes. The perfume comes with instructions to use it by applying an X over the heart and behind the left ear to draw one's object of lust.

The proliferation of signifying on voodoo led me to adopt the descriptive term "voodoo kitsch."³ While the term voodoo kitsch was adopted *in situ* as a response to my experiences in New Orleans, I have since come to find this term useful for encompassing a broad range of portrayals of voodoo—whether in literature, film, music, art, miscellaneous objects from popular culture or in public discourse. Examples abound. There are websites, such as pinstruck.com, which "allows people like yourself to vent on their friends and enemies by sending them personalized voodoo curses via e-mail." There is the Sarkozy voodoo doll that was the source of much hilarity when a French court ordered the manufacturer that its product must carry the warning label that sticking pins in the Sarkozy doll may offend the president's dignity (BBC News). A new roller coaster at Dorney Park in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is called *Possessed* (originally called *Voodoo*, but recently renamed). The roller coaster has the tagline "It will possess you!", and on

Dorney Park's website, the promotional material formerly said that "the power of Voodoo will compel riders to new levels of excitement" (Internet Archive website). And what list would be complete without mention of the Spice Girls' song "Voodoo"? In the song, they sing that the "fever's gonna get you," and encourage the listeners to "get up and use your voodoo, / get your booty to the floor." Both Dorney Park and the Spice Girls have latched onto ideas of possession and zombification as metaphors for the power they exert—whether through a roller coaster or infectious rhythms—to control the will of the audience members and make them behave in the desired fashion.

The term "voodoo kitsch" is similar to Cosentino's "Voodoo chic." It is a term he coined to describe an aesthetic that he felt was gaining in popularity owing to a Gramscian *fin de siècle* malaise. Cosentino, writing in 1987, predicted that popular interest in Voodoo chic would only increase, given its "spiritual *duende*," as well as its embrace of bricolage and the carnivalesque (Cosentino, 1987). However, for describing the above examples, I find the word "chic" to miss the mark. Instead, I prefer the notion of kitsch, with its historic roots in mass production, because these objects, gestures and discourses straddle the line between sincerity and bathos (or pathos, in many cases), good and bad, adopting an aesthetic closely allied with "camp." Aesthetic value aside, their specific appeal lies elsewhere; they appeal because they evoke voodoo. Furthermore, this evocation is done in such a way that, depending on the consumer's situatedness and personal beliefs, the response can be one of curiosity, awe, fear, shock, good-natured humor or derision. The consumer chooses out of this range on the basis of his or her own life experiences, personality and priming.⁴ The nature of the sign (be it a voodoo doll, a horror film or a shabby museum) and its context permit this full range of affective and aesthetic responses, but the sign itself is underdetermined.

In order to understand this complicated range of responses, our task must first be to define what we mean by "voodoo" and furthermore make an effort to interrogate its enduring appeal. These questions are not antiquarian. They matter because Vodou is not ancient history. Vodou and related African and African diaspora religions are practiced by millions of people located around the Atlantic. Moreover, Conjure, Hoodoo and Voodoo remain important but hidden aspects of African American culture, particularly for Southern blacks. To greater or lesser degrees, what one believes about imagined voodoo is also what one believes about all of these people.

The continuation of African religions in the Americas has been of interest to Europeans and Euro-Americans since the beginning of the slave trade. Efforts were made in most cases to deracinate Africans by placing them in contexts where they were incapable of communicating in their native languages or engaging in acts of cultural continuity. The forcible or coerced conversion of slaves to Christianity was typically incentivized, and in many cases the evangelization of Africans was used as an apology for slavery. As one can see in early descriptions by Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797), Haitian Vodou was regarded with deep fascination but also with derision, as a kind of grotesque theater. He describes Vodou dances as frenzied, convulsive, and at times so impassioned that the dancers would literally be killed. These bacchanalian images certainly confirmed for many of his European and American readers that blacks were basically savages given to bestial behavior—an opinion that has subsequently improved in general regarding blacks but has adhered tenaciously to Vodou itself. Part of the question then is, Why?

The scope of this article forbids giving a full description of the process by which Vodou came to be so substantially maligned, but I refer the reader to Laënnec Hurbon's excellent essay, "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou" (1995). For Hurbon, Vodou's infamy is the result of anti-black racism and discourse, combined with the general capacity of Vodou to evoke "disquieting strangeness" (Freud's words)—that is to say, a feeling of the uncanny—in the outside observer (p. 181). I agree with Hurbon's point that Vodou has the power to destabilize the material world. However, since Hurbon's argument could equally be applied to almost any African diaspora faith, such as Santería and Candomblé, it remains vital to account for Vodou's unique appeal in the popular imagination.⁵

We should ask this question in the context of Haiti being the site of the only truly successful slave revolt in recorded history. When black Africans and their New World descendants liberated themselves from the French, they sent a shockwave throughout the Western hemisphere. In their struggle for independence, revolutionary blacks in St Domingue committed considerable violence against white colonists. This was the darkest nightmare of all slaveholders, sprung to life: violent delights come to violent ends. Those fleeing from the Haitian Revolution were treated as though they carried a dangerous disease (Murphy, 1990: 333). Many places, including New Orleans, attempted to control the influx of blacks from Haiti, who, like pathogenic agents, might spread the spirit of rebellion. It is not surprising, then, that Vodou would become a fixation in the white imagination, a site for expressions of both fear and denigration.

I would like to suggest, however, that scholarship on the place of Vodou in popular culture has, to a degree, been led astray by the rather logical—but mistaken—assumption that agents of cultural production are attempting, if badly, to *actually* portray Vodou, but failing out of ignorance. To state it more boldly, I would argue that there is a distinct religion called by the nearly identical name of "voodoo"—which is made no less real for the fact that it has no actual practitioners and, for all intents and purposes, does not exist except in the imaginations of millions of people who have been exposed to American popular culture.⁶

I draw this distinction for two main reasons. The first is to summarily recognize that, while this voodoo is inspired loosely by actual encounters with African-derived religious practices in the Americas, it does not even attempt to realistically reproduce or represent them. Whilst demonstrating this point, again and again, has served as the principal pre-occupation of most critical responses to popular representations of Vodou, I would argue it is the least interesting thing one can say about them. I would rather focus on what *work* these representations are doing.

Second, I would suggest that imagined voodoo exists as a receptacle for centuries of anxieties related to (though not limited to) the sense that entering into a sensual relationship—initiated primarily through slavery—with black Africans was a Faustian bargain. Blacks, once brought to the Americas and Europe, could not be sent back (though not for lack of trying). Colonialism and slavery, intended to be unidirectional relationships of unbounded benefit solely to whites, turned out to be unavoidably ensnaring. The presence of Africa in the Americas is perceived therefore to be a source of contamination, impurity and danger for all involved.

