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Imagined Voodoo:
Terror, Sex, and Racism in American Popular Culture

A dissertation presented

by

Adam Michael McGee

to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
African American Studies

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2014

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Terror, Sex, and Racism in American Popular Culture

Abstract

I analyze the historical and cultural processes by which American racism is reproduced, approaching the issue through the lens of "imagined voodoo" (as distinct from Haitian Vodou). I posit that the American Marine occupation of Haiti (1915-34) was crucial in shaping the American racial imaginary. In film, television, and literature, imagined voodoo continues to serve as an outlet for white racist anxieties. Because it is usually found in low-brow entertainment (like horror) and rarely mentions race explicitly, voodoo is able to evade critique, disseminating racism within a culture that is now largely—albeit superficially—intolerant of overt racism.

I establish a methodology that engages seriously with black studies; cultural studies; historiography; gender and sexuality studies; postcolonial studies; religious studies; film studies; psychoanalysis; and literary criticism. Adopting a program of intellectual activism, I argue that the tools of Haitian Studies can be used to critique American culture, thus destabilizing the hierarchical relationship between metropole and postcolony.

Imagined voodoo plays a role in what Frantz Fanon calls "sociogeny," the process by which cultural actors create blackness and read it onto "blackened" bodies. I contextualize imagined voodoo within the literary tradition of the Gothic, arguing that voodoo, as a Gothic mode, assumes racial and sexual norms that are coeval with colonialism. I argue that both the Gothic genre and imagined voodoo construct black sexuality as inherently queered.

In Chapter Two, I examine how imagined voodoo serves as an agent of "black revenge," my term for white fears that blacks long to enact violence against whites.

In Chapter Three, I dissect portrayals of black bodies as hypersexual and perversely sexed, organized as an exegesis of Fanon's argument that Negrophobia is fundamentally a sexual phobia. I include an analysis of voodoo in pornography.

Chapter Four is organized around the question, "Are zombies (still) black?" I interrogate the appeal of zombies for philosophers (such as Deleuze and Guattari), the American working class, the news media, and white supremacists.

Chapter Five explores how black writers and filmmakers use stereotypical voodoo imagery in ways that subvert racist content, converting them into images of black power—often with ties to Afrofuturism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures vi

Acknowledgements vii

Author's Note xii

Introduction 1

Chapter One: Imagining Voodoo, Imagining Blackness: On how and why to study imagined voodoo 20

Chapter Two: The Fiction of Black Revenge 69

Chapter Three: Hot Voodoo: Voodoo and Hypersexuality 105
- Part I: Imagined voodoo, the sexually perverse, and sociogeny 105
- Part II: Voodoo's gendered stereotypes 139
- Part III: Voodoo and pornography 163
- Part IV: The erotic life of zombies 174
- Conclusion 184

Chapter Four: The Revenants: On the meanings of zombies 186
- Part I: Thinking Through Zombies 186
- Part II: Four key sources for the American zombie 203
- Part III: Zombie Apocalypse(s) and a Case for Anachronism 231
- Conclusion 250

Chapter Five: Flipping the Script: On black reimaginings of voodoo 252

Conclusion: Further Considerations 329

Appendix A: The Haitian concept of the *zonbi* 339

Bibliography 346

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1: *Vèvè* for Danbala in Muriel's, New Orleans 38

1.2: *Vèvè* for Ezili Freda in Muriel's, New Orleans 39

1.3: Voodoo window display, American Apparel, New York City 40

1.4: Voodoo-themed mural, Marie Laveau's Bar, New Orleans 43

3.1: ". . . blood-maddened, sex-maddened," illustration from *The Magic Island* 126

3.2: ". . . they were staring fixedly," illustration from *The Magic Island* 127

4.1: ". . . strange tales are told of Voodoo," illustration from *The Magic Island* 207

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though neither of us knew it at the time, this dissertation began when Jacob Olupona agreed to supervise an independent study on popular representations of Haitian Vodou. This is among the many reasons I have to be grateful to Jacob. As an advisor, he has always expressed calm confidence in my capacity to succeed.

Kimberley Patton is the greatest advocate one could have. I would not have been published half so much had it not been for her, and she often fought hard for my teaching appointments. She read every draft of this dissertation, and gave detailed feedback that was simultaneously encouraging and honest.

Vincent Brown provoked me to be rigorous in answering questions of intellectual history. Vince was the first person to introduce me to Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, and I appreciate that we share a conviction that the right questions are often more interesting than answers.

I must profusely thank Carol Duncan for agreeing to be on my committee, despite the fact that Harvard doesn't give her a single cent for all of her hard work. It was in Carol's class that I first started to think about the intersection between blackness and popular culture. Had it not been for that, this project would never have happened.

I also have to thank Jacob, Kimberley, Vince, and Carol for putting their trust in me when, following my father's death, I realized that I needed to switch to a completely different dissertation topic. In that vulnerable interval, I think that one wrong word would have set me back years. Instead, their confidence is what allowed me to get this far.

My editor, Jennifer Doody, did fantastic work turning my drafts into coherent, lucid prose. I expect she had no idea what she was taking on when she offered to edit my dissertation, and I am enormously grateful for her many hours of attention. I cannot recommend her services highly enough.

In a special issues of *Studies in Religious/Sciences Religieuses* that they guest edited, Terry Rey and Karen Richman published the journal article that was the beginning of this project. I am profoundly thankful for their support and feedback, as well as the feedback of the anonymous reviewers. Likewise, Alessandra Benedicty and Kaiama Glover invited me to contribute to a panel presentation at the Haitian Studies Association's annual conference, which became the core of the section on Zora Neale Hurston. I am grateful for their support, and for the invaluable feedback I received on that presentation from Gina Ulysse. In addition, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel have been tireless supporters of my scholarship.

My students at Tufts University Experimental College participated in a class that was, in essence, my dissertation in progress. I am indebted to them for all of their insights. I am also appreciative of my students at Northeastern University and Harvard University, with whom I have, in various ways, worked through many of the questions here.

Throughout the long process of writing, I have relied on the support and guidance of friends and colleagues too numerous to recall. I am particularly grateful to Carla Martin—for everything, really, and in particular for teaching my article on this topic. Funlayo Wood has talked through much of this with me, and I am thankful to her for also teaching my article. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge Deirdre Barrett, Elizabeth Crocker, Kyrah Daniels, Brian King, Sharon Kivenko, Christina Knight, Giovanna Micconi, Ernie Mitchell, Tim Reppucci, Diana Steinberg, and Grete Viddal.

Kathleen Cloutier is the administrator who keeps afloat the Department of African and African American Studies. For the many times she has assisted with paperwork and answered my questions, I give thanks.

I am appreciative of the staff of the Harvard Sq. L.A. Burdick's, the big Harvard Starbucks, the Harvard Panera, the Starbucks at Charles & Beacon, and the Downtown Crossing Boston Common Coffee for never giving me a hard time about staying all day.

Nearly everything I know about Vodou, I know because of Manbo Marie Maude Charles Evans and her Sosyete Nago. "Thank you" feels entirely inadequate.

Bill McCarty is amazing.

So are my mother, Kathy McGee; my brother, Daniel McGee; his wife, Rachel Silkworth.

And Dad. Always Dad.

in memory of
Michael Joseph McGee
1953-2012

There is no such thing as Voodoo; it is a silly lie invented by you whites to injure us.
—William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Haitian Vodou is a religion created by the descendants of Africans brought as slaves to the French colony of St. Domingue (present-day Haiti). It combines components of multiple west and west central African religious complexes (notably Fon/Ewe, Kongo, and Yorùbá) with European and Native American cultural and religious elements to create a religion entirely unique to Haiti and its diaspora. Haitian Vodou is the religion of millions of Haitians, though precisely how many is difficult to say. Focused around the celebration of ancestral spirits called *lwa*, all Vodou rituals are, at heart, healing rituals. Through feasting, singing, and ecstatic dance, these rituals mend damaged bodies and restore ruptured social bonds.

Because this work is about white American *fantasies* of voodoo, the reader will learn very little here about the actual religion of Haitian Vodou. For those wishing to learn more, I highly recommend Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 [1991]); Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1983 [1953]); Elizabeth McAlister's *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Donald Cosentino's edited volume, called *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995).

INTRODUCTION

> The white imagination is sure something when it comes to blacks.
> —Josephine Baker[1]
>
> O my body, make of me always a man who questions!
> —Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*[2]

A diagnosis

A culture can catch a disease, as surely as a person can, and just as deadly. This dissertation is about a disease in American culture, though like most diseases, it is contagious and America has been spreading it around for a long time. By the logic with which Europeans called diseases Spanish or Italian, not for where they originated, but from whence the latest wave arose to crash down, we might call this disease an American disease. In reality, it was born on salt, crisscrossing the Atlantic, in the minds of those who were manning the boats, and the minds of whites all around the Atlantic, in Europe and the Americas, whose lives were staked on those boats in one way or another. I call this disease "imagined voodoo." It is kissing cousin to several diseases that already have names, like "the Other" (an ancient disease) and "race"—the American strain of which remains one of the deadliest and most contagious known to man. The symptoms of imagined voodoo include feelings of anxiety, discomfort, and scorn towards black

[1] *Jazz: The Story of America's Music*, episode 1 ("Gumbo"), directed by Ken Burns, aired January 8, 2001 (PBS, 2004), DVD.

[2] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 232.

subjects, principally experienced in the emotional keys of terror, anxiety, and sexual obsession. Rather than offering a cure, I aim to provide a diagnosis of the disease of imagined voodoo—and yet diagnosis may go toward a cure, since it is a disease that thrives in subtext. By making it the subject of analysis, it forces it to become the text proper, a thing it cannot bear, just as many horrid diseases perish in air and sun.

I use the term imagined voodoo in spite of my general aversion to neologisms. Nonetheless, when I first began researching the subject, I found myself pulled again and again to use the word voodoo, as it is the term most frequently used in pop culture. In order to combat the stereotypes associated with the word, I needed to clarify that I was not speaking of any actual African diaspora tradition of folk magic, spirituality, or of the religion of Haitian Vodou. Rather, I refer to an imaginary construct invented in the American popular imagination during the late nineteenth century and given renewed life in the early twentieth, first by the Marine occupation of Haiti in 1915-34, and second by the Hollywood entertainment industrial complex. When I use the term "imagined voodoo," it is to this construct to which I refer: an imaginary religion and magical system, indelibly imprinted upon the American brain and linked to white anxieties of black uprising, hypersexual black bodies, miscegenation, and ultimately the dissolution of the white race. Although this imagined religion has no real adherents (or, at least, did not historically), it is no less real for this fact. As I will explore later, this imagined voodoo serves as a continued outlet for the expression of racist anxieties under the guise of harmless entertainment, thereby disseminating denigrating images of black religiosity—Haitian Vodou most of all—and of black subjects generally. Most importantly, I argue that, while voodoo was once openly paired with a discourse about the inferiority of blacks, voodoo continues to serve this role despite

our latter-day age of political correctness —and brilliantly so, for it permits a continued racist discourse without ever making overt reference to race.

By beginning this introduction with a poetic description of imagined voodoo as a psychic disease, I admit a heavy debt to Ishmael Reed. In Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, the plot revolves around the spread of a plague/anti-plague that personifies black expressive culture, a self-perpetuating psychic event called "Jes Grew."[3] The novel begins with a scene in which Jes Grew is introduced as a kind of psychic plague that overwhelms the white citizens of New Orleans, causing them to spontaneously adopt the stereotypical speech patterns and bodily affectations of blacks. In this same scene, we are introduced to the novel's antagonists, the Wallflower Order, white Illuminati who seek to suppress the "plague" of Jes Grew and its alchemical power to confound racial boundaries. Fighting against the Wallflower Order is Papa LaBas, a Harlemite and voodoo priest offering himself as the midwife for Jes Grew, which he believes is an *anti*-plague with the potential to inaugurate a black American utopia. In search of a uniquely black epistemology for understanding the perpetuation of imagined voodoo, I came to rely on Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. I will lean heavily on Reed's concept of Jes Grew when exploring the power and persistence of imagined voodoo because, in the idea of a psychic plague/anti-plague, Reed offers a voodoo epistemology that describes how ideas can be self-perpetuating and crowd-sourced.

My interest in this topic began with a disease of my own. Nauseated and fatigued by cancer treatments for the better part of a year, I developed an unusual fixation on horror films. Prior to that, I had found them upsetting, and after watching one, would invariably end the day subjecting every shadow and creak to heightened scrutiny. Suddenly, however, I found there

[3] Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972).

was no end to my appetite for horror movies—especially anything supernatural—and I would watch them for days on end, propped up on the couch with little else to do, my attention span too foreshortened to enjoy reading.

My viewing, though, was hardly pre-critical, and I began to notice recurring themes in the way that black characters—and, in particular, black spiritualties—were portrayed. On the one hand, it is a well-oiled trope in horror for the black character to die first, enough for it to be lampooned in films like *Scary Movie* (2000), written and directed by the African American comedic filmmakers the Wayan Brothers.[4] Horror is not a genre known for subtlety. Quite intentionally, it is built around hyperbole. It also relies on cultural stereotypes, a kind of shorthand, to quickly establish characters in the first few minutes: the cheerleader, the dumb jock, the hysterical woman, the well-meaning priest, the drunk abusive father. Backstory is typically only provided in the form of flashback if it serves to reveal past horrors that haunt the present, or to establish the origins of psychosis. Like its parent, the Gothic, the genre of horror is highly conservative. It tells rigorously formal and formulaic stories—often with foregone conclusions—with the minimal number of brushstrokes expended on character development. It is in the small embellishments, the twists, and in atmosphere that horror filmmakers most distinguish themselves and their creations. If this analysis seems to suggest that the horror genre is without art, consider the rigorous formality and formula of the sonnet—even down to which themes were deemed acceptable. Formality does not preclude art.

