AFRICAN DIASPORA RELIGIONS:
VODOU, POP CULTURE, AND THE CULTURE WARS
EXP-0037-F (Fall 2012)
Experimental College, Tufts University
Thursdays, 6PM-8:30PM in Olin 112

Instructor: Adam M. McGee
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Course Website:
https://trunk.tufts.edu/xsl-portal/site/21b075bd-bd82-4146-90ca-e49f85aa03ae

This course will introduce students to the study of African diaspora religions, through the lens of exploring why these traditions—usually in mangled form—appear so frequently in American pop culture products, especially horror films. Quickly moving beyond the simple question of whether such products accurately depict these religions, the focus will instead be on exploring what work they do in creating and maintaining cultural and racial boundaries. While the special focus of the course will be Haitian Vodou, students will also explore Regla de Ocha (Santería), Palo, Candomblé, and conjure/hoodoo. Particular attention will be 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.

Each class meeting will begin with a short presentation by the instructor, during which the week’s readings will be woven together in light of common themes. However, the emphasis of each class meeting will be small group presentations and discussion. Students will be expected to arrive prepared to help shape the conversation. Course materials will include scholarly depictions of African diaspora religions and popular stories, novels, films, and television shows. In addition to the weekly assigned readings, students will be expected to have watched the assigned films. Many of the films are short, while for others it will only be necessary to watch short clips. Some will be viewed together in class, and others will need to be viewed prior to class meetings. The instructor is open to helping students organize group film viewings. Students are forewarned that course materials will include depictions of violence and sexuality (i.e. the bread and butter of horror)—and an emphasis will be placed on critically deconstructing these images, rather than passively receiving them.

Students can buy as many or as few of the assigned texts as they wish. We are reading only selections from most, and therefore it will be possible in many cases to make copies from texts that will be placed on reserve at the library. Many of the readings will also be placed on
the course website as PDFs. Many, though not all, of the assigned films are available through Netflix, and I would encourage students to consider getting together in smaller groups to watch the films whenever possible. Every effort will be made to guarantee that all of the assigned films are also available on reserve at the library, where they can be viewed for free, at the student’s convenience.

Assignments
Because the course is based largely on student-generated discussion, it assumes a high level of motivation on behalf of the students in completing all readings and film viewings prior to each class meeting. Assigned readings/viewings are listed for the class in which they will be discussed, meaning they should be completed by that class meeting. In addition to regularly participating in class, students will be expected to give one in-class presentation, write a short midterm paper, and a longer final paper based on texts addressed in class and at least some additional guided research.

Group presentation: At the beginning of the semester, students will pair up and choose one week during which they will be responsible for giving a short (<15 min) presentation in which one of the assigned films or texts will be presented analytically to the class. Students are free to be creative with what form the presentation takes.

Midterm: Choose a film or novel from the course bibliography that is not on the syllabus and write a 7-10 page analysis, using some of the critical approaches we have been discussing in class.

Final paper: A research paper of 20 pages on a course-related topic of the student’s choosing, to be approved by the instructor by Week 10. A list of potential paper topics will be handed out after the midterm.

Grade breakdown:

20% Group presentation
20% Midterm paper
40% Final paper
20% Class participation

Attendance
This course will be driven by student participation and peer teaching. Any class you miss is not only a loss for you, but a loss for your classmates. Therefore, attendance at all class meetings is obligatory. Students may have 1 absence during the semester, with advanced notice to the instructor. All other absences will drop the final course grade by two increments (e.g. an A will become an A-, an A- will become a B, etc.).

Plagiarism
Plagiarism is passing off all or part of someone else’s work as your own. This encompasses both excerpts from texts and the original ideas in those texts. Most plagiarism occurs accidentally, when you don’t keep track of your sources. That’s why it is important to keep
good records of what sources you have used, and to consistently use a standard citation method when writing. Tufts University’s Academic Resource Center has a helpful website that offers tips for how to avoid plagiarism.

http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingresources/plagiarism.asp

If you still aren’t sure, or you’re worried, please ASK your instructor. All cases of plagiarism will be reported to the Dean and result in a final course grade of F.

Other
Students with health concerns, disabilities, or other learning-related challenges are encouraged to contact the Tufts University Disability Services Office (617-627-4539; Academic Resource Center, Dowling Hall; http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/disability/index.asp) to gain accommodations (such as approval for extended absences from class) and confidential assistance.

Students dealing with challenges related to school and life may seek assistance through Tufts University Counseling and Mental Health Services (617-627-3360; 120 Curtis Street; http://ase.tufts.edu/counseling/).
COURSE SCHEDULE

Sept 6: Introduction to Course

Film: Legacy of the Spirits. Directed by Karen Kramer, 1985. [Available to stream online through Tufts Library; linked from course website.]