For whites in the Americas, this moral panic has found one expression in the predisposition to view blacks as familiar strangers. Though white and black Americans have

always conducted their lives in intimate proximity—perhaps never so much as during slavery—whites have consistently disavowed this intimacy. Furthermore, whites have ironically pretended that this disavowal is not their own. In other words, the sentence is not “we disavow intimacy with blacks,” but rather, “intimacy has been disavowed,” or “blacks disavow intimacy with us.” In either case, the effect is the same: the disavowal of intimacy is transformed into a site for anxiety springing from perceived out-group threat and a sense of the uncanny—the presence of something which is at once familiar yet irrepressibly foreign. It is vital that we note the end result of this largely invisible process, because it has underwritten a very real historical sleight-of-hand. The effect is to forgive the malicious acts of whites against blacks and to *displace this malice*: “There is an African presence with us now, and it has malicious intent towards us.” Murphy summarizes this sleight-of-hand beautifully.

In the relations between the races: who is seducing whom? Who is committing violence against whom? Who is cannibalizing whom? Images of license and violence in African-derived religions are denials of white guilt, projections of unrestraint and malevolence onto blacks. . . . In each of the literary and cinematic images of voodoo . . . those practising these horrible rites are black and the victims intended to arouse our sympathy are white. Whites are victims of irrational, malevolent and unseen violence which is directed at them by blacks. I believe that in these images of voodoo we have a recognition of social violence and a displacement of its true source. (1990: 332)

As I hope to show, references to voodoo typically express this mix of historical and pseudo-historical concerns about black people and what might be called the predicament of Africa in America. While it is easy enough to say that the New Orleans example—the use of *vèvè* to decorate a bathroom—is demeaning to Haitian Vodou, the inclusion of this historical and cultural discourse expands our understanding considerably. It is no longer an isolated incident of defamation, but rather part of a larger discourse using the trope of voodoo to comment on racial anxieties. Moreover, this allows us to understand such signs in a way that does not depend on the intentions of their agents of transmission. It does not matter whether the person who decorated the bathroom intended to participate in this cultural warfare. As a well-established element of popular culture—and perhaps more so in New Orleans than anywhere else—voodoo is a meme. It is self-replicating and smuggles its darker messages under the guise of other things, such as the aesthetic of kitsch.

Naturally, not every reference to voodoo in popular culture is participating in this discourse. I propose that most do, though—granting that signs are inevitably multivalent and therefore may possess multiple aims. One can perform archaeology on these signs, extracting unconscious or unintended meanings from the strata below the level of the surface, conscious intention. For example, we are familiar with the use of expressions like voodoo economics, voodoo politics and voodoo genetics. In these three instances, the word “voodoo” is used as a synonym for shadowy, superstitious or flawed. Naturally, the aim here is not to comment on voodoo *per se* but rather on a particular style of conducting economics, politics or genetics (cf. Bartkowski, 1998). However, this is similar to expressions like “don’t Jew me,” or using the word “gay” to describe something as ridiculous or

undesirable. In all of these cases, the primary aim of the statement is not to demean voodoo, Jews or gays, but rather the thing that is the topic at hand. Nonetheless, they *also* have the effect, collaterally, of demeaning voodoo, Jews and gays by using the words in this fashion—namely, to describe something that is contemptible.

Vodou is often the victim of this kind of collateral damage—in particular because of voodoo's enduring appeal for the genre of horror. Often, in these cases, voodoo is used as kindling.⁷ By kindling, I mean that voodoo is used to add flavor and induce a particular mood. The appeal of voodoo (the imagined religion) in horror is not surprising, since for Europeans and white Americans, Vodou (the real religion) has always been greeted as a kind of horror. Early twentieth-century accounts, published mostly as travel journals and read widely, echoed Moreau de Saint-Méry's depiction of Haitian Vodou as grotesque and carnivalesque, even insinuating that Vodouisants performed human sacrifices (Murphy, 1990; Seabrook, 1929; Wirkus, 1931; Loederer, 1935). The genre of horror also forges strong links between violence and graphic sexuality. Equally so, Vodou has, in the popular imagination, been hypersexualized—owing, in part, to what Murphy (1990) identifies as *nostalgie de la boue*. For many, voodoo conjures images of orgies and of naked black bodies writhing with sacrificial animals, outdoors and in the dark of night. This is an image that derives from some of the earliest written accounts of Vodou and which persists to this day.

I do not wish, however, to suggest that voodoo and horror have been only incidentally connected because of some aesthetic affinity. As I have argued above, voodoo frequently exists as a stand-in for racial and cultural anxieties. As something that is coded as black, presenting voodoo in scenarios that are belittling, denigrating and, most especially, *aimed to evoke terror* is a way of directing these sentiments at blacks without openly entering into racist discourse. I suspect that this often occurs unawares, almost naïvely, below the horizon of conscious thinking. As such, a careful analysis of the place of voodoo in popular culture can operate like a Rorschach test, revealing deep and habitual connections that slip by the censorship of conscious thinking in a moment of attenuated attention.

Given the salience of voodoo in American popular culture, it would be possible to draw examples from nearly any arena: film, television shows, literature, comic books, art, toys, advertisements, touristic memorabilia, newspapers, magazines, interior design, and nearly endless amounts of ephemera (ranging from bumper stickers to beers to fashion). I will limit my discussion primarily to an abbreviated analysis of the role of voodoo in film, with minor forays into television and literature, because these genres are easily grouped into the general category of uses of voodoo in fiction.

Voodoo in Fiction: Film, Television and Literature

For an extensive look at the appearances of voodoo in cinema (and television, to a degree), I would refer the reader to Bryan Senn's *Drums O' Terror: Voodoo in the Cinema* (1998).⁸ In *Drums O' Terror*, Senn has collected and analyzed nearly every English-language film to feature voodoo as a prominent element of the plot. Senn's interest is much more in evaluating the films as cinematic works rather than the ways that they use voodoo. Nonetheless, his book is a fantastic resource. However, Senn's book only includes films and

television programs through the year 1995. In the intervening fifteen years, a veritable cottage industry of voodoo films has sprung up. In the absence of a full catalogue, yet to be written, I hope that the following will prove generative.

I opened this paper with an epigraph from H.P. Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulhu." In the story, the narrator Francis Wayland Thurston pieces together a tale from papers found in the estate of his uncle, who died suddenly and mysteriously after being "jostled by a nautical-looking negro" (p. 202). "The Call of Cthulhu" is really three distinct stories, each of which tells a different piece of the horrific mystery surrounding the cult of Cthulhu.⁹ It is the second part that is of interest to us. It describes an investigation of a statue of Cthulhu.