However, employing stereotypes as a way of forcing the audience to do much of the narrative's heavy lifting means that horror films often reproduce mortifyingly negative representations of gender, class, religion, and race. This is especially egregious where ethnic and

[4] *Scary Movie*, directed by Keenan Ivory Wayans (2000; Miramax Lionsgate, 2011), DVD.

racial minorities are concerned. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison calls this a reliance on "Africanist presences," by which she means the use of black characters to comment on themes of freedom, servitude, rationality, magical thinking, danger, and illicit sexuality.[5]

My analytical starting point was as a viewer who brought to these films a keen interest in Haitian Vodou. As both an initiate of Haitian Vodou and an anthropologist of religion who has written extensively about Haitian Vodou, I found myself finely attuned to mentions of voodoo, hoodoo, and black spiritualities in general. In many of these films, I detected patterns that routinely situated voodoo at the intersection between derision and fear: Derision of "superstitions" that were almost always overtly coded as black. And fear because voodoo was an evil, or at best amoral, force that presented the characters with danger, madness, downfall, torture, mutilation, and the specter of imminent death. In short, voodoo functions as a Gothic mode.

My interest piqued by these repeated uses of voodoo in horror, I began to notice popular culture references to voodoo everywhere—in films, television shows, news stories, magazines, books, advertisements, mass-produced commercial products, music, touristic ephemera, political propaganda, pornography, and so on. Several years into the project, I can now say that the list of references to voodoo, and its close cousin hoodoo, is virtually endless. In many cases, it can be difficult to detect the signal in the noise. On occasion, the signal in fact gets lost, and it seems that a particular incident has become wholly detached from any larger discursive arc. Nonetheless, the vast majority of these incidents contribute to a long-standing discourse, originating in the Atlantic slave trade, that ties black cultural patterns—and black subjects—with ideas of intellectual (including linguistic) inferiority, violence, superstition, hypersexuality,

[5] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

subhuman or bestial behavior, barbarism, cannibalism, human sacrifice, and an inability to adequately acquire and assimilate to Western cultures.

As will be seen in the coming chapters, my interest is not only in overt references to voodoo and hoodoo, but also cases in which the qualities of voodoo are applied to both black and white characters in ways that mimic the application of a minstrel's blackface—what I call "getting voodooed."[6] When this happens, it usually takes the form of exceptionalist claims that black subjects are, in one way or another, uniquely and naturally inclined towards spiritual insight, mysticism, psychic capabilities, magical gifts, and supernatural feats of religious piety—as well as acts of occult malice and treachery. As I will later argue, this has had the far-reaching effect of making most popular representations of black spirituality only legible through the lens of imagined voodoo. In the case of white characters who get voodooed, it is usually to serve the purpose of either lampooning them as yokels, or identifying them as race traitors. These characters and plot devices can be productively analyzed as being voodooed even if they do not overtly evoke voodoo or hoodoo, as they employ a symbolic vocabulary that derives from voodoo—and without that reference, lack resonance for audiences.

The use of voodoo in popular culture serves the purpose of curating the presence of an Other, a cultural outsider seen at once as existing at the periphery of civilization and also seditiously lurking at its heart. In *Time and the Other*, the philosopher and anthropologist Johannes Fabian diagnoses the West's obsession with the notion of the Other.[7] While Fabian is

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[6] This plays on the existing word "hoodooed," meaning cursed or hexed—for example, as used in the Louis Jordan song "Somebody Done Hoodooed the Hoodoo Man." Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five, performance of "Somebody Done Hoodooed The Hoodoo Man," by Wesley Wilson, recorded March 13, 1940, Decca 7745, LP.

[7] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]).

especially interested in how anthropology as a discipline has been complicit in this process of othering, his writing is of value to anyone who wishes to understand how this process functions generally. In particular, Fabian is interested in how the Other is seen as embodying those qualities that culture deems to be of the past, retrograde, pre-scientific—in effect, outside of ordinary time, what Fabian calls "allochronic." Imagined voodoo is nothing if not allochronic, characterized as hailing from the dawn of mankind, ignorant and superstitious, to be jettisoned at the earliest possible moment if its adherents have any hope of being absorbed into modernity and the boon it promises.

The degree to which imagined voodoo and the real religion of Haitian Vodou are confounded is evidenced in the work of the conservative strategist Lawrence Harrison, whose book *The Central Liberal Truth* argues that Haitian Vodou is expressly inimical to modernity, and that only by adopting a religion like Protestant Christianity (and, specifically, "proper" mainline American sorts) can Haitians hope to achieve success at reforming their country.[8] In Harrison's work—and those of others like him—one can see beliefs about imagined voodoo supporting the racist hypothesis that diaspora blacks are fundamentally *other than* whites. That this has direct impact on public policy, international politics, and the allocation of monetary aid makes the battle to unmask imagined voodoo absolutely vital.

Little work has been published on popular representations of Haitian Vodou, voodoo, hoodoo, and other African diaspora religions (including the black church). Laënnec Hurbon's *Le Barbare imaginaire* remains one of the only book-length treatments, and has never been

[8] Lawrence Harrison, *The Central Liberal Truth: How Politics Can Change A Culture and Save It From Itself* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

translated into English.[9] Hurbon's work is primarily one of intellectual history. In analyzing how Haitians were historically seen as allied with cannibals, sorcerers, and zombies—a pattern that varies little to the present day—Hurbon traces the history of the idea of the barbarian (*le barbare*) from the Enlightenment through the French *philosophes,* to its continued application in the twentieth century, particularly during the Marine occupation of Haiti.

Serving as a companion piece to Hurbon's book is his essay "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou." It was published in the landmark volume *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, edited by Donald Cosentino and published by UCLA Fowler Museum in 1995 as the accompanying catalogue for its traveling exhibition of the same name.[10] As the first major international showing of Vodou sacred arts, the exhibition may in the end be most remembered for its catalogue, a beautiful object in itself, which collects some of the finest essays to be published on Haitian Vodou to date. In his contribution, Hurbon focuses primarily on the twentieth century, examining the role that travelogues and other popular narratives played in (mis)informing American understanding of Haitian Vodou—a knowledge base that filtered into what I am calling imagined voodoo (note that Hurbon does not use that terminology).

Overlapping with Hurbon's essay, Mary A. Renda's *Taking Haiti* also takes as its subject the Marine occupation of Haiti.[11] Divided into halves, the first portion of Renda's book looks at the effects of the Marine occupation on Haiti's image of itself. The second half, of greater relevance to this project, examines how Haiti and Vodou came to occupy important places in the

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[9] Laënnec Hurbon, *Le Barbare imaginaire* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988).

[10] Laënnec Hurbon, "American fantasy and Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 181-97.

[11] Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

American popular imagination of the 20s, 30s, and 40s. Renda notes a striking lack of historiographic symmetry: namely, that the Marine occupation tends to be viewed as highly significant to Haiti but of little long-term importance to the United States. On the contrary, Renda demonstrates that the American occupation of Haiti was a significant arena—politically, imaginatively, and intellectually—for both white and black Americans to work through questions of American empire and capitalism; of national sovereignty, democracy, and self-determination; the meaning of liberty; and the role of religiosity in public life. For American blacks in particular, it offered the chance to reflect on the significance of race—and whether, as a category of identity, it superseded nationality (in other words, Pan-Africanism).

Joseph Murphy published an essay in 1990 entitled "Black Religion and 'Black Magic,'" in which he uses "black magic" in much the same way that I use the term imagined voodoo.[12] Fully explored in Chapter One, "Imagining Voodoo, Imagining Blackness," Murphy's essay is primarily psychoanalytic. He argues that much of voodoo's enduring appeal lies in its ability to displace white guilt and perverse libidinal energies onto blacks. Originating in the minds of writers and viewers, these feelings are, through the "Hollywood magic" of voodoo, transferred onto voodooists. While throughout this work I rely heavily on such psychoanalytic insights, I also repeatedly draw attention to the limitations of psychoanalysis in urgently addressing the role that such psychic maneuvers play in matters of social justice.[13]

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[12] Joseph M. Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic': Prejudice and projection in images of African-derived religions," *Religion* 20, no. 4 (1990): 323-37.

[13] Another essay by the sociologist John Bartkowski is mostly concerned with news media, and the legal and political consequences of negative portrayals of Vodou. John P. Bartkowski, "Claims-making and typifications of voodoo as a deviant religion: Hex, lies, and videotape," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 559-79. I have also published an essay on this topic. Cf. Adam McGee, "Haitian Vodou and voodoo: Imagined religion and popular culture," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41, no. 2 (2012): 231-56.

Following the Haitian Earthquake of January 2010, a number of scholars of Haiti and of Haitian Vodou—notably Elizabeth McAlister, Gina Athena Ulysse, and Laurent Dubois—have published print media and online articles that have, to varying degrees, challenged popular assumptions about Vodou, particularly how the religion was represented in the wake of the earthquake. Around the same time, Kate Ramsey published *The Spirits and the Law*.[14] Large portions of Ramsey's book analyze the archives of Congressional hearings conducted in response to allegations of military excesses in Haiti during the Marine occupation of 1915-1934. During these hearings, the presiding Senators were essentially incapable of sustained inquiry into abuses by Marines because they were routinely sidetracked by their obsession with the possibility that Haitians were engaging in black magic, human sacrifice, and cannibalism. Ramsey's findings are consistent with Hurbon's thesis in *Le Barbare imaginaire*, and support my argument that imagined voodoo entered American pop culture on a wave of racist anxiety—and that it is this same racist anxiety that continues to buoy it along.

My own work stands on the shoulders of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*.[15] Gilroy's text examines the identification of circum-Atlantic historical, cultural, and artistic patterns that coalesced as a uniquely black modernity, a black Atlantic. Interested particularly in the pathos that informs certain aspects of this black modernity, Gilroy's text is capacious in its choice of primary sources—running the gamut of philosophy, sociology, fiction, poetry, painting, and popular music.

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[14] Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[15] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

While my work largely follows the contours of the field of cultural studies as modeled by Gilroy and others, I also am attentive to the critique often leveled against cultural studies—namely, that it offers compelling but self-referential hermeneutical models that lack testability and cannot easily be demonstrated as functioning in "real life." I have tried to address this critique by including news stories wherever possible. By doing so, I hope to have made a case for how these powerful fictions routinely shape interpretations of lived experience. Pointedly, I suggest that a feedback loop exists between our racialized fictions and our experiences of the world. I argue that there is a moral necessity for intervention in this process, and advocate for altering the kinds of fictions that we tell. This means first abandoning the deeply American notion that we have an inalienable right to be entertained—what amounts, I believe, to idolatry of the pleasure principle. This premise grants us plenary indulgence to engage with entertainment media pre-critically, as though we were little more than alimentary tubes.

I take as the object of my study less the black Atlantic *per se*, but rather what white Americans think about the black Atlantic and black Atlantic religiosity, through the lens of characterizations of voodoo. For heuristic purposes, this can be labeled "white fantasy." However, my project is diasporic in scope, not only because it routinely references the Caribbean and Africa, but because imagined voodoo represents African Americans not as proper citizens of the United States, but as sojourners who pay allegiance foremost to the black Atlantic in the broadest sense. And it is this anxiety over the supposedly unintegrated presence of blacks in the Americas that I argue is the ultimate root of American preoccupations with voodoo.

I also take up at least some of the questions posed by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, her masterful work of literary criticism that explores the place of blacks in white American *belles lettres*. Remarkable for both its brevity and clarity of prose, Morrison's monograph

examines what she calls the "Africanist presence" that haunts American literature. By Africanist presence, Morrison means the way that black characters appear routinely in early American writings as foils against which American writers struggle to define American identity. In these works, blacks stand in for a "darkness" linked to slavery, animalism, illicit sexuality, unchecked nature, pollution, and moral ambiguity—set in opposition to white images of humanity, productive sexuality, civilization, purity, and moral clarity. Transcending mere structuralism, Morrison argues convincingly that this system of color symbolism, which is also a system of race symbolism, is central to the American literary imagination. Like Morrison, I mostly bracket questions of the aesthetic merit of the works that I examine. And like Morrison, I am interested in cases where imagined voodoo, as a species of Africanist presence, both support and overwhelm authors' intentions.

What I believe has been missing is work that directly challenges imagined voodoo. Haitian Vodou and imagined voodoo have entwined destinies, gravitating toward one another in the American popular imagination with the force of powerful magnets. To address oneself only to Haitian Vodou leaves untouched the semantic field that one actually wishes to transform. I have learned this the hard way, from teaching about Haitian Vodou in classrooms, churches, and open community spaces. For years, I would only talk about Haitian Vodou—about how it, in brief, wasn't what people thought. I would endeavor to impart a sense of the beauty and theological complexity of the tradition. At the end, when it came time for questions, nine out of ten would be about what I now call imagined voodoo. People would want to know about why Vodouisants stick pins in dolls, curse people, whether they really sacrifice human beings—and what's all that stuff about zombies? Can Haitians really raise people from the dead, and have I met a zombie?