Sept 13: Haitian Vodou: An Introduction

Text: Brown, Mama Lola, Introduction and Chs. 2 & 5

Sept 20: Introduction to Haitian Vodou, cont.

Text: Brown, Mama Lola, Chs. 10, 12, and Afterward

Sept 27: Haitian Vodou and Documentary Film

Text: Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen, Author’s Preface, Introductory Note, Chs. I-III

To Serve the Gods. Directed by Karen Kramer, 1982. [Available to stream online through Tufts Library; linked from course website.]

Oct 4: Vodou: A History of Representation

Texts: Laurent Dubois, “Vodou and History,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 43.1, 92-100. [on course website]
Kate Ramsey, The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti, Chapter 3. [on course website]

Oct 11: The Vodou/Voodoo You Do So Well: Representations Deconstructed

Oct 18: Textual Detractors, Old and New

Texts:
- H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu.” [on course website]
- Lawrence Harrison, “Haiti and the voodoo curse: The cultural roots of the country’s endless misery,” *The Wall Street Journal* (February 5, 2010). [online, linked from course website]

MIDTERM PAPER DUE IN PRINTED FORM
AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS OCT. 25

Oct 25: The “Science” of Zombies

Texts:
- Zora Neale Hurston, “Zombies” in *Tell My Horse*. Selections. [on course website]

Films:

Nov 1: Vodou/voodoo, Alternative Sexualities, and Hypersexuality

Texts:
- Darieck Scott, *Hex: A Novel of Love Spells*, only through Ch. 8 (p. 182).

Films:

Nov 8: Hoodoo, Conjure, and Conjuring Race

Texts:

Films:
- *The Skeleton Key*. Directed by Iain Softley, 2005.

Nov 15: **New Orleans: Voodoo City**

**Texts:**

**Films:**
*True Voodoo* promotional videos, “BlankPaigeTV” YouTube channel. c. 2010. [online; linked from course website]

Nov 22: THANKSGIVING; NO CLASS

Nov 29: **Santería and Palo: Illegalization, touristic valorization, and infamy**

**Texts:**
Margarite Fernandez-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*. Selections. [on course website]

**Films:**

Dec 6: **Sympathetic Approaches?**

**Texts:**

**Films:**

**FINAL PAPER DUE IN ONLINE DROPBOX**
**DECEMBER 14 BY 5PM**
BIBLIOGRAPHY

N.B. This bibliography contains an extensive list of scholarly sources addressing the issue of popular representations of Haitian Vodou and other African diaspora religions (including Candomblé, Regla de Ocha [Santería], and Obeah, as well as the magical practices of conjure and hoodoo). Additionally, it is an catalogue of examples of such representations, ranging from well-intentioned and sensitive to grotesque. In the course, students will be encouraged to work independently with materials chosen from this list when engaging in individual viewing assignments and written work.

Print and internet texts

Ackermann, Hans-W. and Jeanine Gauthier

Allende, Isabel

Anderson, Jeffrey E.

Bartkowski, John P.

Brooks, David

Brown, Karen McCarthy

Cosentino, Donald J., ed.
1988a “More on ‘voodoo’,” African Arts 21:3, 77
1988b “The final word on ‘voodoo’,” African Arts 21:3, 77-8

Courlander, Harold
Craige, John Houston

Danticat, Edwidge

Davis, Wade

Deren, Maya

Desquiron, Lilas

Drewal, Henry John

Dubois, Laurent
2001 “Vodou and History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43.1, 92-100.

Dunham, Katherine

Eco, Umberto

Fabian, Johannes

Fandrich, Ina Johanna

Gaiman, Neil

Glassman, Sallie Ann


Long, Carolyn Morrow

Lovecraft, H.P.

Lovelace, Earl

Marshall, Paule

Martinié, Louis and Sallie Ann Glassman

Matory, J. Lorand

McAlister, Elizabeth

McGee, Adam

Montero, Mayra

Moreau de Saint-Méry, Louis-Elie


Thompson, Robert Farris

Tobey, Danny

Wirkus, Faustin

Film and Audio


*Black Orpheus [Orfeu Negro]*. Directed by Marcel Camus, 1959.


*Constantine*. Directed by Francis Lawrence, 2005.


In the Mirror of Maya Deren [Im Spiegel der Maya Deren]. Directed by Martina Kudlacek, 2002.


It’s All True. Directed by Orson Welles, 1993.


King of the Zombies. Directed by Jean Yarbrough, 1941.


The Secret Circle [television series], 2011-12.


The Skeleton Key. Directed by Iain Softley, 2005.

The Skeleton Key Soundtrack. Edward Shearmur et al., 2005.

So NoTORIous, Season 1. Directed by Chris Alberghini, et al., 2006.


Tales from the Hood. Directed by Rusty Cundieff, 1995.


Vers le Sud [Heading South]. Directed by Laurent Cantet, 2005.


Voodoo Island. Directed by Reginald Le Borg, 1957.