The Statuette, idol, fetish, or whatever it was, had been captured some months before in the wooded swamps south of New Orleans during a raid on a supposed voodoo meeting; and so singular and hideous were the rites connected with it, that the police could not but realise that they had stumbled on a dark cult totally unknown to them, and infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles. (p. 208)

The devotees of the cult were "men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type," "degraded and ignorant," "negroes and mulattos, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands" (p. 213). This is how their rite is described:

Void of clothing, this hybrid spawn were braying, bellowing and writhing about a monstrous ring-shaped bonfire; in the centre of which, revealed by occasional rifts in the curtain of flame, stood a great granite monolith some eight feet in height; on top of which, incongruous in its diminutiveness, rested the noxious carven statuette. From a wide circle of ten scaffolds set up at regular intervals with the flame-girt monolith as a centre hung, head downward, the oddly marred bodies of the helpless squatters who had disappeared. It was inside this circle that the ring of worshippers jumped and roared, the general direction of the mass motion being from left to right in endless bacchanale between the ring of bodies and the ring of fire. (p. 212)

I begin with Lovecraft because I see his work as a prototype for many later presentations of voodoo. Lovecraft draws a connection between voodoo and the Satanic (in Lovecraft's mythic universe, Cthulhu is essentially a stand-in for Satan). In particular, Lovecraft makes no apologies about his perceived connection between the mental inferiority of blacks—in particular, people of mixed race—and their belief in voodoo, which he clearly perceives as superstitious, unrefined and barbarous. It is as though the latter naturally springs from the former, diseased, inferior religion from diseased, inferior minds. Lovecraft states outright what, in the future, others will only imply: namely, that voodoo is nothing more than superstition, well-suited for the inferior. It is left to the reader or viewer to deduce on his or her own who these inferior people are.

Lovecraft also makes a connection between voodoo, violence and base sexuality. He describes the rite as an "endless bacchanale." All of the participants are naked; they jump and roar in a circle of their maimed human victims. Amidst them roar the bonfire's

flames, reminiscent of the infernal. Beneath Lovecraft's Edwardian prose crackles the suggestion of psychosexual thrill-killing and the orgiastic. As one of the originators of modern horror, Lovecraft has included in these few brief paragraphs many of the most important elements of the imagined religion of voodoo.

One of the only major elements that Lovecraft does not include is that of zombies. While a reasonably minor part of Haitian Vodou, the idea of zombies (*zonbi* in Kreyòl) was received with enormous interest by early ethnographers and tourists. Zora Neale Hurston writes extensively about zombies in her work *Tell My Horse* (1938), a combination of ethnography and folklore. In fact, she devotes an entire chapter to the subject. In Haitian Vodou, the *zonbi* is a dead person who has been captured—sometimes in body but more typically as a soul—by a *boko* (sorcerer), who is then master of the *zonbi* and can make the poor soul work forever. *Zonbi* are said to till fields, harvest crops, and do all forms of menial labor formerly relegated to slaves. They are also frequently sent, as spirits, to drive the *boko*'s victims mad. Hurston theorized the likely existence of a chemical agent that was responsible for the creation of physical zombies, a speculation that would decades later be investigated by Harvard professor Wade Davis, who published his findings in two books, the sensationalized *Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and the slightly less sensationalized *Passage of Darkness* (1988).

Inspired by the idea of zombies, the Hollywood film industry created numerous big screen thrillers that would rocket voodoo into increased international fame. The first film to ever feature voodoo, *White Zombie* (1932), stars Bela Lugosi as Murder Legendre, who uses a mysterious tonic to create a workforce of enslaved men for his sugar mill. Legendre is enlisted by the plantation owner Beaumont to turn the character of Madeline into the eponymous white zombie. Beaumont wants Madeline for himself, but she is determined to marry her fiancé Neil. Beaumont hopes that by turning Madeline into a zombie, he will cause Neil to think she is dead. Then, Beaumont will have Madeline all for himself.

The title, *White Zombie*, is apt on a number of levels. First of all, the zombie extras are rather obviously white, though it's possible that the ruddiness of their makeup is intended to communicate blackness. But the real white zombie is Madeline herself, played by Madge Bellamy, who literally glows on celluloid. As a zombie, her radiant skin and blank stare invite the viewer's gaze to admire her body, which has been left without consciousness and therefore defenseless. Halperin has transformed the patently unsexy idea of a half-dead workhorse into a potent male sexual fantasy—the notion of a woman who cannot say no, cannot demur and will not turn away from the gaze. The advertising taglines for the film's posters emphasized the sexual significance of this zombification. They included, "What does a man want in a woman, is it her body or is it her soul?" and, "They knew that this was taking place among the blacks but when the fiend practiced it on a white girl—all hell broke loose" (Senn, 1998: 27).

It is significant that, in communicating these sexual messages, the studio also chose to convey messages of racial outrage—especially given that this is not present in the film itself. By doing so, it not only evoked sexual fantasies, but summoned up classic white racist fears that black men long endlessly to violate white women. This invites the white male viewer to leer at Madeline all the harder in his fear that a black man will

attempt to steal her—and at once forgives this trespass as an act of guarding over white female honor.

A number of other early zombie films built on the idea of sexualized white female zombies, including one of the most meritorious voodoo films (from an aesthetic perspective), *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943). By the seventies, however, such films had made a turn towards zombies created by biochemical means, usually by some contagion. The Italian film *Zombi 2* (1979) represents a transition, in which there is the presence of voodoo-practicing natives but the zombies are primarily created by a mad scientist-doctor. While the idea of zombies has, in recent years, experienced unbelievable success, most zombies now have nothing to do with voodoo but rather are related to technomodern anxieties of disease, contagion, unregulated science, isolation and anonymity. Despite these technomodern anxieties, I wonder about the extent to which the idea of zombieness, if not the zombies themselves, is coded as distinctly black—calling into question precisely who is the object of aggression in recent “zombie apocalypse” films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), and the AMC television show *The Walking Dead* (2010).