Today, when I teach about Vodou, I begin with imagined voodoo. I instruct students or participants to turn off their PC (political correctness) filters and to tell me whatever they associate with voodoo. A typical list might look like this:

Curses
Black magic
Dolls/pins, voodoo dolls
Animal sacrifice, chickens
Human sacrifice
Cannibalism
Superstition
Zombies
Poison
Sorcerers
Witchcraft
Witch doctors
Haiti
New Orleans

Establishing a thought map like this is a far more effective way to initiate discussion, as it is only after systematically debunking these myths, one by one, that I can then begin to teach about Haitian Vodou. If I ignore this crucial step and begin speaking about the religion, participants leave the discussion with their misconceptions intact, assuming that an exposé on voodoo dolls and curses will be part of the next lecture. Thus, imagined voodoo began for me as a heuristic device, useful for teaching purposes, but has subsequently grown in importance with my awareness of its pernicious and widespread influence on popular culture. Imagined voodoo uses black abjection for the purposes of entertainment. By drawing attention to the obscenity of this, I seek to flip it on its head, using *abjection* to provoke *objection*.

Positionality and intellectual activism

I identify variously as an American, a leftist, white, a gay man—raised by racist grandparents and educated by a pseudo-Southern public school in which desegregation was more a nice idea than a reality. Furthermore, I am an initiate of Haitian Vodou, having passed through the *djevo* of Manbo Marie Maude Evans in Jacmel, Haiti, receiving the rank of *oungan asogwe* (priest). My commitments to some of the above and adamant rejection of others have shaped my own vision and activist agenda. In a work such as this, it is important that the particularity of my vision not be mistaken for being more universal than it is. I am not an Everyman, nor do I wish to speak as one. Naturally, the reader is also not an Everyman (a term I use precisely to draw attention to the imperfections of such a concept). However, in our interactions as writer and reader, we enter into a dialectic relationship that offers greater clarity by helping us become clearer about our own limitations.

In this book, I critique the harmful racist "work" which imagined voodoo executes in our culture—and, in order to do that, I first identity the pattern of imagined voodoo. What I will be presenting in this book represents, to some degree, my own heuristic construct that, by virtue of being schematic, must necessarily be less nuanced and hideously subtle than in real life. Nonetheless, the fact that it is heuristic does not mean that it does not have an objective correlative, in addition to rhetorical value.

More than half of what follows is analyses of popular films. As will be clear in both the text and footnotes, my viewings of these films are shaped by my use of scholarly texts from a variety of disciplines, particularly black studies; women's, gender, and sexuality studies; literary criticism; film studies; religious studies; anthropology; and psychoanalysis. At the same time, I do not exclude from the discussion my own reactions and responses as an individual viewer. On

the contrary, I advocate for the value of such personal responses, especially since this project focuses particularly on the intimate space of viewership and the experience viewers have when they enter into a relationship with a film (or book, article, object, etc.)—what Sarah Patricia Collins calls (in a turn of phrase I am repurposing) "space[s] of . . . intimate subjugation."[16] I am not only interested in how, abstractly, works that utilize imagined voodoo smuggle in racist content, but how a viewer or reader discerns the existence of such content and engages with it in both biographic and broader socio-historical contexts.

This project is a work of what Patricia Hill Collins calls "intellectual activism."[17] By this, she means "engaged scholarship" which is aimed at identifying and remedying social problems.[18] As part of her commitment to intellectual activism, Collins makes an effort to write her books in "multiple registers."[19] By this, she means that she includes technical discussions pitched to a specialized scholarly audience, but the majority of the text is intended for a general educated audience. By doing so, Collins positions her writing to be capable of simultaneously "speaking truth to power" and "speaking truth directly to the people."[20] As much as possible, I follow Collins's example of writing in multiple registers, an effort shaped by my belief in the strong ethical dimension to this work. At the root of my project to examine and critique

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[16] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

[17] Patricia Hill Collins, *On Intellectual Activism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013). This is similar to what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and the Harvard University Department of African and African American Studies have advocated under the name of "social engagement," which they define in part as "academically informed civic responsibility." Evelyn Higginbotham, "Social Engagement" presentation in "Race and Technology" seminar, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, November 8, 2013.

[18] Collins, *On Intellectual Activism*, xii.

[19] Ibid., xiv.

[20] Ibid., xix.

imagined voodoo, there is a moral imperative to engage publicly and critically with manifestations of racism in the hopes that doing so may disrupt harmful settled patterns.

Guide to reading

Chapter One, "Imagining Voodoo, Imagining Blackness," begins by defining "imagined voodoo." Engaging with Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, I interrogate how American racial categories are constituted, proposing that imagined voodoo plays a meaningful role in what Fanon calls "sociogeny," the process by which cultural actors create notions of blackness and read them onto "blackened" bodies. I also engage with psychoanalytic approaches to constructions of the Other. At the same time, I caution that such explanations often fall short by focusing overwhelmingly on the psychic actions of an imagined individual actor, thus giving insufficient attention to how othering does real work at a cultural level to maintain imperial and colonial regimes. The chapter goes on to contextualize imagined voodoo within the literary tradition of the Gothic, arguing that voodoo, as a Gothic mode, assumes racial and sexual cultural norms that have changed little since the nineteenth century. Moreover, I argue that both the Gothic genre and imagined voodoo construct black sexuality as inherently queered.

Chapter Two, "The Fiction of Black Revenge," is a case study of how imagined voodoo serves as an agent of "black revenge," my term for white fantasies that black people long to enact violence against whites in recompense for historical wrongs. Engaging with anthropological and psychoanalytic understandings of revenge, I highlight the intersubjective logic that underlies the white fantasy that African Americans long for revenge. Moreover, I note how the anticipation of revenge grants permission for preemptive aggression that is imaginatively cast as merely

defensive. Using news stories, I highlight how fantasies of black revenge influence the interpretation of real events. I then move on to black revenge in fiction, offering interpretations of a number of films and television shows, including *Django*, *American Horror Story: Coven*, ghost hunting reality TV shows, *Sugar Hill*, *The Skeleton Key*, and *The Princess and the Frog*.

Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo," dissects historical portrayals of black bodies as hypersexual and perversely sexed, organized as an extended exegesis of Fanon's argument that Negrophobia is fundamentally a sexual phobia. Practitioners of imagined voodoo are frequently represented as gluttonous for sexual coupling, while at the same time ambiguously (and therefore subversively) sexed, gendered, and sexually oriented—a series of slippages I gloss as "inherently queered." As a symbol that is deeply connected with blackness, yet able to act upon characters of any race, voodoo often functions as a device within narratives to both explain the sexually transgressive behaviors of white characters, and pardon it because it is magically compelled. Representations of voodoo are full of accounts of transgressive sex—whether homosexual, miscegenated, violent, homicidal, cannibalistic, zoophilic, pedophiliac, or coerced. Playing on images of the mammy, buck, tragic mulatto, punk/sissy/queer, pimp, and coon—and set in stark contrast to images of sexually virtuous white heroes and imperiled white women—the sexuality of imagined voodoo is operatic, scripted for a white (principally male) heterosexual gaze, and quite intentionally unwholesome, aiming to at once thrill and repulse. It thus permits the viewer or reader to experience an erotic charge from the doubly insulated position of both "not that" and "unwilling victim." In this chapter, I undertake an analysis of a number of mainstream works, such as the films *Angel Heart* (1987) and *Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988). I then transition to an analysis of voodoo in softcore and hardcore pornography. The chapter concludes with an investigation of the eroticism of zombies.

Chapter Four, "Revenants: On the Meaning of Zombies," addresses the most visible and popular manifestation of imagined voodoo. While zombie films and books are now a multi-million dollar industry with new entries every week, few fans are aware that the idea of the zombie derives from Haitian Vodou. The chapter is organized as a thought experiment around the question of how we can still extract classed and raced meaning from the phenomenon. I engage in readings of Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, and Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* to examine the impact of their visions of the zombie on American popular culture. The core of the chapter questions the appeal of zombies for philosophers, theologicans, the American working class, the news media, and white supremacists. I conclude with an extended anachronistic meditation on the potential implications that zombie films have for how we read nineteenth-century white accounts of the Haitian Revolution.[21]

Chapter Five, "Flipping the Script," explores how some black writers and filmmakers have used stereotypical voodoo imagery in ways that subvert racist content, converting them into images of black power—often with strong ties to the aesthetic movement of Afrofuturism. The chapter opens by querying the role that black actors play in the production of racist depictions of voodoo. Before turning to film and literature, I also investigate the role of voodoo imagery in Blues music. The remainder of the chapter is organized as a series of close readings and viewings. Mined for theoretical insights elsewhere, it is in this chapter that Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* receives full attention. Other works include Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, Darius James's *Negrophobia*, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, Kasi Lemmon's *Eve's Bayou*, Darieck Scott's *Hex*, and Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* and *Voodoo Season*. I am

[21] Appendix A, "The Haitian concept of the *zonbi*," provides an extended look at the importance of the figure of the *zonbi* in Haitian culture and religion.

particularly interested in the sites of struggle in these texts, where racist images of voodoo risk overwhelming—and in some cases do overwhelm—the intentions of the authors and directors.

In my brief conclusion, I delve into a series of personal reflections about voodoo, then reflect on a peculiar and fascinating aspect of imagined voodoo—namely, the fact that it is no longer entirely imaginary. Now it has true believers, such as New Age pilgrims who go to New Orleans in search of spiritual awakening and instruction in voodoo. In a strange object lesson in the notion of supply and demand, imagined voodoo has generated a feedback loop of people who now believe it is real and practice it, which in turn influences the way imagined voodoo is represented. Imagined voodoo has leapt from the page and screen, complicating the terrain of inquiry and raising questions about what it means for people to practice a spirituality that has its roots in racist misrepresentations.

Chapter One

IMAGINING VOODOO, IMAGINING BLACKNESS:
On why and how to study imagined voodoo

> Once many plantations grew cotton; today, some grow movies. But the imperatives remain pretty much the same.
> —Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*[1]

> It is said that the camera cannot lie, but rarely do we allow it to do anything else, since the camera sees what you point it at: the camera sees what you want it to see. The language of the camera is the language of our dreams.
> —James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*[2]

> But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul. . .
> —Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*[3]

In the time of the presidency of Barack Obama, it is painfully evident that American racism has not died. Sharon Patricia Holland refers to this as "a historical moment in the United States that wants desperately and unconvincingly to call itself 'postracial.'"[4] If anything, racism in the United States is experiencing a period of efflorescence. In a 2013 report, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented that racist organizations not only exist in record numbers, but

[1] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 9.

[2] James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 35.

[3] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 42.

[4] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 14.

that new groups are forming at an unprecedented rate.[5] Therefore, to emphasize the shift of American racism to institutionalized forms risks downplaying this renaissance of its quite overt manifestations. This is not to suggest that American racism does not also exist in institutionalized form—as the myriad systemic, bureaucratic, and inherited disadvantages that blacks endure daily—but that these institutionalized forms are *in addition to*, rather than in lieu of, overt forms of racism.[6]

While considerable scholarly energy has been invested in evaluating the ways in which both individuals and societal collectives are racist, fewer efforts have focused on tracing the

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[5] Mark Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," *Intelligence Report,* a publication of *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 149 (Spring, 2013), accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.splcenter.org/home/2013/spring/the-year-in-hate-and-extremism.

[6] This work is specifically about American popular culture and America's unique kind of white/black racism. When I use the term American, unless otherwise specified, I am referring to the United States, in deference to how this word is typically used in the United States. I am keenly aware of the problems with this way of using the word "American." Not only is it inexact, but its total cooption of the term "American" highlights the imperial regime of the United States, which has throughout its history attempted to completely define the shape and limits of American identity—here referring to the hemisphere at large. In acknowledgement of these problems, Mary Renda uses the term "U.S. American" throughout her work *Taking Haiti*. Similarly, Haitians themselves use the French term *États-Uniens* as an adjective when referring to people and things pertaining to the United States. Despite these options, I prefer to use the term "American," precisely as a way of drawing attention to its problems and the semantic slippages that underpin the conditions of hemispheric and global neo-colonialism. For similar reasons, I insist in this work on using the word "voodoo" throughout when referring to stereotypes, a choice I will explore in depth in a later section. I each of these cases, I want the reader to pause over these terms when they are used—rather than awkward replacements for them—and reflect on the ways they are engaged in manipulating social and political power towards particular hegemonic social visions. Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Similarly, despite being about American popular culture, I will on a few occasions utilize examples of imagined voodoo that are the products of other cultures. I argue that these examples are admissible because they are examples of the globalization of both American popular culture and, with it, America's unique vision of race. While these examples certainly represent attempts to embed American popular culture within local cultures, the examples I have selected nonetheless are generated out of globalization—and more than anything, demonstrate largely uncritical adoption by non-Americans of America's pernicious race system.

processes that perpetuate racism intergenerationally. In other words, how is it that people become, and stay, racist? More vexingly, how is it that individuals who are not racist—at least not in any simplistic or schematic sense—come not only to have racist ideas, but also perpetuate unintentional acts of racism?

These are some of the central research questions that underpin my project, which at its root is an exploration of how American racism maintains itself. I engage with that through the particular lens of how images of voodoo conceal racist messages under the guise of entertainment. Cultural critic Ed Guerrero has referred to this as the "cultural phenomena [of] the recurrence (though in mutated, updated forms) of certain resilient stereotypes and devaluations of African Americans" which, among other things,

> leads to the filmic overrepresentation of blacks as comics, entertainers, athletes, and criminals in disproportion to broader dramatic roles depicting the emotional and intellectual complexity of black life; the manner in which black culture is relentlessly co-opted, emptied of its social meaning, and sold by the entertainment industry as the latest fashion or fad.[7]

In this chapter, I lay out a theory and methodology tailored to the study of voodoo imagery in popular culture. This robust set of theory and methods could, with minimal modification, be applied to the study of other kinds of anti-black racist imagery, particularly those relating to religion (for example, Islamophobia), race, and sexuality. In this sense, I see this work as offering a broad methodological contribution that may inspire others to rigorously engage with these topics.

This is an ideal moment to advocate for an intervention in how popular culture perpetuates racist beliefs through images of voodoo. The last ten years have experienced the publication of an almost unprecedented number of scholarly works that, in various ways, address

[7] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 7.

the topic of how black people are and have been represented in American popular culture—both by whites and by other blacks. These works interrogate black identity, particularly in relation to questions of performativity, and come out of a plethora of disciplines, particularly literature; film studies; performance studies; and queer, gender, and women's studies.[8] This chapter undertakes the project of making these works talk to one another, which—in part because they come from a variety of disciplines, and in part because they were published so recently—has yet to happen to the extent that one would hope.

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[8] Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacred Profane Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); W. Lawrence Hogue, *The African American Male, Writing, and Difference: A Polycentric Approach to African American Literature, Criticisms, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Adilifu Nama, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Vincent R. Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood's Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Alison Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Young, *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

While "imagined voodoo" is my own neologism, the several years since the 2010 Haitian earthquake have seen an invigoration of public scholarship—and popular interest—in Haitian Vodou and its representations. Most of this has come from the field of Haitian Studies, with substantive works of scholarship and journalism by Gina Ulysse and Elizabeth McAlister, among others.[9] This highlights the need to not limit Haitian Studies to studying only the island of Haiti and Haitians abroad. Rather, the tools of Haitian Studies can be used to critique American

[9] Ulysse has a blog on *The Huffington Post* which often focuses on representations of Vodou. Gina Athena Ulysse, "How Vodoun Became 'Voodoo' and Vodou," *The Huffington Post*, January 9, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gina-athena-ulysse/vodoun-voodoo_b_2413249.html; "Loving Haiti Beyond the Mystique," *The Haitian Times*, January 1, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.haitiantimes.com/loving-haiti-beyond-the-mystique/; "Defending Vodou in Haiti," *The Huffington Post*, October 18, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gina-athena-ulysse/defending-vodou-in-haiti_b_1973374.html; "Why Haiti Needs New Narratives Now More Than Ever," *The Boston Haitian Reporter*, January 29, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.bostonhaitian.com/node/705; "Fractured Temples: Vodou Two Years After Haiti's Earthquake," *Tikkun Daily* Blog, January 12, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2012/01/12/fractured-temples-vodou-two-years-after-haitis-earthquake/.

Immediately following the Haitian earthquake, Elizabeth McAlister, an ethnomusicologist and Vodou expert at Wesleyan University, published a number of articles in popular news outlets. Elizabeth McAlister, "Devil's Logic: Behind Pat Robertson's Haitian Blame Game," *Forbes.com*, January 14, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.forbes.com/2010/01/14/haiti-earthquake-pat-robertson-opinions-contributors-elizabeth-mcalister.html; "Vodou's View of the Quake," *Washington Post* "On Faith" Blog, January 15, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/01/voodoos_view_of_the_quake_in_haiti.html; "Why Does Haiti Suffer So Much?," *CNN.com*, January 18, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/ 2010/OPINION/01/18/mcalister.haiti.faith/index.html; "Perspective on Haiti's Earthquake," *New York Times* online feature, Jaunary 28, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/world/haitivoices.html. McAlister has also followed this with scholarly articles on popular representation of voodoo. For example, Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 457-486.

culture, thus advancing the effort to destabilize the hierarchical relationship between the metropole and the postcolony.[10]

While recent attention paid to Haitian Vodou has offered some positive (if difficult to quantify) improvements in public opinion about the religion, it has also offered proof that a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. One of the changes that has occurred is that the Library of Congress has updated its entries from "voodoo" and "voodooism" to "Vodou," in acknowledgement that these other spellings carry with them racist baggage. This change was hard-won, the result of a multi-year campaign led by historian Kate Ramsey, the Haitian Studies Association, and KOSANBA.[11] However, a related effort to have the Oxford English Dictionary's entry on "voodoo" updated to reflect the state of current scholarship has found less success. Although the dictionary's editors have been extremely receptive to requests that the definition be updated, the new entry—which notes that "Vodou" is the preferred spelling—is highly problematic and offers few substantive improvements over the old entry.[12] For example, whereas the old definition described voodoo as "characterized by sorcery," the new definition says that the religion was "in the past"—a tormentingly vague expression—"frequently regarded

[10] I am partly inspired by Gina Ulysse, who challenged me to push at the boundaries of what is considered Haitian Studies. Ulysse's point was that Haitian Studies, like many area studies fields, is often treated as a topic bounded by having Haiti or Haitians as its sole objects of investigation. However, doing so has the effect of ghettoizing the knowledge produced by Haitian Studies scholars, and also preempts the possibility of that knowledge having imaginative applications outside of a carefully delineated socio-geographic space.

[11] Kate Ramsey, "Possibilities of New Narratives of Vodou," Roundtable Presentation at KOSANBA Internation Colloquium, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, October 19, 2013. Cf. KOSANBA, "BIBLIYOTÈK KONGRÈ AMERIKEN AN CHANJE TIT SIJÈ «VOODOOISM» LA POU FÈ L TOUNEN «VODOU»" ["American Library of Congress Changes Subject Heading 'Voodooism' to 'Vodou'"], press release, December 22, 2012.

[12] This is a temporary entry, offered as a stop-gap measure. It is unknown what the new permanent entry will say, or whether it will offer meaningful improvements.

as witchcraft." So doing, it tips the hat to misconceptions of the religion while doing little to actually inform. As Haitian Studies scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith warns, campaigns to change dictionary, library, and stylebook conventions from "voodoo" to "Vodou" risk merely changing "voodoo politics" to "Vodou politics."[13] In other words, the spelling changes, but the substance does not. As Bellegarde-Smith implies, this is almost worse, as the spelling change offers the misleading appearance of meaningful knowledge about the religion, when in fact what it on offer is merely recycled racist stereotypes.

An excellent example of this is a recent, much-circulated Smithsonian Magazine blog post by Mike Dash, entitled "The Trial That Gave Vodou a Bad Name."[14] Relating the events of the Haitian *affaire de Bizonton*—an 1860s trial prosecuting a supposed case of human sacrifice—the article uses the term "vodou" (note the lowercase, suggestive that it is not a real religion), and cites numerous scholarly sources. However, although it purports to examine how "vodou" came to be *falsely* maligned, it never expresses any clear awareness that human sacrifice and related evil practices are in fact *not* part of the religion of Haitian Vodou. As such, there is a conflict between the article's stated aims and its actual impact, a near perfect disjunct between the manifest goals of the scholarship that it cites (often incorrectly) and the uses to which Dash puts them. The article pretends to be about Vodou, when it is really a representation of imagined voodoo.

As a final introductory note, I would like to offer a corrective to how voodoo in the United States tends to be conceptualized—which is largely as a topic of regional interest. When

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[13] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, "Opening Seremoni," introductory remarks for KOSANBA Internation Colloquium, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, October 18, 2013.

[14] Mike Dash, "The Trial That Gave Vodou a Bad Name," *Past Imperfect* Blog on *Smithsonian.com*, May 20, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/history/2013/05/ the-trial-that-gave-vodou-a-bad-name/.

I mention that I study Vodou or voodoo in the United States, most people—including religion and black studies specialists—assume that my work must be principally set in the southern United States, particularly New Orleans. This is false for two different reasons. The first pertains to the present state of Haitian Vodou, which can be found wherever Haitians have emigrated, generally in direct proportion to the size of the Haitian population. This means that the southern city of Miami, which has the highest concentration of Haitians in the United States, also has one of the highest concentrations of practicing Vodouisants. By extension, though, New York City, Boston, Montréal, Washington, D.C., and numerous other North American cities have large communities of practitioners of Haitian Vodou. Thus, if there is a regional bias, it is towards the East Coast as a whole, rather than the South.

However, regarding voodoo, hoodoo, conjure, and related black American magical-religious practices, it is equally false to assume that they exist exclusively—or even principally—in the South. Increasingly, historical evidence offers compelling evidence that such practices have been integral to black American cultural life regardless of region. Furthermore, the Great Migration dispersed black southern culture—including southern black religious and magical practices—throughout North America, including major northern cities such as Chicago, New York City, Detroit, and Boston.[15]

Independent of this cultural and demographic redistribution, white Americans outside of the regional South expressed consistent and enduring interest in voodoo and related practices since at least the period of Reconstruction. A search of the Boston Globe archives, for example, finds numerous articles about voodoo, hoodoo, and conjure spread over the second half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. Some of these articles, as one would

[15] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).

expect, report on voodoo practices in the American South—perhaps satisfying a Northern readership that enjoyed seeing Southerners portrayed as backwards or superstitious.[16] However, against expectations, at least some of these articles report on voodoo practice in Boston and the surrounding communities. For example, in one article from 1879, the reporter describes visiting a "Witch Doctor" or "Goopher Man" who lived and practiced in Cambridge, Massachusetts.[17] The story's opening sentence claims, "The only purely African trait which the negro of this country possesses is his intense superstition, which is shown more particularly in his belief of witchcraft in general and the devil in particular." Published during the nineteenth century in one of the most liberal cities in the North—long associated with abolition and the struggle for black legal rights—these stories help correct our popular historical misunderstanding that voodoo was something practiced almost exclusively in the South, and of interest principally only to whites who lived in the South. On the contrary, voodoo was something that was of great interest to Northern whites as well, and which afforded opportunities to publish racist descriptions of blacks in what was, on the whole, a liberal white newspaper.

The same could be said of the present moment. Voodoo is consistently mistaken for being a minor or regional interest. On the contrary, portrayals of voodoo appear throughout our

[16] For example, "Voudoos Houdooed. Demoniacal Dance Stopped by Police. White Women Join in Revolting Orgies With Negroes in New Orleans. The Fetich Worshippers Arraigned and Fined in Court," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 31, 1889. It is worth noting that the story's headline highlights the "horror" of racial mixing as one of the most appalling aspects of the "orgy."

[17] "Voudooism. A 'Conjure' Doctor of the Present Day. How a 'Goopher' Man Can Cast Out Devils. A Reporter's Visit to the Witch Doctor of Cambridgeport," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 8, 1879. The story appears on the same page with a "demonic" race story entitled, "Possessed of A Demon. Remarkable Case of a Little Mulatto Girl, Who Attempts to Murder a Family." In the second story, more than 50 lines are devoted to describing the girl's appearance in ways that offer her as both an exceptionally grotesque example of stereotyped black bodies (toothless, and with an "uncommonly large" forehead "flatter even than African faces usually are"), as well as ambiguously sexed owing to her extremely large Adam's apple.

popular culture and, as I demonstrate, give expression to anti-black racist beliefs that have no particular regional or historical constraints. What follows in this chapter is an analysis of the stakes involved in studying popular representations of voodoo, and a methodology for doing so. The use of this methodology is then modeled in the following three chapters.

"Imagined Voodoo": a definition

Following the *Goudougoudou* of January 12, 2010, Haitian culture and religion fell, once again, under the focus of the international media and opinion makers.[18] 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,

> 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.[19]

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[18] *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.

[19] David Brooks, "The Underlying Tragedy," *New York Times,* January 14, 2010, accessed January 15, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/opinion/15brooks.html?_r=1. Cf. Lawrence Harrison, *The Central Liberal Truth: How Politics Can Change A Culture and Save It From Itself* (New York: Oxford University Press, 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," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704533204575047163435348660.

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—what Darieck Scott calls "a latency sporadically but inexorably reactivated."[20] Rather, they are continuously at play in our popular culture, where they manifest most frequently in references to an imagined religion called "voodoo."[21] Principally an invention of Hollywood—and of travel writers long before that—voodoo has power in the imaginations of many, despite having little to 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 war 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.

The topic of popular representations of Vodou and voodoo has received very little scholarly attention.[22] Perhaps most notable is Joseph Murphy's essay "Black religion and 'black

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[20] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 2.

[21] In this sense, they are not unlike what William James called "extra truths," beliefs that are part of a culture and which, when inactive, are "salted away" so they are always fresh and at hand when needed. Cf. Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 107.

[22] Joseph Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic': Prejudice and projection in images of African-derived religions," *Religion* 20, no. 4 (1990): 323-37; John P. Bartkowski, "Claims-making and typifications of voodoo as a deviant religion: Hex, lies, and videotape," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 559-79; Laënnec Hurbon, "American fantasy

magic,'" 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, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo." 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 1987 prediction that future years would experience an emergence and boom of what he called "Voodoo chic" (an idea to which I will return later).[23]

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 Voodoo, the complex of indigenous African religions practiced in West Africa, particularly in the region around Togo and Benin. Both of these are different from the use of the word Voodoo 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, 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

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and Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 181-97.

[23] Donald J. Cosentino, "Spirit and Image: The Art of Voodoo," *African Arts* 21, no. 1 (1987): 71-3.

purposely utilize precisely these malapropisms.[24] 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 no real-life correlate. 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 alternate spellings even though the reference is still to this imagined faith.

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.

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

[24] Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic'"; Cosentino, "Spirit and Image: The Art of Voodoo"; Harold Courlander, "The word voodoo," *African Arts* 21, no. 2 (1988): 88; Cosentino, "More on 'voodoo,'" *African Arts* 21, no. 3 (1988): 77; Courlander, "Still more on 'voodoo,'" *African Arts* 21, no. 3 (1988): 77; Cosentino, "The final word on 'voodoo,'" *African Arts* 21, no. 3 (1988): 77-8.

officials, no single shred of physical evidence has ever been produced to validate these accounts.[25] There is good reason to believe, therefore, that the Satanic cult these imagined evil-doers 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, penis snatchers, and other magical malefactors.[26]

In every case, these are accompanied by incredibly rich details about the spiritual activities of the group in question. When these manifest as medical syndromes, such as the belief that one's blood or genitals have been stolen, anthropologists refer to them as "culture-

[25] Kenneth V. Lanning, "Investigator's Guide to Allegations of 'Ritual' Child Abuse" (Quantico, VA: Behavioral Science Unit, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Academy; 1992).