One of the last films to feature the erotic appeal of zombies was *La Rebelión de las Muertas* (1973; translated into English as *Vengeance of the Zombies*), a Castilian-language film directed by the legendary Spanish horror film director León Klimovsky.¹⁰ *Rebelión* has some of the hottest zombies in the history of voodoo films. The breasts of its nearly nude female zombies earned the film a censoring, forcing an edited version to originally be released in Spain. The film also has a bizarre and confusing plot. It follows Elvire, a British woman whose family was, until recently, a colonial power in British India. Elvire’s family, particularly the beautiful women, are being systematically murdered by some unknown maniac, and then their corpses are being stolen. The viewer knows, though Elvire and the British police do not, that these women are being resurrected as zombies. Elvire retires from London to the Welsh home of her Indian Hindu guru, Krisna (played by the Spanish mega-star Paul Naschy). However, Krisna’s house is considered cursed because it was formerly the site of Satanic rituals and human sacrifice. After Elvire has a nightmare in which she is sacrificed to Satan (also played by Naschy), it becomes clear that all is not well with Krisna, who suffers from frequent bouts of apoplexy. Over time, it is revealed that Krisna is thrall to his deformed twin brother Kantaka (also played by Naschy), who was severely burned in India by Elvire’s family after he accidentally killed a female member of their clan with whom he had been having an illicit affair. After barely surviving, Kantaka became an initiate of voodoo so that he could use it to exact his revenge. In the end, just as Elvire is about to be sacrificed by Kantaka—thereby solidifying his revenge and enabling him to gain immortality—she is saved by a servant who turns out to be a representative of voodoo, sent to stop Kantaka from using voodoo for his own gains. But then the servant prepares to kill Elvire, this time for the glory of voodoo. Finally, Scotland Yard storms in and Elvire is saved, bringing the film to an abrupt conclusion.

Rebelión works harder than most films to make the connection between voodoo and Satanism. In addition to Elvire’s dream in which Satan is played by the same actor (Naschy) who plays the voodoo priest Kantaka, *Rebelión* features the most violent scene of a voodoo ritual in any film. The scene in question shows Kantaka performing the sacrifice of a black rooster to summon voodoo powers. Kantaka is assisted by two

unidentified aides who are wearing masks that appear to be made from cardboard boxes onto which clown faces have been applied. At the beginning of the scene, a black rooster is produced and, with little preamble, one of the ritual assistants *actually* chops the head off the rooster and hands the flapping, dying chicken to Kantaka (Kay, 2008: 75). Kantaka then pours (real) blood onto the (prop) coffins that contain the (imaginary) zombies, directly from the still-bleeding stump of the neck of the (actually dead) rooster. In an effort to enact one of the most lurid imagined rituals of voodoo—namely, that of blood sacrifice—the filmmakers *actually* killed an animal, meaning that they participated in an act that their film ironically signifies as reprehensible and demonic.

The apparent confusion in the plot between Hindus and voodoo practitioners reveals deep colonialist and racist fears about an international conspiracy of brown people. The film suggests that all non-white people are secretly united to bring down white people and enslave white women to their desires. The surprise twist, when the white servant Susan kills Kantaka and reveals that she is also a voodoo practitioner, insinuates the presence of race traitors, those willing to betray their white heritage for illicit power and glory.

Rebelión is not unique in suggesting such connections. The Boris Karloff stinker *Voodoo Island* (1957) takes place on a remote Polynesian Island and features Polynesians using voodoo to defend their homes from Western encroachment. Many works of fiction fundamentally confuse or simply ignore the provenance of real Vodou—often also connecting it directly with Africa. This drives home the idea that imaginary voodoo is a citizen of the world. Anywhere that there are non-white people, it may appear. By extension, I suspect that the confusions between Vodou, Santería and Candomblé are often not real confusions but rather reflections of the belief that they are all fundamentally the same thing.

In VH1's short-lived fake reality TV show *So NoTORious* (2006)—in which Tori Spelling stars as an exaggerated version of herself—the episode “Cursed” poked fun at these confusions. Spelling becomes convinced that her mother has placed a curse on her, and that the only way to have the curse removed is to consult Jennifer Aniston's voodoo priestess, named MaMa Belle (played by Whoopi Goldberg, clearly having the time of her life). MaMa Belle lives in a rundown bungalow, and her altars include a shrunken head she speaks to and calls “Precious.” In an apparent case of confusion, MaMa Belle works with the orishas. However, in the next scene, Tori explains to her friends that it's not voodoo but Santería, which she says is “like voodoo, but in Spanish.” The joke works in part because of Spelling's ditziness, but also because the viewer is expected to sympathize with the notion that these are really all the same thing, just different names for black superstition. The connection with blackness is made explicit when Spelling asks the character of Nanny—Cleo King playing a Hattie McDaniel-style sassy house servant (switch the Ns to Ms to get “Mammy”)—what she knows about voodoo. Nanny says, “Chil', what you asking me that for? Is it because I'm black?” Spelling responds sheepishly, “No . . . Well, yes.”

While most of the voodoo films I have discussed thus far have involved fears about the eroticization of white women, there is also a distinct subgroup of voodoo films that revel in the eroticization and *exoticization* of black women. Two of the best examples of this type of film are *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) and *Angel Heart* (1987). In colonialist fantasies of voodoo, female voodoo practitioners are willing and decadent

lovers because their religion (and their skin color) predisposes them to ignore the inhibitions that prevent virtuous white women from acting on their basest urges. Furthermore, these unbridled female voodoo practitioners have effectively inexhaustible lust for white men.

In *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Dennis Alan (a fictionalized version of Wade Davis, played by a charismatic if slightly goofy Bill Pullman) goes to Haiti to discover the secret of how zombies are made. While there, he encounters Dr Marielle Duchamp (Kathy Tyson), in whose charge is a real-life zombie. At a voodoo ritual staged by good (if ineffective) voodoo priest Lucien Celine (a fictionalized version of Max Beauvoir), Duchamp becomes possessed by the goddess Erzulie and Alan looks upon her with the eyes of lust. Eventually, they get around to having a great deal of steamily-filmed sex—including behind the waterfall at the voodoo festival of Sodo.¹¹ At the end, Alan must rescue Duchamp from the machinations of Dargent Peytraud, an evil voodoo priest and leader of the Tonton Makout. In Bond-esque style, though, it is clear that Duchamp is just a bit of fun for Alan, who at heart is only committed to the adventure.

Additionally, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* picks up on an important theme in voodoo fiction—namely, that while there is such a thing as good voodoo (exemplified here by Lucien Celine), it is distinctly less powerful and effective than the evil kind. This is a theme echoed, for example, in an episode of the television show *Friday the 13th: The Series*, entitled “The Voodoo Mambo” (1988). In it, the spirit of an evil voodoo priestess uses a demonic mask to steal the souls of good voodoo priests and priestesses, thereby restoring herself to the world of the living. One of the good voodoo priests says, “We only know tricks, but her magic is real!” The episode is also very interesting because it includes excerpts from Maya Deren’s posthumous ethnographic film, *Divine Horsemen* (1977). Deren’s grainy footage is intercut with graphic shots of the evil voodoo priestess being drowned, filmed in such a way that it attempts to match the appearance of Deren’s film. As such, it makes Deren’s clips (ranging from Vodou ceremonies to Rara dances), already out of context, seem even more mysterious and sinister.