[26] Many attempts have been made to explain witchcraft beliefs in the context of a modern Africa. Many have asked how present-day Africans can continue to believe things that, to many Westerners, seem fanciful or absurd. Most of these explanations fall far short of satisfying, likely because no single reason exists for an entire complex of related beliefs. It is necessary to acknowledge that cultural difference cannot always be reduced to a common denominator, and that furthermore, there are myriad versions of what modernity looks like. Nonetheless, a key seems to be in recognizing that the central crime of witchcraft is antisociality, and that it is to this anxiety that witchcraft beliefs principally give voice. It is not simply that witches do evil using occult powers, but that they are your neighbors and relatives. Witches hide in plain sight, and a belief in witches is also a belief that people who *should* be obliged to have your best interest in mind may, in fact, be engineering your downfall. While some witchcraft beliefs have roots in precolonial Africa, it is not surprising that they are on the rise, as globalization destabilizes countries and cultures to the point that many events seem shaped by caprice and shadowy outside forces. In such an environment, not only do people turn to occult economies for solutions, but occult powers seem as reasonable an explanation as any other for swift and unearned turns in fortune. While the belief in witchcraft has a uniquely African signature, the widespread belief in occult economies is not unique to Africa. On the contrary, it can be found throughout the world in many places that deny any predisposition towards magical thinking. For example, in the United States and England, political discussions are frequently animated by the specter of people who become wealthy from welfare, draining resources away from taxpayers to finance a life of lethargy—the so-called "Welfare Mom" or "Welfare Queen." This belief persists in spite of overwhelming evidence that welfare recipients do not live in the lap of luxury, and on the contrary, typically struggle to make ends meet despite the minimal aid that they receive.

bound syndromes."[27] The idea of the "culture-bound syndrome" seems, to me, to be a productive locus for thinking more generally about cultural beliefs that have dramatic effects on the beliefs and behaviors of the group in question—particularly intersocial behaviors and relations with cultural "Others." One could make much of the similarities between these invented religions—in particular, the fact that they all pertain to imagined groups of evil-doers. I suggest that imagined voodoo is thus little different, and can productively be situated as an American culture-bound syndrome.

Murphy 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.[28] However, he does not take the next step of acknowledging that most witches are imaginary, not real people. I draw this heuristic distinction to recognize that, while imagined voodoo is inspired loosely by actual encounters with African-derived religious practices in the Americas, it in no way realistically reproduces or represents them. Whilst demonstrating this point, again and again, has served as the principal preoccupation of most critical responses to popular representations of Vodou, I would argue it is the least interesting thing one can say about them. Rather, I focus on the *work* these representations are doing.

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[27] Cf. Michael Jackson, "Penis Snatchers," in *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 49-53; cf. Brad Weiss, "Electric Vampires: From Embodied Commodities to Commoditized Bodies," in *The Making and Unmaking of the Haya Lived World: Consummation, Commoditization, and Everyday Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 202-219; cf. Brad Weiss, "Plastic Teeth Extraction: The Iconography of Haya Gastro-Sexual Affliction," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 3 (1992): 538-552.

[28] Note that I am using the word "witch" here in the way typical of anthropology, to refer to malevolent magical beings. This is a distinctly different discourse from those Neo-Pagans who have adopted the words "Witch" and "Witchcraft" to describe their unrelated religious practices.

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, the moral panic resulting from slavery and colonialism has found one expression in the predisposition to view blacks as familiar strangers—what Holland calls "blood strangers."[29] Though white and black Americans have always conducted their lives in intimate proximity—perhaps never so much as during slavery—whites have not only consistently disavowed this intimacy, but ironically pretended that the 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. Projecting the disavowal of intimacy onto blacks fosters anxiety about threats from the perceived out-group, as well as 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 both 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

[29] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 6.

> 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.[30]

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. Naturally, not every reference to voodoo in popular culture is participating in this discourse. I propose that most, however, do—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 surface of 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.[31] However, this is similar to expressions such as "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 topic at hand. Nonetheless, by employing the words voodoo, Jews, and gays in this fashion, they *also* have the collateral effect of demeaning those same terms—by using them to evoke something contemptible.

[30] Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic,'" 332.

[31] Cf. Bartkowski, "Claims-making and typifications of voodoo as a deviant religion: Hex, lies, and videotape."

The uses of imagined voodoo

Vignette 1

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. The restaurant 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* (Figures 1.1 & 1.2) for the Vodou lwa Danbala and Ezili Freda.[32] I say nothing to the staff or manager of the restaurant.

Vignette 2

In the heart of Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan, New York City, an American Apparel store creates a Halloween-themed window display depicting mannequins dressed in voodoo costumes of grass skirts and beads, with knit bags grotesquely obscuring the heads (Figure 1.3). They pose around a voodoo altar littered with bottles, candles, and a fake skull. On the background wall is painted a *vèvè* for Papa Legba. A viral campaign starts on Facebook asking practitioners of African and African diaspora religions to call the store to demand that the display be removed. The store rapidly complies, removing the display by the end of the next business day. Funlayo Wood, a doctoral student in African and African American Studies at Harvard and a practitioner of Ifá, contacts the corporate office of American Apparel to demand that the company censure its

[32] *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 *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.



Figure 1.1: *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.



Figure 1.2: *Vèvè* painted on a toilet stall of Muriel's, New Orleans, LA. The ornate heart is a *vèvè* for the spirit Ezili Freda.



Figure 1.3: American Apparel Halloween "voodoo" window display
Houston Street, New York City. Early October, 2013.
The display has manikins dressed in voodoo costumes in front of a voodoo altar. On the background wall, a version of the vèvè for Papa Legba has been painted.
Photo used with permission of Rosella Molinu.

store and enact new corporate policies so it will not happen again. A representative from American Apparel's customer service division replies that during the Halloween season, their stores

> are responsible for choosing a theme(s) to showcase in their windows to present ideas of excitement, ironic humor, satire situations and provocation. . . Furthermore, the window is a no more than a 'creative interpretation' to be more understood as fictional, not fact. Please understand it is not in our direct manner to cause alarm amongst our customers where a display could invoke such disconcert. However as this being only a display and pitch of costume ideas we hope you can understand what we are allowing our store's to utilize this opportunity to showcase grand ideas of costume wear for this festive season.[33]

Questions

How are we to interpret these two popular and public depictions of sacred Vodou symbols in profane settings? Are these isolated incidents, or do they participate in a larger discourse? What, if anything, do they "mean"?

Analysis

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. Even more confusing, in New Orleans, 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 barkeeps whose primary interest in Vodou is as a marketable commodity: tourists come to New Orleans in part to be shocked by the presence of Vodou and other mysterious rites (they also come to get drunk). Such visitors 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

[33] Joshua Villanueva, "Retail Dept. /Retain Operations/ Costumer Service Coodinator," email message to Funlayo Wood, October 9, 2013. *Sic* all errors. This correspondence was made public on Facebook by Funlayo Wood, to whom it was addressed.

oblige. Local bars such as Loa feature voodoo altars in their décor; Marie Laveau's Bar on Decatur Street contains murals of the famed Voodoo queen writhing in various stages of undress with buxom female coreligionists (Figure 1.4). 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. While presenting itself as a serious museum, The Historic Voodoo Museum—also in the French Quarter—has little sophistication, playing 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," claimed to originate 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.

By contrast, New York City is not, by and large, a city associated with voodoo in the popular imagination; references to it are comparatively rare. Nonetheless, it is not unknown. For example, a number of bars in the city reference voodoo in the establishment's name, such as the Vodou Bar (in BedStuy, Brooklyn), and the Vodoo Lounge (in Park Slope, Brooklyn). More crucially, Vodou has become a frequent topic in New York news in recent years, with numerous articles in news outlets like the New York Times, the New York Post, and NPR, stories pitched as exposés about New York City's Haitian community and their continued, secretive practice of Vodou. Several recent news stories in the New York City metropolitan area have drawn connections between insane and criminal behavior and Haitian Vodou—for example, a tragic

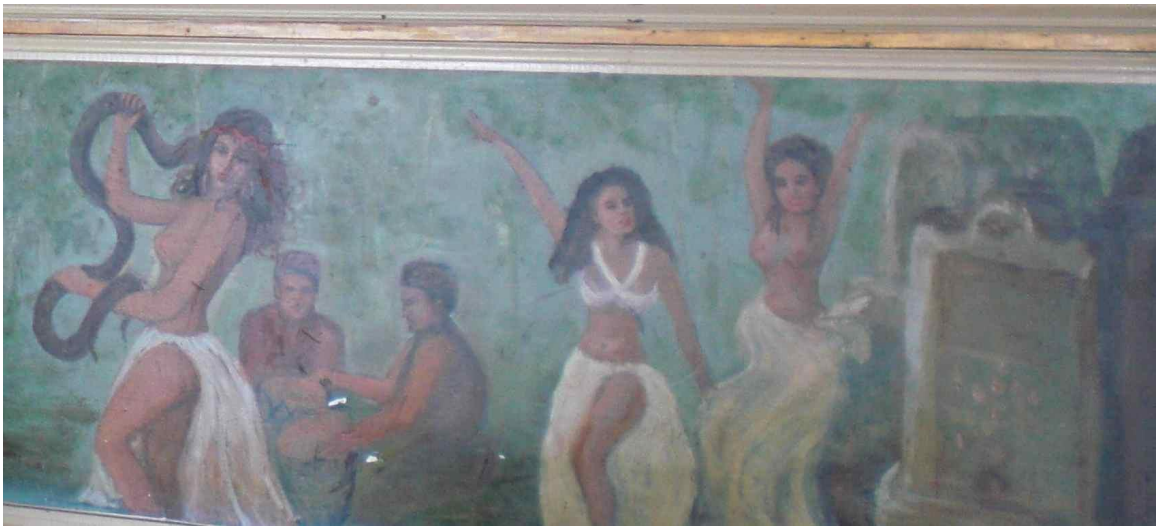


Figure 1.4: Voodoo-themed mural in Marie Laveau's Bar, New Orleans, LA.

case in which a fire was started by a man who claimed to be a Vodou priest.[34] Therefore, an NYC window display reflecting fascination with Haitian Vodou—mingling derision and wide-eyed curiosity—can only be properly understood within this broader context.

The proliferation of signifying on voodoo led me to adopt the descriptive term "voodoo kitsch."[35] While I adopted the term *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, including 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 also the Sarkozy voodoo doll, which was the source of much hilarity when a French court ordered that the toys must bear a label declaring that sticking pins in the

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[34] Simone Weichselbaum, "Voodoo priest linked to Flatbush blaze is one of many scammers, predators, say neighbors," *New York Daily News*, March 23, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/voodoo-priest-linked-flatbush-blaze-scammers-predators-neighbors-article-1.123590#ixzz2ky9cGbcf; Jonathan Lemire, et al., "Voodoo candles used in sex ceremony sparked deadly Brooklyn blaze, sources say," *New York Daily News,* February 25, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/voodoo-candles-sex-ceremony-sparked-deadly-brooklyn-blaze-sources-article-1.135157#ixzz2kyA0OmXf; Al Baker, "Voodoo Candles Ignited Deadly Fire, Officials Say," *New York Times*, February 25, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/nyregion/26fire.html?_r=0; John Doyle, "Last Saturday's fatal Brooklyn fire started by voodoo sex rite," *New York Post*, February 26, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://nypost.com/2011/02/26/last-saturdays-fatal-brooklyn-fire-started-by-voodoo-sex-rite/.

[35] My use of the term "signifying" is informed by the work of Charles Long. In *Significations*, 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." Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 1-2. I am grateful to Carla Martin for first uttering the expression "voodoo kitsch." The term "kitsch" is especially apt, given its historical origin as describing art objects of mass production and mass consumption.

Sarkozy doll may offend the French president's dignity.[36] A roller coaster at Dorney Park in Allentown, Pennsylvania is called Possessed (originally called Voodoo, but later renamed). The roller coaster carries the tagline "It will possess you!", while promotional material on the Dorney Park website formerly teased, "the power of Voodoo will compel riders to new levels of excitement."[37] And what list would be complete without mention of the Spice Girls' song "Voodoo." The lyrics claim that the "fever's gonna get you," encouraging listeners to "get up and use your voodoo, / get your booty to the floor."[38] 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." In 1987, Cosentino predicted that popular interest in Voodoo chic would only increase, given its "spiritual *duende*," as well as its embrace of bricolage and the carnivalesque—aesthetics he identified with post-modernism.[39] 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, as 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 situation and personal

[36] "Sarkozy 'voodoo doll' may be sold," BBC News, October 29, 2008, accessed February 10, 2014, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7756030.stm.

[37] The old version of the website was recovered using The Internet Archive, https://archive.org.

[38] Spice Girls, "Voodoo," *Greatest Hits*, Virgin Records, 2007, CD.