In Alan Parker’s atmospheric masterpiece *Angel Heart* (1987), Mickey Rourke plays Harry Angel, a low-rent private detective hired by a wealthy client (played by Robert De Niro) to track down someone who skipped out on a contract. *Angel Heart* makes strong connections between voodoo and Satanism. De Niro’s character turns out to be Lucifer himself, and Angel an amnesiac Satanist (the “missing” Johnny Favorite). Voodoo seems to be what blacks do, whereas whites know that the “power behind the throne” is Lucifer himself. Therefore, they go directly to the source.

Angel’s investigation takes him to New Orleans, in search of a psychic (Charlotte Rampling) who may have helped Johnny Favorite (Angel’s real identity and face) to skip town. Angel eventually seeks out Epiphany Proudfoot (Lisa Bonet), whose mother had a relationship with Favorite. Proudfoot is a voodoo priestess. Spying on one of Proudfoot’s voodoo ceremonies, Angel (and with him, the audience) watch as Proudfoot—wearing only a thin white shift—writhes ecstatically in the dust, grinds a sacrificial chicken against her body and exposes her breasts. It is not long before Proudfoot and Angel are having sex, in spite of their age difference (she is only seventeen, and he appears to be in his thirties). In one of the film’s key scenes, Angel and Proudfoot have frighteningly violent sex—at some point it clearly becomes rape. It seems that he is murdering her (her

blood is everywhere). Later, she is found, savagely killed in Angel's bed. Her death is regarded without remorse by the police, and her marginal position as a voodoo priestess not only seems to forgive the sexualized violence performed on her, but suggests she is complicit in it. This is worsened by the startling revelation that Proudfoot is, unbeknownst to her, Angel's/Favorite's daughter, allowing for the possibility that Proudfoot was, on some level, drawn to him precisely because he was her father. The portrayal of her character as participating in hypersexual bacchanals seems to invite such considerations.

There is another category of voodoo film that portrays voodoo as the tool for black (perhaps legitimate) revenge. This is epitomized by *Sugar Hill* and *The Skeleton Key*. *Sugar Hill* (1974) is one of the finest examples of the blaxploitation genre of filmmaking. Marki Bey stars as Diana Hill (nicknamed Sugar), the girlfriend of a bar owner who is viciously murdered by mobsters after he refuses to sell his bar to their leader. Devastated, Sugar seeks the assistance of her family's resident voodoo priestess, Mama Maitresse. Sugar and Mama Maitresse make their way to a swamp, complete with alligators, where they summon the assistance of the voodoo god Baron Samedi. Baron Samedi is a rather sleazy, pimp-like character, complete with a cadre of zombie hoes, the semi-dead Brides of Baron Samedi. He agrees to help Sugar if afterwards she will become one of his brides. She accepts; then follows what is surely one of the longest and most tedious scenes of raising an army of the dead. The dead in question are former slaves who died violently. Their limbs are shackled still. It is clearly an eager revenge for both Sugar and the revived slaves—all of whom have their own good reasons for wanting to kill evil white men and their black henchmen. Notably, all of this exposition takes place in the first twenty-five minutes of the film. The remaining hour is a nearly plotless murder spree, as Sugar directs her zombie army to kill its way up through the ranks of the crime ring responsible for her lover's death. At last, in a scene that returns to the swamp, Sugar's army kills the crime boss, and Baron Samedi accepts the mobster's moll as a fulfillment of Sugar's contract. She gets her revenge and lives to tell of it.

In the Kate Hudson vehicle *The Skeleton Key* (2005), she plays Caroline Ellis, a nurse hired by handsome lawyer Luke Marshall (Peter Sarsgaard) to live in a Louisiana plantation house to assist an aging woman, Violet Devereaux (Gena Rowlands), to care for her catatonic husband (John Hurt). It quickly becomes clear that all is not well in the Devereaux house. An inquiry into why there are no mirrors in the house leads to a revelation about the plantation's dark past. It was formerly the home of two servants who were powerful hoodoo practitioners, the husband and wife team of Papa Justify and Mama Cecile. When they were discovered apparently trying to teach the owners' white children how to conjure, they were dragged outside and summarily lynched. Over the course of the film, Caroline becomes increasingly engrossed in the world of voodoo and hoodoo, believing that it may hold the key to healing her patient. In the surprising conclusion, Caroline discovers that Luke Marshall and Mrs Devereaux are, in fact, Papa Justify and Mama Cecile, who have mastered a spell that permits them to swap bodies with a victim—a human (if bloodless) sacrifice. Upon a second viewing, the scene in which Papa Justify and Mama Cecile are killed takes on a completely different meaning. It becomes clear that their souls have in fact passed into the bodies of the children, who watch from the window with *sang froid* as the real children—frenzied and trapped in the bodies of their servants—are murdered by the mob.

In the present day, Justify has recently moved from the body of Mr Devereaux into the younger Luke Marshall. Caroline is intended to be Cecile's next vessel, and does in fact become the victim of their magic. In the end, Cecile (in the body of Caroline) laments that she wanted a black body this time, but Justify (as Luke) says that it is impossible to get "the black ones" to stay long enough to ensnare them. This reiterates one of the film's most important (if confused) themes: Namely, voodoo is very real and very powerful, yet only works if you believe in it. This is an interesting twist on the classic trope, heard again and again, that voodoo only works on people who believe in it.¹² If you don't believe, it has no power because it is a creation of the mind—essentially a rehashing of the idea that voodoo is *of* inferior minds, *for* inferior minds. *The Skeleton Key* wants to make room for both to be true—the avowal and the dismissal.

While the element of black revenge is quite obvious in *Sugar Hill*, it is more occulted in *The Skeleton Key*. In order to understand this element, we must first recognize that the characters of Mrs Devereaux and Luke Marshall, while played by white actors (Gena Rowlands and Peter Sarsgaard), are in fact black characters. They are the living vessels of Papa Justify and Mama Cecile, who have hidden themselves behind white faces. This is a radical form of racial "passing" because it is not apologetic but sinister. Justify and Cecile use their magic to take revenge on their employers and an oppressive society in which the only way to be socially powerful was to be white. And so they became white—by sacrificing their bosses' children. The "Conjure of Sacrifice" chant (*The Skeleton Key* Soundtrack, 2005) that Justify uses to enact this switch speaks of the need for deliverance from enemies and from slavery.

It is time, Lord.
From the dry dust,
out of these chains,
from the Devil's house.
It is time, Lord, take me,
from the dry dust, break me,
from these chains, bring me,
from the Devil's house, take me.
Out of darkness, walk me,
out of blindness, lift me,
out of sadness, save me,
from my damnedness, please Lord.