[39] Cosentino, "Spirit and Image: The Art of Voodoo."

beliefs, the response can be one of curiosity, awe, fear, shock, good-natured humor, or derision. The consumer chooses from this range based on his or her own life experiences, personality, and priming.[40] The nature of the sign (be it a voodoo doll, a horror film, or a shabby museum) and its context permits 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 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 largely hidden aspects of African American culture, particularly for Southern blacks. To greater or lesser degrees, what one believes about 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 a defense of slavery. As one can see in early descriptions by Moreau de Saint-Méry, Haitian Vodou was regarded with deep fascination but also with derision, as a kind of grotesque theater.[41] He describes Vodou dances as frenzied, convulsive,

[40] I am using the term "priming" in the fashion it is used in psychology, to mean the way that the context encourages or permits one to respond in a particular fashion.

[41] Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Déscription topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1797).

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 the idea that blacks were basically savages given to bestial behavior—an opinion that has subsequently improved in general regard to blacks but has adhered tenaciously to Vodou itself. The question then is, why?

For part of the answer, I refer the reader to Laënnec Hurbon's excellent essay, "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou."[42] 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.[43] 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 American popular imagination.[44]

We must 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, violent delights come to violent ends. Those fleeing from the Haitian Revolution were treated as though they carried a dangerous disease—much like the "Jes Grew" of Reed's

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[42] Hurbon, "American fantasy and Haitian Vodou," *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 181-97.

[43] Ibid., 181.

[44] 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.

Mumbo Jumbo.[45] 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.

While it is easy enough to say that the examples from Muriel's and American Apparel—the use of voodoo sacred symbols to decorate bathrooms and window displays—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 people who decorated the bathroom or shop windows 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.

Blackness, black sexuality, and Negrophobia

Given that race—and in particular, black identity—are central to this project, "blackness" is far too important a field of meaning to be left uninterrogated. Reams of scholarship—including biological and psychological research—have been devoted to demonstrating that race, as it is popularly understood, is socially constructed, rather than rooted in biology. Sadly, this

[45] Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic,'" 333.

scholarship has not made significant headway in changing popular sentiment, leaving largely intact the average person's understanding of race as something unquestionably real, if complicated. While I will, at times, diverge from this black/white racial binary, I join Sharon Patricia Holland in arguing for the pragmatic necessity of working with these terms because they continue to reflect the realities of American race dynamics. Holland explains that she returns, "ever again, to the black/white binary that many theorists were happy to leave behind. That glee alone should tell us there is unfinished business—but by no means have we forgotten it, solved it, or even, in the end, addressed it."[46]

For the purposes of this work, the understanding of blackness that I have found the most useful is found in Darieck Scott's rereading of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.[47] Fanon offers not only a way of conceptualizing black identity as contingent and shifting, but also proposes a useful rubric for understanding white obsessions with black sexuality—a topic that occupies a large portion of this work. While acknowledging the critiques of Fanon's work by influential scholars like Homi Bhabha, Scott suggests that the most important aspect of Fanon's work is his contribution of the concept of "sociogeny," the process by which black identity was not only *created* (past tense) by whites, but must always *continue to be created* (present progressive) in a process that equally constitutes whiteness and white social power. Scott explains that Fanon "seeks to banish from the reader's thought any notion that blackness is an a priori truth, natural or eternal in its all-too-transparent meanings."[48] In particular, Scott helps us

[46] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 14.

[47] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*.

[48] Ibid., 40.

to see that, for Fanon, blackness is not a fixed identity but an *action* that is still occurring, always occurring, and requires constant maintenance. Fanon

> proposes that to 'be' black is to have been black*ened*. Viewed with the assistance of his psychiatric training and Sartrean existential phenomenology, blackness is revealed to Fanon as a figure, a clever and pernicious invention serving the particular cultural and psychological functions set for it by its inventors, the enslavers and conquerors of various African peoples.[49]

It is this process that Fanon refers to as "sociogeny," the concept that race is something which is never finished, but is always in creation. Lest it go without saying, this also means that whiteness is constantly in the process of being created—and that blackness is what creates whiteness. As Scott pointedly reasons, "a conscious white supremacist of the Aryan Nation variety is roughly equally the 'descendant' of [blackness] as a person who takes on a highly politicized conscious African American or black identity."[50]

I argue that imagined voodoo and its uses in popular culture are one of the ways that this sociogeny continues to take place, by utilizing and maintaining normative racist imagery. In doing so, it is critical to recognize that imagined voodoo and horror have not been only incidentally connected, but rather that imagined voodoo abets the process of sociogeny *precisely because it inspires fear*. Fanon argues that blackness fundamentally exists as a receptacle for displaced sexual anxiety, and is thus intended—like horror's deployment of imagined voodoo—to evoke existential terror. Expounding on Fanon, Scott writes,

> blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality and death—fears, in other words, about the difficulty of maintaining boundaries of the (white male) ego, and fears about acknowledging the repressions and renunciations on which Western

[49] Ibid., 37.

[50] Ibid., 2.

> civilization depends. As such, blackness is an invention that accomplishes the domination of those who bear it as an identity. . .[51]

Speaking more directly about the connections between black sexuality and terror, Scott explains that

> to confront the notion of a "black" "sexuality" is to run, at top speed, into the puckered but nonetheless sturdy walls of an often deforming articulation between blackness and the production of sexual expression and repression in Western societies. As Frantz Fanon elegantly dissects the matter, Negrophobia is essentially a sexual phobia, because blackness is primarily associated in Western (and Western-influenced) cultures with perverse, non-normative sexuality.[52]

In Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo," I explore at length the role that imagined voodoo plays in perpetuating representations of black sexuality as perverse, a discussion I frame as an extended exegesis of Fanon's notion that Negrophobia is fundamentally a sexual phobia. Furthermore, as Scott suggests, this inherent perversity of black sexuality also means that black sexuality—as popularly construed in racist discourse—is inherently queered (which is to say non-normative). This concept of black sexuality as inherently queer—and inherently monstrous—is a topic to which I will return at length in the section of this chapter on imagined voodoo and the Gothic.

The *realpolitik* of these racist constructs is a regime of terror. Importantly, this terror exists for both parties: As I have already pointed out, imagined voodoo is part of a broader project of sociogeny—of race creation—that is about the displacement and evocation of white terror onto black bodies. In other words, race programmatically specifies that whites should experience terror at the sight of blacks. However, as Scott notes in his reading of Fanon, this terror has real manifestations in the bodies of black folks—what Scott calls "a readiness to

[51] Ibid., 4-5.

[52] Ibid., 6.

flinch."[53] This phrasing, of course, is drawn from Fanon's clinical practice working with North African men for whom the psychological trauma of colonialism manifested psychosomatically as painfully tensed muscles and nervous tics ("flinches"). Drawing conclusions more generally about the experience of being a "blackened," colonized subject, Fanon writes that such an individual's body "is no longer altogether a body or rather . . . is doubly a body since it is *beside itself with terror*."[54] Elsewhere, he adds, "he will feel himself emptied, without life, in a *bodily struggle with death, a death on this side of death, a death in life*."[55] The point I wish to make by highlighting these quotations is that, for Fanon, the product of being a black subject—which is to say, becoming the topic of terror—is to also be terrorized oneself. It is also usually to be the victim of regimes of terror meant to control one. This, for me, is the strongest imaginable case one can make for an activist position against such discourses of terror, particularly those like imagined voodoo which are more explicit than most in connecting black bodies and black sexuality with repulsion and horror.

Throughout this chapter, I will give serious space to psychoanalytic approaches to race, and to "otherness" more generally. Like Fanon, many of these are predicated on the notion that such constructions are the product of various kinds of psychic displacement. While such psychoanalytic approaches are hugely useful, in as much as they provide insight into the dynamics of these processes, they often fall short by giving insufficient attention to how such "othering" or racializing operates to maintain imperial and colonial regimes. Such regimes were and continue to be enormously profitable, and the creation of "Others"—whatever psychological

[53] Ibid., 3.

[54] Ibid., 61. Emphasis added.

[55] Ibid., 72.

work they might do—also serves the purpose of creating and maintaining a large underclass of laborers who have always and everywhere given far more than they have gotten. Therefore, these threads—what we might broadly call "psychoanalytic" and "social justice"—will be kept in conversation throughout this work, so that it always remain in sight that these bad ways of thinking enact real harm.

Recalibrating our approach to popular culture, film, and visual media

American Horror Story: Coven (2013-14) is the third season of the highly successful horror show, produced for FX Network by the television power couple Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk. In addition to *American Horror Story*, Murphy and Falchuk are responsible for creating the hit television show *Glee* (2009-Present) and the plastic surgery melodrama *Nip/Tuck* (2003-10). Murphy and Falchuk, who are both openly gay, have earned an outsized reputation—largely thanks to *Glee*—for producing television shows that challenge stereotypes about sexual orientation, gender, sizism, sexuality, and race. However, this reputation deserves interrogation, particularly in light of *American Horror Story: Coven*, which is largely assembled out of misogynist and racist Gothic tropes.

I will return specifically to the topic of voodoo and the Gothic momentarily, and in Chapter Two, "On the Fiction of Black Revenge," I will engage in close viewings of a number of scenes from the show. For now, I wish to focus on some interactions, via Facebook, that I had with fans of the show. As an experiment in intellectual activism, I decided that I would post comments on the show's official Facebook page, questioning the show's racist depictions of black people and the city of New Orleans. Although the comments were largely ignored, several

fans did engage with them, beginning with the comment, "calm down and enjoy the show."[56] Despite extensive efforts to make substantive, accessible, and level-headed replies to every comment I received, users refused to engage directly with the content of my posts. Instead, the consensus was reiterated again and again: "This is fiction. Its media. Meant to be enjoyed. Why over analyze a show about witches, magic, and voodoo. [. . .] its a tv show ... and looks to be a great season. So just enjoy it." While it would be absurd to draw conclusions from these isolated posts, I include them because they exemplify a pervasive attitude towards entertainment media—namely, that it is *meant to be* viewed pre-critically and that our mingled *need* and *right* to be entertained excuses whatever is entertaining us from being subjected to scrutiny. In the Introduction, I have likened this to an idolatry of the pleasure principle, but we must press even further and see that this surrender to pleasure is only possible when one's social position and power are already assured—and, moreover, that hedonism itself is always a performance of power.

Guerrero describes this as "the overworked rationalization that industry movies are 'harmless entertainment,'" and argues that entertainment media should be seen as "collaborative dreams" which exist "in circular collusion with [their] audience."[57] This collusion has two parts: The refusal of entertainment producers to acknowledge the social power dynamics hidden in their work, and the equal refusal of entertainment consumers to admit that it is there. This collusion of silence around racist images is reminiscent of Scott's evocative statement that

[56] All comments were posted on October 10-11, 2013, the day of and the day following the airing of the season's pilot episode. I will reproduce users' comments anonymously and verbatim. I wish to emphasize that spelling and capitalization errors should not be used by readers to assume anything about the user's level of education, language fluency, etc. On Facebook, users routinely forego formal conventions in the interest of speed, and errors are also frequently introduced when users post from mobile devices.

[57] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 6.

America's "racially organized economic and social system" now operates "like an ancient painting [faded] to near invisibility, its frame, capacious and insidiously flexible, still set[ting] the boundaries of our own world."[58]

I argue that this trope of "harmless entertainment" is a kind of silenced violence which, to borrow a phrase from Jessie Daniels, does "real harm to real people."[59] I use the term "silenced" in the sense of a gun with a silencer, which suppresses only the sound of the shot, and not the harm inflicted. Racist portrayals in entertainment media continue the process of racialized psychic violence, which Fanon argues leaves black subjects in "a bodily struggle with death, a death on this side of death, a death in life."[60] This "permanent struggle" against "omnipresent death," what Fanon elsewhere likens to a "readiness to flinch," leads Darieck Scott to conclude, "It is easy enough to see how the emergency continues, to still hear the sirens of warning, to feel the body readying itself yet again to receive a lash or a blow."[61]

One of the richest descriptions of this is James Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work*, in which he describes how seeing racist depictions of blacks in film was constitutive of his development as a social and sexual being. As far as Baldwin is concerned, almost all American films undertake, as a central part of their mission, to nullify or pervert the subjectivity of black people. In one of the most poignant passages in the book, Baldwin submits,

> *no one*, I read somewhere, a long time ago, *makes his escape personality black*. That the movie star is an "escape" personality indicates one of the

[58] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 2.

[59] Jessie Daniels, "Internet Racism" presentation in "Race and Technology" seminar, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, October 3, 2013. Daniels, a public scholar who was a student of Patricia Hill Collins, works on cyber racism.

[60] Fanon quoted in Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 72.

[61] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 73, 3.

> irreducible dangers to which the moviegoer is exposed: the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of one's fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen.

For Baldwin, this "fantasy" is the negation of black people, which he sees as fundamental to the American dream—which is really the *white* American dream. He writes, "It is said that the camera cannot lie, but rarely do we allow it to do anything else, since the camera sees what you point it at: the camera sees what you want it to see. The language of the camera is the language of our dreams."[62] Writing in the 1970s, Baldwin had an equally dismal view of so-called "race" films.

> I suspect their intention to be lethal indeed. . . Their entire purpose (apart from making money; and this money is not for blacks; in spite of the fact that some of these films appear to have been, at least in part, financed by blacks) is . . . to make black experience irrelevant and obsolete.

In Baldwin's view, then, American films are actively engaged in the process by which "the civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the *status quo*."[63]

Pushing against this silenced violence, I adopt in this work the African American rhetorical strategy of talking back to films. Rejecting the rhetorical constraint that watching film is an act of unidirectional information flow, many African American filmgoers talk—both as individuals and communally—to the film while watching it. This talking back can occur in moments of both delight and disgust, but in this text, I am modeling my rhetorical strategy in particular after an episode of disgust that Baldwin describes. While seeing the film *The Defiant Ones* in a theater, Baldwin notes that the black audience began shouting at the black main character that he should abandon his dogged and unrealistic commitment to the white character,

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[62] Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 35.

[63] Ibid., 16.

as it will surely lead to his death.[64] Thus, "talking back" is shown to be a subaltern form of resistance against dominant discursive modes. Even if one's community is deprived of the resources to make a film that speaks to its interests, one can literally talk *over* someone else's film, supplementing it with one's own text.

Depending on this rhetorical strategy of talking back to film—as well as to television, literature, and cultural objects—I adopt Guerrero's view that "movies are in many ways analogous to dreams." He goes on to say,

> both have a manifest content as well as potent latent meanings. And in much the same way that a dreamer tries to avoid the powerful, repressed currents welling up in his or her dream work by dismissing them as 'only a dream,' so, too, the film industry tries to avoid the political and ideological significance of its film.[65]

Refusing the admonition of the *American Horror Story* fans that viewing must stop at the "manifest content" of entertainment, I model how "latent meanings"—and, most importantly, latent *patterns*—can reveal racist elements of the collective imaginary which are rarely put on display, though they exert undeniable influence on people's ways of acting- and being-in-the-world.

Imagined voodoo as a Gothic mode

Imagined voodoo is continuous with the eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic literary tradition in its use of images of blacks to represent the monstrous Other, the sexually perverse, and the savage. Crucially, both imagined voodoo and the Gothic evoke terror through racialized

[64] Ibid., 65.

[65] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 6.

images as a means of reinforcing conventional morality. The Gothic is the parent of the modern genre of horror—and horror, as a highly conservative genre, continues to replicate many moral conventions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That contemporary imagined voodoo stories enjoy such large audiences suggests that the moral and social conventions of the Gothic genre resonate for contemporary audiences far more than audience members might be inclined to admit.

As a genre of popular writing, the Gothic began in England in the middle of the eighteenth century, and quickly spread to mainland Europe. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764, is widely credited as being the first Gothic novel. Summarizing some of the potential sources of the Gothic, L. Andrew Cooper writes, "the Gothic has roots in medieval romances, Renaissance tragedies, and early experiments in the novel based on the romance tradition."[66] The speed of the Gothic's ascent as a popular genre was certainly aided by a rapidly growing audience of women readers. By the end of the century, the genre was popular enough that authors wishing to spoof it—for example, Jane Austen with *Northanger Abbey* (1803)—could safely assume that readers were well familiar with its conventions of haunted castles, ghosts, demon lovers, incestuous family entanglements, blighted landscapes, violent storms, and imperiled heroines.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were periods of dramatic social, sexual, racial, political, and economic change. Again, Austen's novels capture many of these, with themes of tension between marriages of love and marriages of financial benefit; with intimations of endless warfare; and mentions of the colonial projects, which tied Britain to nearly every corner of the world. As a genre, the Gothic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided

[66] L. Andrew Cooper, *Gothic Realities: The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 5.

opportunities (not afforded by the bourgeois novel) to explore questions of strangeness, colonialism, and changing gender roles. For example, the Gothic heroine is almost always a young woman on the verge of being married, and the Gothic works explore societal anxieties around female sexual maturation and the need to control it through marriage.[67]

More broadly, the Gothic served as a pressure valve for concerns about all kinds of sexual, racial, and social strangeness—what William Hughes and Andrew Smith call "unpalatable if not actually taboo issues."[68] In *Queer Gothic*, George Haggerty explains,

> It is no mere coincidence that the cult of gothic fiction reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sexuality were beginning to be codified for modern culture. In fact, gothic fiction offered a testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities, including sodomy, tribadism [lesbianism], romantic friendship (male and female), incest, pedophilia, sadism, masochism, necrophilia, cannibalism, masculinized females, feminized males, miscegenation, and so on.[69]

Further clarifying the *need* for the Gothic, Haggerty adds, "If the emergence of 'the novel' celebrates the codification of middle-class values, . . . the gothic novel records the terror implicit in the increasingly dictatorial reign of those values."[70] Even if the conventions of the Gothic virtually necessitate that all such forms of threatening sexual and racial identity must be overcome by "the eventual triumph of a familiar morality," the very real threat that they pose

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[67] Notably, this is a concern explored also in Shakespeare's comedies.

[68] William Hughes and Andrew Smith, "Introduction: Queering the Gothic," in *Queering the Gothic*, eds. Hughes and Smith (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2009), 1.

[69] George E. Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 2.

[70] Ibid., 10.

"proclaims a brittleness" to the established social order which cannot truly be resolved within the bounds of the work, but only "imperfectly concealed."[71]

Within the Gothic genre, there is a complex and quite intentional merging between different kinds of identities that are marked by the conventions of the period as "monstrous"—notably those who are seen as being deviantly sexed, gendered, and raced. This encompasses homosexuals and people who are ambiguously sexed, as well as people who are black, brown, or ambiguously raced—in other words: non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual. As feminist scholar Judith Halberstrom notes, "the Gothic monster 'can represent any *horrible* trait,' and a 'monster functions as monster . . . when it is able to condense as many *fear-producing* traits as possible in one body.'"[72] Feminist and queer scholars have argued compellingly that the Gothic genre was in fact central to constituting homosexual identity. In Cooper's words, "'the homosexual' is, in a crucial way, Gothic. As George Haggerty unambiguously asserts in *Queer Gothic*, 'gothic fictions gave sexuality a history in the first place.'"[73] Cooper goes on to add that "Gothic language" is what renders "the homosexual threat intelligible."[74]

The Gothic was equally influential in helping to codify blackness and whiteness as racial identities. As Paravinisi-Gebert states, the Gothic "was, from its earliest history in England and Europe, fundamentally linked to colonial settings, characters, and realities as frequent

[71] Hughes and Smith, "Introduction: Queering the Gothic," 1.

[72] Cooper quoting Halberstrom. Cooper, *Gothic Realities*, 89.

[73] Ibid., 60.

[74] Ibid., 62.

embodiments of the forbidding and frightening."[75] In his study of colonialism and the Gothic, Tabish Khair demonstrates how the Gothic is constantly haunted by "the ghost of empire."[76] Khair offers an important correction to the misunderstanding that eighteenth century Europeans experienced "empire" as something distant from their own lives, "out there":

> . . . by the eighteenth century, empire was no longer just out there; it had also started reaching the centre. Nabil Matar, among others, has convincingly documented that even in the early Elizabethan period, . . . various non-English peoples—Moors, Jews, Arabs etc—did live in or pass through at least the main port cities of England. However, by the eighteenth century, their numbers appear to have started swelling in a visible manner: thousands of black soldiers from the United States who had fought for the British in the American War for Independence, slaves, servants, ayahs, lascars as well as the occasional non-European nobleman or 'business partner'. . . In other words, by the eighteenth century, empire was no longer just out there; it was also present in Leeds and London and Liverpool, and could sometimes, in the shape of tinkers, traveling sellers and gypsies, even penetrate the smaller towns and villages.[77]

Set against the backdrop of colonialism and the enterprise of slavery—and in some cases written by authors who had direct involvement in these—Gothic novels participate in the construction of black identity, writ large, and more specifically in the characterization of blackness (and non-whiteness, broadly) as monstrous. Khair's text is full of examples from Gothic literature of racial Otherness as the principal marker for monstrousness—from the "Negroid" creatures that Jules Verne places on Dr. Moreau's island, to descriptions of Dr. Jekyll's evil doppelganger, Mr. Hyde, as "an urban version of 'going native'"—in other words, a race traitor.[78]

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[75] Paravisini-Gebert, quoted in Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 7-8.

[78] Ibid., 28-29, 30. For more on the Gothic, race, and sexuality: Ed Cameron, *The Psychopathology of the Gothic Romance: Perversion, Neuroses and Psychosis in Early Works of*

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison points to the impact of America's racial system on American literature.[79] In her reading of literary texts from a diverse range of writers, including Hawthorne, Crane, and Hemingway, Morrison uncovers how images of blackness—and even of a generalized, but racialized, darkness—were central to the nationalizing project of American *belles lettres*, particularly in shaping an understanding of what constituted "Americanness," as defined in terms of whiteness and maleness. An understanding of the role of racialized images in the Gothic genre help extend Morrison's reading even further back in time, while also providing a broader historical context for it. Moreover, this rereading of the Gothic helps to better contextualize the overt connections between representations of blackness and the sexual perverse in Western art.

In particular, recognizing imagined voodoo as a Gothic mode provides an explanatory framework for the consistent connection between blackness and the sexually perverse in works of imagined voodoo. In her work on the genesis of ideas of blackness and queerness, Siobhan Somerville convincingly argues that modern black and queer identities were mutually constitutive, both generated out of eighteenth and nineteenth century science, which sought to provide "natural" taxonomic categories for various "types" of humans. Exploring how both queers and non-whites became topics of sexual and racist obsession, she quotes Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien.

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the Genre (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010); Elizabeth Young, *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor* (New York: New York University, 2008); Alison Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[79] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

> The prevailing Western concept of sexuality . . . *already contains racism*. Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect . . . The personage of the savage was developed as the Other of civilisation and one of the first "proofs" of this otherness was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of its sex.[80]

In the specific context of the Gothic, feminist and queer scholarship have explored how the genre relies on the formula "Monstrous = Queer."

> Because they helped to define homosexuality, to greater and lesser degrees, Gothic monsters were and are implicitly homosexual. The legacy of nineteenth-century Gothic is a formula that persists in the cultural imaginary, MONSTER = HOMOSEXUAL . . . The formula MONSTER = HOMOSEXUAL is a metaphor that merely visualizes the monstrosity already built into homosexuality as a social construct. Conceived as a pathological category, "homosexual" stigmatizes the people it names; with or without vampire fangs, an image or person labeled "homosexual" is implicitly monstrous.[81]

However, as Eve Sedgwick reminds, "sexual aberration almost always appears [in the Gothic] alongside other counter normative economic, gender, and racial characteristics." Through this, one can thus extend the Gothic equation to read "Black = Monstrous = Queer." Thus, the Gothic engages in a broader social discourse that constructs black sexuality as both inherently queer and inherently monstrous or perverse. This is a discourse perpetuated in contemporary uses of imagined voodoo, a topic which I will explore at length in Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo."

By positioning imagined voodoo as a latter-day manifestation of the Gothic genre, we are able to better understand the symbolic and formal mechanisms through which voodoo continues to perpetuate racist fantasies that derive from the colonial period. At the same time that this demonstrates a historical and discursive trajectory for imagined voodoo, it also highlights the

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[80] Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 5.

[81] Cooper, *Gothic Realities*, 82.

extraordinary and disturbing power of these stereotypes to flourish in the soil of contemporary culture, which purports to disavow such beliefs. The continued power of these tropes to entertain us —*and terrify us*—speaks to the reality that our culture's supposed triumph over all but the most subtle, structural sorts of racism is more wishful thinking than fact.

These dangerous "fictions"—earlier termed silenced violence—possess the power to shape their audiences' ways of thinking and behaving. I grant that this causation, owing to the complexity of human subjectivity, may often prove impossible to parse. Nonetheless, I contend it is there. As L. Andrew Cooper writes,

> I don't claim that human agents possess a free will that is independent of cultural determination. Though it does for many thinkers, deterministic thinking for me does not preclude individual—and prosecutable—agency and responsibility. I readily grant that fictions teach people ways they might live; they can provide role models that shape how readers and viewers behave. Allowing that actions can be role models posits a role for fiction in identification and consequent subject formation.[82]

This returns us to the moral imperative to address the latent messages contained within uses of imagined voodoo, and the ways that they engage with audiences.

In analyzing the Gothic genre's reliance on themes of sexual and racial monstrousness, it is important to recognize how this relates to broader historical arcs of "Otherness" as constructed in the West. Within psychoanalysis, cultural studies, religious studies, and historiography, there is an abundance of literature about the process by which some individuals have been perennially designated as "Others," such as "savages," "barbarians," "aliens," "cannibals," "monsters," "primitives"—or "natives," to use Fanon's term. In other words, those who are irreducibly *not us*. Speaking broadly of the anthropological phenomenon of Othering, Kearney suggests that

[82] Ibid., 11.

these monstrous Others "signal borderline experiences of uncontainable excess."[83] He goes on to argue that the central psychological functioning of the Other is

> that we often project onto others unconscious fears from which we recoil in ourselves. Rather than acknowledge that we are deep down answerable to an alterity which unsettles us, we devise all kinds of evasion strategies. Primary amongst these is the attempt to simplify our existence by scapegoating others as 'aliens.'[84]

Later, he adds, "Holding certain aliens responsible for the ills of society, the scapegoaters proceed to isolate or eliminate them. This sacrificial strategy furnishes communities with a binding identity, that is, with the basic sense of who is included (us) and who is excluded (them)."[85]

Within the specific context of early modern colonialism and slavery, this Other was "constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation of everything the West stood for."[86] Often characterized specifically as "the savage" or "the primitive," Johannes Fabian has definitively analyzed how these subjects of colonial regimes—both political and of the mind—are classified as outside of time, incapable of progressing.[87] Such people are imagined to be "the slaves of

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[83] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

[84] Ibid., 5.

[85] Ibid., 26. For the definitive works on this process, cf. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[86] Stuart Hall cited in Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*, 11.