Despite their reprehensible actions, Justify and Cecile could be viewed as desperate, and therefore sympathetic, characters who use their unique occult powers to save themselves. Notably, they are determined to remain perpetually in the house that formerly belonged to their masters, and that they inherited by adopting the likeness of their children. In other words, Justify's and Cecile's social and economic ambitions are not boundless. They have not used their esoteric knowledge to become world leaders or the richest people. They simply wish for dignity, equality, citizenship, the comforts offered to those who own the house rather than toil in it. Having achieved these modest goals, they cling to them with a tenacity familiar to those who have ever been deprived of basic

needs. They will never willingly surrender what they have won—even if this means continuing to offer two new human sacrifices for each generation that passes.

What both *Sugar Hill* and *The Skeleton Key* highlight is voodoo's moral ambiguity. It can be used for good or evil, and the viewer is left to determine how she or he feels about what has happened. In the case of *Sugar Hill*, the viewer is clearly intended to be on the side of Sugar. The gangsters are portrayed as the nastiest sort of people, and therefore their lives (at least in the world of cinematic logic) are expendable. Sugar, who is charismatic and beautiful, seems justified and the violence is rendered cheesily so that it feels fairly minor that she is, by the end, a multiple murderess. The seventies was also a decade more sympathetic to ideas of vigilante justice, especially given that the film was intended primarily for a black audience and Marki Bey exudes a distinctive Pam Greer-cum-Black Panthers appeal.

In *The Skeleton Key*, it is less clear whether Justify and Cecile are intended by the filmmakers to be sympathetic characters. It seems likely that they are not—although the film allows for a certain amount of moral complexity, making it a more engaging narrative than *Sugar Hill*. Although Justify and Cecile were victims in their own right, the audience is primed to be on the side of Caroline from the moment she appears on the screen in the likeness of Hollywood starlet Kate Hudson. An affable, young white girl who has suffered personal tragedy and wishes the best for her patient, Caroline does not deserve what happens to her. One is ultimately left with the impression that Justify and Cecile are sadists who delight in first terrifying, seducing, humiliating and abusing their victims. This duality is slightly undermined by the fact that, in the closing scenes, Cecile *is* Caroline—or has possessed Caroline's body, anyway. Tellingly, though, the narrative does not construct this swap as a moment of triumph but rather one of terror and discomfort. In classic fashion, voodoo is used to evoke a disquieting feeling of the uncanny, and in this case the particular race anxiety of black people who persist by stealing white bodies—essentially a form of cannibalism.

The Disney animated film *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) can be seen as a subtle addition to this category of voodoo films. The main character, Tiana, is a poor African American girl living in New Orleans in the 1920s. She dreams of opening her own restaurant, but does not have the capital. New Orleans society is in a tizzy with word that Prince Naveen of Maldonia, a notorious playboy, will be visiting. Tiana's childhood best friend, the white and wealthy debutante Charlotte, schemes to marry Prince Naveen. However, because of the machinations of voodoo, this plan is subverted when both Prince Naveen and Tiana are turned into frogs by the evil voodoo witchdoctor Dr Facilier. As frogs, Prince Naveen and Tiana go on a journey to find Mama Odie, a powerful voodoo queen who lives in the bayou. In the course of their journey, Naveen and Tiana fall in love, and it is at last their marriage and subsequent kiss that break the voodoo spell and return them to their human forms.

The race politics of *The Princess and the Frog* are intensely problematic. First of all, though marketed as Disney's first black princess, Tiana is more accurately described as Disney's first *green* princess, since she is a frog for all but the first twenty minutes and last few seconds of the film. Additionally, Disney seems to have been unprepared to portray a miscegenated romance on screen. As humans, the racially ambiguous Prince Naveen is colored as phenotypically identical to Tiana—and as frogs, he is even a darker

shade of green. The villain of the film is a voodoo witchdoctor who, according to early leaks on Wikipedia, was slated to be named Dr Duvalier—but this was met with such outrage that the name was changed to Dr Facilier (Moore, 2007). Visually, Dr Facilier is styled after the *Bawon*, a family of Vodou spirits who, as undertakers, are charged with controlling cemeteries and the dead. As a character motivated entirely by greed and liberated from any moral conscience, Dr Facilier must surely be one of the most blatantly offensive portrayals of voodoo in recent memory. The character of the voodoo queen, Mama Odie, does little to improve the viewer's opinion of voodoo. Round, dotty, maternal, toothless, barefooted, exiled to the wilds, Mama Odie embodies many of the worst racist stereotypes of the kerchief-headed mammy. She mixes her magic in an old bathtub as though she were stirring up a batch of hooch, and for all of the sparkly magic to emerge from her gourd wand (a send-up of the Vodou *ason*),¹³ she is notably incapable of reversing Dr Facilier's spell that binds Naveen and Tiana to the form of frogs. In the end, however, Tiana has cause to be grateful to voodoo, which allows her to subvert the plans of white New Orleans high society and corral Prince Naveen for herself. While one must grant that Tiana is not the one controlling the magic, it is nonetheless the case that voodoo is coded as a black force and works amorally to the benefit of its black heroine.

It is interesting to note that both *The Skeleton Key* and *Angel Heart* were released to DVD with featurette documentaries on the discs. These documentaries, to my knowledge produced independently of one another, both aim to set the record straight about what *real* Vodou is and is not. This was no doubt inspired by fears that these films—which feature particularly unflattering portrayals of voodoo—would prompt harassing calls from black advocacy groups. Each documentary includes interviews with many of the same public figures—including Sallie Ann Glassman and Ava Kay Jones, who ironically are both people that the Haitian Vodou community does not consider good representatives of the tradition.¹⁴ Glassman, Jones and others make standard press statements, describing Vodou as interested in health, healing, goodness and so on. In context, however, these documentaries actually communicate the opposite message of what they purport to say. The explicit aim is to avoid libel by basically saying, “It’s just a story, and Vodou is alright by us.” Instead, what it says is that the filmmakers know about Vodou but do not care; it doesn’t change anything. They will still use it however they wish in order to tell their stories. In other words, voodoo is powerless to stop them. It is a straw man, a convenient (racist) trope to be trotted out and used at will.

While the material is virtually endless, I would like to conclude this section with a brief look at two novels by African American author Jewell Parker Rhodes. *Voodoo Dreams* (1993) and *Voodoo Season* (2005) are the first two books in a trilogy about the life and descendants of Marie Laveau, the famed New Orleans Voodoo queen. These books aim to present voodoo in a positive light, as a vital cultural inheritance for American blacks and a potential tool for healing. I am interested in the ways that Rhodes, as I see it, both succeeds and fails in this effort. In particular, I believe that this highlights the challenges facing anyone who attempts to “flip the script” and use the imagined religion of voodoo as a tool to communicate positive messages about black people.

There is very little historically verifiable information about Marie Laveau. She lived in New Orleans during the nineteenth century and gained notoriety as a Voodoo priestess who could use her power to bend the outcomes of court cases. It appears that there was

confusion at the time of her life—subsequently compounded by the passage of time—between Marie Laveau and her daughter (or granddaughter), who had the same name. It is likely that they looked very similar and that this lent credence to legends of her unaging beauty and unusually long lifespan. A portrait was made of Laveau by George Catlin (who is best known for his sketches of Indians of the American West). This painting was, in turn, copied by Frank Schneider. In it, Laveau is shown to be a light-skinned Creole woman of clearly mixed racial heritage. She wears her hair up in an elaborate wrap and is draped with a delicately printed rose-colored shawl. Her gaze is directed over the painter's right shoulder—perhaps eyeing the direction to which she would exit the studio, and the historical record. For little else is known of her.¹⁵

Voodoo Dreams follows the life of Marie Laveau III, the granddaughter of the original Marie Laveau, as she is raised from girlhood in a remote swamp by her grandmother, ignorant of her inheritance as a voodoo queen. Later, they move to New Orleans, where Marie III marries Paris, a young sailor of Haitian extraction. She then betrays both her grandmother and husband to learn voodoo from the controlling and cruel Doctor John, a witch doctor who had a role in the downfall of both her grandmother and mother. Eventually, Marie III is able to defeat John (by murdering him) and experiences success as a voodoo queen. Her story ends in old age with her relating her story to a white man who has long carried a flame for her.

Voodoo Season follows a fictional direct descendant of Marie Laveau, Marie Levant, a present-day resident at New Orleans's Charity Hospital. During the course of the book, Levant comes to realize and embrace her heritage. In the process, she helps the police to solve an improbable series of murders involving zombification and the revival of quad-room balls.¹⁶ This evil scheme is engineered by Allez, a Doctor John-like figure who wishes to be a powerful voodoo practitioner but has no "natural" gift. In the end, Marie brings down Allez and his house, aided by the voodoo gods of the dead (the "Guédé brothers") and the spirits of all the Maries before her.

In her "Author's Note" at the end of *Voodoo Season*, Rhodes writes that Marie Laveau helped her "to appreciate the glory and wonder of being a woman: powerful; spiritual; in control of her life and body; valuing ancestors, family and community" (277). And these are very much the qualities that voodoo represents for Rhodes. It is, perhaps most importantly, a form of living memory. The books, in part, are a valorization of voodoo as a vital link between American blacks and their ancestors, leading back into an African past. In the world of Rhodes's books, voodoo—rooted in ancestral memory—is inalienable, something in the blood. It cannot be disavowed. *Voodoo Season* opens with the epigraph, "You can't escape history or spirits singing in your blood. When the mind refuses, the body knows" (p. 3). For the Laveau women, the power of voodoo is passed from mother to daughter; their connection to voodoo and ancestral powers is vital not only for themselves, but for the communities they lead in each generation. In Rhodes's voodoo, only Marie Laveau can be possessed by the spirit of Damballah, the voodoo god of ancestral wisdom, purity and power. It is she alone who can bring this miraculous, transformative power to her congregants. By extension, the voodoo of the Laveaus is principally occupied with healing—healing historical wrongs, healing broken bodies (most of the Maries practice some form of medicine), healing broken lives and souls.

However, in playing with these classic tropes, Rhodes constantly runs the risk of simply reproducing racist stereotypes. I find it particularly concerning that Rhodes identifies voodoo as an artifact of the blood. It is difficult to argue that voodoo is a serious religion if one is at once claiming that it is a genetic inheritance. This suggests that, like the classic racist view, voodoo is somehow an hereditary quirk, with appeal limited to a finite set of people who possess certain inherited traits (or limitations). Even when these abilities—be they psychic or spiritual—are construed as talents, it still evokes racist ideas of the mystical negro or the melanin man.

Having Marie Levant rocket to a leadership role only days after learning that she is descended from voodoo queens suggests that voodoo is a religion with no sophistication or theological complexity. Rather, it is a reflexive way of responding to spiritual “feelings,” a range of affective responses. Again, this does little to challenge racist notions of black people as thralls to powerful feelings, responding in each moment to affect with little conscious reflection. This is amplified by the fact that, while Rhodes has done some limited research into Haitian Vodou, her imagined New Orleans voodoo is reasonably impoverished, lacking any ritual order (*regleman*)¹⁷ and relying on simplified, stereotyped behaviors of the spirits. The gods do little more than flirt, writhe, swing machetes and emote.

Rhodes romanticizes her characters, identifying them as part of a unique set of African Americans who possess Creole heritage. However, Rhodes plays peculiar games with language. She writes as though all African Americans in New Orleans are French speakers, a falsehood that conceals their real lives beneath a fairytale of exceptionalism. She also claims that her characters speak Creole, and periodically even writes “Creole” dialogue for them. However, this “Creole” is not real Creole but grammatically incorrect French. I find this to be one of the most peculiar aspects of Rhodes’s books. It is incomprehensible why Rhodes did not consult with someone who could help her to write proper Louisiana Creole or Haitian Kreyòl dialogue. Instead, her fake Creole (sloppy French) plays to racist stereotypes of creoles as not being real languages but simply degraded forms of proper Western languages. These views of creoles have, for centuries, been used to support racist views of black and mixed race peoples as intellectually inferior, incapable of learning and using “real” languages, able only to learn them in degenerate, pidgin form.

In the end, then, the voodoo of Rhodes’s Marie Laveau novels is a great deal like the voodoo we have seen elsewhere. It is connected with a hereditary disposition; it is about acting on strong feelings rather than careful theological reflection. Furthermore, it is essentially amoral. While the Laveaus themselves are, for the most part, good, they are constantly faced with enemies who also use voodoo—at least, a semblance of voodoo—with great success to achieve their own selfish, evil ends. The mostly nameless voodoo devotees seem blithely ignorant of the difference and in either case appreciate the show.

This highlights the serious challenges that face anyone who wishes to use voodoo, as Rhodes does, to tell a story that departs from the classic racist stereotypes from which voodoo has been constructed. While Rhodes intends to tell a story of black female empowerment, her (presumably) accidental evocation of racist tropes frequently overwhelms her intended themes. In the end, the careful reader is left with an impression of a Marie Laveau who continues to avert her gaze, slipping from the page into a yet-uncharted zone where her Voodoo is real and itself.

Conclusion: Directions for Future Work

Film, television and literature are rich sites for exploring the enduring appeal of voodoo in Western popular culture. I assert that voodoo has, for too long, gone mostly unchallenged as a means by which racist anxieties have continued to operate unchecked in popular discourse. While religious scholars and spiritual leaders continue to make advances in improving the public image of the religions of the African diaspora, it seems clear that real Vodou and imaginary voodoo have entwined destinies. Until voodoo's racist messages are publicly unmasked, apologetic documentary featurettes will do little to free actual Haitian Vodou from the tarnishing reputation of its imagined, but entirely real, double.

Notes

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1. *Goudougoudou* is the personified name of the earthquake. In the weeks following the earthquake, this name circulated through *tele dyol* (word-of-mouth). It may be an onomatopoeia, capturing the sound of the shaking earth. The name has been widely adopted by Haitians.
2. Cf. Harrison, *The Central Liberal Truth: How Politics Can Change A Culture and Save It From Itself* (2006). The title of Harrison's book is self-incriminating, but for a distillation of his racist views on Haiti—masquerading as neo-liberalism—see his *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published two weeks after the earthquake. Lawrence Harrison, "Haiti and the Voodoo Curse: The cultural roots of the country's endless misery," *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 February 2010.
3. My use of the term "signifying" is informed by the work of Charles Long. In *Significations* (1999 [1986]), Long cites an African American popular saying, "Signifying is worse than lying." He goes on to explain, "my community was a community that knew that one of the important meanings about it was the fact that it was a community signified by another community. This signification constituted a subordinate relationship of power expressed through custom and legal structures" (pp. 1–2). I am grateful to Dr Carla Martin for first uttering the expression "voodoo kitsch."
4. By priming, I mean the way that the context encourages or permits one to respond in a particular fashion.
5. That being said, Vodou, Santería and Candomblé are frequently confused in the popular imagination. Nonetheless, it seems significant that even when they are confused, it is almost always under the name of voodoo.
6. While it may seem odd to suggest the existence of a religion that no one really practices, voodoo is hardly unique in this regard. I would direct the reader to the available literature on Satanic Ritual Abuse, which captivated the imaginations of many Americans during the 1980s. Thousands of people came forward to claim that they had been victims of sadistic rites conducted by a vast network of Satanists that frequently included seemingly loving relatives, friends and community members. In spite of extensive investigation by law enforcement

officials, no single shred of physical evidence has ever been produced to validate these accounts. There is good reason to believe, therefore, that the Satanic cult these imagined mal-factors practiced was, quite simply, an imagined religion—fleshed out in considerable detail yet entirely false. Other examples that come to mind include the present-day belief, widespread throughout Africa, in witches; and the witch hysterias of medieval Europe and colonial New England. In every case, these are accompanied by incredibly rich details about the spiritual activities of the group in question. One could make much of the similarities between these invented religions—in particular the fact that they all pertain to imagined groups of evildoers. Murphy (1990) comes close to identifying voodoo as an imagined religion with his notion of “black magic” and his brilliant insight that voodoo practitioners bear strong similarity to witches, inherently evil beings who hide in plain sight and whose fundamental crime is antisociality. However, he does not take the next step of acknowledging that most witches are imaginary, not real people.

7. Cf. Graves (1997 [1948]: 25): “In Classical Arabic poetry there is a device known as ‘kindling’ in which the poet induces the poetic atmosphere with a luscious prologue about groves, streams and nightingales, and then quickly, before it disperses, turns to the real business at hand—a flattering account, say, of the courage, piety and magnanimity of his patron or sage reflections on the shortness and uncertainty of human life.”
8. To my knowledge, no similar work exists which looks comprehensively at the role of voodoo in literature.
9. For those unfamiliar with the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, his complex Cthulhu mythology centers around an ancient race of gods who came to Earth from distant stars when the planet was young. These gods delight in horrors and wish to enslave humanity in a world of nightmares that they would rule. However, these evil gods were forced into an endless slumber, leaving only their high priest—the gargantuan man-squid Cthulhu—entombed in the sunken city of R’lyeh to hold vigil for their reawakening.
10. The more recent film *Voodoo Academy* (2000), by filmmaker David DeCoteau, also features hypersexualized zombies. It is, to my knowledge, the only instance of hypersexualized *male* zombies. The movie is essentially a softcore gay porn in which the students of a Bible college become enslaved by the powers of a demoness, who is posing as the school’s headmistress.
11. It is noteworthy that this is both impossible (there is no *behind* the waterfall) and would amount to a great sacrilege.
12. In the first season of HBO’s hit show *True Blood* (2008), one storyline involves voodoo and the African American character Tara. Tara’s alcoholic mother begs Tara to give her the money to get an exorcism from a voodoo or conjure woman named Miss Jeanette, to free her from a demon that makes her drink. Miss Jeanette operates out of a gutted school bus, permanently parked somewhere in the countryside. Jeanette drums, chants and drowns a possum in which she has trapped the demon that has been afflicting Tara’s mother. The exorcism is successful and Tara’s mother becomes, overnight, a different person. It is such a success, in fact, that Tara is convinced to undergo an exorcism herself, to free her from her own brokenness. Later, however, it is discovered that the voodoo woman is a fraud, a pharmacy clerk who moonlights as a conjurer to pay her bills. This real Miss Jeanette tells Tara that she must allow her mother to go on believing, since it is this belief that has created the transformation. After this revelation, Tara reverts to her cynical ways while her mother continues to be sober and blissfully unaware of the counterfeit.
13. The *ason* is the beaded gourd rattle used in Haitian Vodou by initiated clergy.

14. Sallie Ann Glassman and Ava Kay Jones are both fixtures of voodoo tourism in New Orleans. Sallie Ann Glassman, initiated as a *manbo* (priestess) in Haitian Vodou by Edgar Jean-Louis (d. 2010), owns and operates the Island of Salvation Botanica. She also regularly hosts religious services at her home. Glassman practices a self-styled New Orleans Voodoo that combines elements of Haitian Vodou with New Orleans voodoo folklore, hoodoo, ceremonial magic, yoga, vegetarianism, New Age philosophy and so on. Ava Kay Jones calls herself a “Voodoo and Yoruba Priestess.” A native of New Orleans and initiate of Santería, Jones is the founder of the Voodoo Macumba Dance Ensemble, which performs voodoo-inspired dances at parties and public events. Jones also lectures, makes public appearances, and is available to do work for clients. She frequently appears in the media as an expert on African and African diaspora religions, claiming to be a spokeswoman for Voodooists everywhere.
15. In spite of this, numerous biographies have been written about Marie Laveau, based on the scant historical record, oral tradition, speculations—and, at times, pure fabrication. Cf. Long (2006); Fandrich (2005); Tallant (1946); Hurston (1935).
16. Quadroon balls, most intimately associated with nineteenth-century New Orleans, introduced light-skinned women of mixed African and European heritage to wealthy white men. With their favorite “quadroons,” these men would often establish extramarital, but highly formalized, erotic relationships through the system known as *plaçage*. “Placed” women were given gifts of real estate, clothing, and money, an economic boost that many used to positively augment the socioeconomic position of themselves and their children. However, this came at the cost of living an imperiled lifestyle, dependent entirely on the whims of the white patron, to whom they were obliged to provide sexual services and (real or performed) affection.

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