[87] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]).

custom and thus to be unable to break the despotism of their own 'collective conscience.'"[88] As such, they offer us—the West, "modern" people—a glimpse of "how we used to be."[89]

At times, Enlightenment thinkers such as de Montaigne romanticized this figure as the "noble savage," who lacked civilization and religion, but demonstrated praiseworthy elementary traits of kindness and loyalty.[90] However, on the whole, this colonial Other was not seen as noble, but rather as a savage, a barbarian, a violent creature little better than—and perhaps indistinguishable from—an animal, not properly human, given to violent and taboo deeds such as cannibalism, bestiality, and incest. It is here that we encounter the point beyond which, as I said before, we must acknowledge that psychology gives way to strategy: For it is these precise discourses which were often used as rationale for the destruction and enslavement of colonial subjects, or those who stood in the way of colonial regimes. As Jameson says of the Gothic, the Other in this context must be seen as a "class fantasy"—a discursive construct which licenses excesses of colonial power by creating sharp distinctions between a class of "civilized" persons and those who are "uncivilized" and *incapable* of civilization—who are irreducibly different "savage" beings who can be treated with utter disregard, cruelty, and instrumentalism.[91]

In his study of how Haiti has been portrayed by the West as a land of barbarians and savages, Laënnec Hurbon explores in particular the role that the specters of blackness and Africa

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[88] Brian V. Street, *The Savage in Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 7.

[89] For more on the construction of "the primitive": Adam Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[90] Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," in *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton (1877; Project Gutenberg, 2006), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm. Cf. Ter Ellington, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001).

[91] Jameson quoted in Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*, 5.

played in this process.[92] Importantly, Hurbon emphasizes—as has John Thornton, in a slightly different context—that black skin did not come to be consistently equated with savagery and barbarianism until the advent of the Atlantic slave trade.[93] However, once this equation had been drawn, the impact of the rhetorical shift was vast, epistemologically re-categorizing all things black and related to sub-Saharan Africa as savage. Only through the salvific and civilizing force of Western civilization could such savagery ever be overcome. As Hurbon points out, this created a dilemma for nineteenth century Haitian intellectuals who wished to argue, against the pseudo-scientific racist claims of the continental *philosophes*, for the equality and dignity of the Haitian people. Often, this manifested—as it did for Anténor Firmin in his *De l'égalité des races humaines* [*On the equality of the human races*] (1885)—in the acceptance that Africa and African heritage were effectively savage, but that Haitians had been successfully rendered French, *ergo* civilized. This discourse remained dominant into the early twentieth century, when Haitian intelligentsia, galvanized by the Noiriste (Négritude) and Indigeniste movements, began to valorize Haiti's African heritage. However, the net effect of this was that few wrote in defense of Vodou for centuries, seeing it as representative of the most African—and thus the most savage—aspect of Haitian culture. Numerous works were published which identified the many ways that Vodou exemplified barbarism, a literary and cultural legacy that endures to the present day.

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[92] Laënnec Hurbon, *Le Barbare imaginaire* [*The Imaginary Barbarian*] (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988).

[93] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1992]).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid the groundwork for a critique of "imagined voodoo," the construct of racist imagery that adheres tenaciously to the popular American understanding of African diaspora religions. By exploring its connections to the Gothic genre, and examining the role that it plays in the production of race writ large—what Fanon calls sociogeny—I have aimed to make clear the stakes of this project. Namely, imagined voodoo, by explicitly drawing connections between blackness and the abject, perpetuates real psychic harm against blacks, reinscribing ancient stereotypes of blacks as inferior, even bestial. Often hidden in plain sight, the argument that these racist representations are not meant to be taken seriously—are intended simply for entertainment—must be seen for what it is, a profoundly inadequate response. In the following three chapters, I use this methodological framework to examine three of the most common themes associated with imagined voodoo—the fantasy of black revenge, the trope of the hypersexual black body, and the figure of the zombie.

Chapter Two

THE FICTION OF BLACK REVENGE

> What you fear—and it's a deep guilt thing that white folks suffer—you are afraid that if we ever come to power, we will do to you and your fathers what you and your people have done to us. And I think you are *judging us by the state of your own mind*, and that is not necessarily the mind of black people.
> —Louis Farrakhan[1]
>
> I assure you, there will be no revenge.
> —*Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*[2]

I use the term "black revenge" to describe the white American fantasy that black Americans desire violent revenge against whites in recompense for historical wrongs. This fantasy, a nightmarish eschaton, continues to hold vigil for its eruption into the real. Its long delay—amplified by the self-evident truth that it is a fantasy the majority of blacks do not wish to enact—has resulted in this fantasy being shifted largely into the realm of fiction. "Fiction" here, however, is a slippery term, because by fiction I do not merely mean works of fiction. For this fiction also manifests as fictitious and paranoid ways of perceiving, organizing, and aggregating real events to lend credence to the belief that there are organized black conspiracies against whites. Such paranoid fears often merge with anxieties about what I have dubbed "The International Conspiracy of Brown People"—namely, the white paranoia that all non-whites in

[1] Louis Farrakhan quoted by Darius James in *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable, A Novel* (New York: Citadel Underground, 1992), unnumbered page preceding 1.

[2] *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, directed by Justin Chadwick (2013; Anchor Bay, 2014), DVD. This film includes a scene in which Nelson Mandela explains to white South African government officials why they are mistaken to fear that blacks will take revenge if they ever come to power.

the world are secretly or tacitly united in the goal of destroying the white race. Amidst these fears are often also mingled anxieties about what I call "race traitors," the fear that there are people who appear to be white, but whose sympathies in fact lie with non-whites—who are, as it were, infected with "Jes Grew." I gloss this complex of anxieties—which manifest frequently and most obviously in fiction, particularly voodoo fiction—with the term "black revenge."

To say that imagined voodoo is typically associated with strangeness is something of an understatement. In fact, voodoo is most especially associated with the abject, the monstrous, the rageful, the violent, the murderous—quite simply, with evil (an overused, but in this case apt, word). For many reasonably well-read people, voodoo is tethered to the idea of "voodoo death," a term invented by American physiologist Walter Cannon. In 1942, Cannon published an article proposing that "curses" in "primitive" societies could in fact inflict death through a series of psychosomatic, hysterical physiological reactions in the body of the victim.[3] Although "the negroes of Haiti" are mentioned in the opening paragraph of the article, in fact nearly all of Cannon's examples of the phenomenon are from the Pacific.[4] Nonetheless, the concept of "voodoo death" has taken on a life independent of Cannon's essay, and for many people, Cannon's fateful use of the term "voodoo" has reinforced the already extant belief that "voodoo" is principally a form of witchcraft designed to inflict harm and death. In a way, this is not a misreading of Cannon, inasmuch as his use of the term "voodoo" to label an entire host of

[3] Walter B. Cannon, "'Voodoo' Death," *American Anthropologist* 44, no. 2 (1942): 169-181.

[4] Ibid., 169.

genealogically and geologically unrelated global phenomena reinforces the sense of imagined voodoo being the denizen of "brown people" everywhere.[5]

The complex of black revenge fantasies is a tricky subject to address, in no small part because most whites are loath to admit that it even exists. Perhaps for this very reason, few have tried to quantify it, as there is a marked void in the scholarship—with discussions of Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained* offering some of the only recent public discussions about this complex of fantasies. In her meditation on the film, Yarimar Bonilla in fact asks, "Why, in the era of the first black president, is our gaze being turned towards the fear and fantasy of black revenge. . .?"[6] I agree with Bonilla's use of this question to evoke why Tarantino's film is problematic *in the particular*. However, I believe that it is valuable to discuss the issue of black revenge generally, since in more subtle ways, it is a quotidian fixture of the American cultural imaginary.

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[5] For example, in the Spanish-language horror film *The Vengeance of the Zombies* [*La Rébelion de las Muertos*], 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. *Rébelion* 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 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. *Vengeance of the Zombies*, directed by Léon Klimovsky (1972; Bci/Eclipse, 2007), DVD; *Voodoo Island*, directed by Reginald LeBorg (1957; MGM, 2005), DVD [bundled with *The Four Skulls of Jonathan Drake*].

[6] Yarimar Bonilla, "History Unchained," *Transition* no. 112 (2013): 73.

American fears of black revenge have a long history, and have circum-Atlantic parallels, as the United States is far from being the only country to have good reason to fear that its past evils might return with violent reaping. Slave rebellions in the American colonies occurred with regularity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and occupied the full ranges of scale and organization—from frequent, unnumbered poisonings and sabotages at the level of the household, to full wars which ended in the creation of the independent black republic of Haiti, as well as numerous functionally autonomous maroon regions and city-states. As will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on zombies (Chapter Four, "The Revenants"), blacks fleeing—or being forced to flee by slave masters—from the Haitian Revolution to elsewhere in the Americas were often treated as though they carried the seeds of "black revenge" within them. Rebellion was treated as though it were a psychic disease akin to Reed's Jes Grew, a highly contagious psychic ailment with the power to destroy the white race.

Following the American Civil War, during the period of Reconstruction, black Southerners experienced a brief period of unprecedented legal enfranchisement. Vastly outnumbering whites in many regions, blacks were able to win elections at the local and state levels, in some cases even achieving majority-black state legislatures. Many white Southerners feared not only no longer being in control, but that blacks would soon enact violent oppression against them. One of the insights of psychoanalysis is that such fears of an Other often serve as permission-granting, enacting a carnivalesque inversion in which those against whom one is performing violence are falsely perceived to be the true enactors of violence—in other words, that one is acting *only* in defense. And indeed, these white Southern fears—paired with pedestrian racism and the bald desire to maintain economic control—were used as justification

for the regime of terror which was the Jim Crow South, the name given to the various forms of legal and extralegal racial controls put in place to maintain white control.

A similar logic can be seen at play during the Marine occupation of Haiti (1915-1934). On two separate occasions during the occupation, the United States Congress held official Congressional Hearings in response to allegations of widespread abuse of power by Marines. In particular, there were widespread accusations that Marines were murdering civilians and enslaving the population (which historians can positively assert were true). The Hearings were held, at least in part, at the provocation of the NAACP, armed with the damning reports of James Weldon Johnson, who detailed his experiences investigating such claims in Haiti at the NAACP's behest.[7] As Kate Ramsey demonstrates, however, these Congressional Hearings failed to sustain a critique of U.S. forces because, time and again, the inquiry turned to the topic of Haitian violence against Marines.[8] Not surprisingly, given the alacrity with which imagined voodoo is mobilized as a tool of "black revenge," anxieties about Haitian Vodou were a *leitmotif* throughout the Hearings. Both congressmen and witnesses made frequent allusions to the widely held belief that Vodou was being used to galvanize "native" Haitian forces against their white American saviors—and, in fact, that Vodou practices utilized the bodies of whites in cannibalistic rites of demon worship.

However, what I think it is vital to understand is that these tangents were *not in fact tangents*, but in reality were the true *raison d'être* of the Hearings, instances when they most fulfilled the needs of the white participants. In effect, the discourse of black revenge granted a

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[7] James Weldon Johnson, "The Truth about Haiti. An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation," *Crisis* no. 5 (1920): 217–224, accessed February 10, 2014, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018/.

[8] Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

sort of moral absolution by framing Haiti's white invaders as, paradoxically, individuals acting *only in their own defense* against blacks who were intent on their destruction. What therefore occurred was a psychic reframing, in which—as in the Reconstruction South—those who were the enactors of violence *imagined,* quite effectively, that they were in fact the victims, acting only in defense of their very lives. And, of course, when one is acting *only* to preserve one's life, or the lives of one's comrades or loved ones, then there is no violent act that is truly excessive. It is certainly no worse than "they"—the monstrous, racial Other—would do, after all.

Psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and anthropology offer a number of insights into the phenomenon of revenge in general. As the anthropologist and philosopher Michael D. Jackson has suggested, revenge follows an intersubjective logic.[9] For Jackson, violence and revenge erupt when normal rules that govern intersubjectivity break down. When someone takes something that we perceive as being critical to our ability to make life, to constitute ourselves—and this "something" can be the life of a loved one, critical resources, our dignity, our sense of sanctity—then violent revenge provides us with a mechanism to enact intersubjective logic on the perceived perpetrator's body. This action in blood, when it works, allows us to feel that the rules of intersubjectivity have been restored, that we have taken back something equivalent to—in place of, if not actually *replacing*—the thing which was taken from us.

Thus, violence enacted on the flesh of another can permit a more perfect resolution to wrongdoing than legal proceeding, for example. In Lyotard's writings about the attempts of Holocaust survivors to seek legal "justice" against their Nazi torturers, he coined a term, *le*

[9] Michael Jackson, "Violence and Intersubjective Reason" and "Custom and Conflict in Sierra Leone: An Essay on Anarchy," in *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2005), 35-74; "Storytelling Events, Violence, and the Appearance of the Past," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005): 355-375; *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tuscalanum Press, 2002).

différent, to describe *that which gets left out* in such cases.[10] As Lyotard noted, legal cases require that wrongs be expressed in terms of legal language, but many of the wrongs for which Holocaust survivors sought redress—ultimately, the destruction of the civilization of European Jewry—had no legal categories in which they could be housed. Therefore, the pursuit of legal grievance necessitated leaving out precisely those very things that survivors felt most called for justice—and it was this gap, between what one can legally sue to address and what one has actually suffered, which Lyotard labeled "the differend." In a certain way of reasoning, blood is more flexible than the law: it can, when spilled under the right circumstances, make our lives feel less overdetermined by the harm we were dealt. It can redeem our stolen ability to imagine more life for ourselves.

At least, so goes the logic of the Gothic. As Jackson notes, it is a hollow promise, because violence more often than not becomes its own cycle of psychic harm, and the scale can never be balanced. There is ultimately no way to agree that all parties have paid exactly the right price, no more and no less. Citing examples from his Sierra Leonian informants' experiences with the Truth and Reconciliation process following that country's bloody civil war, Jackson notes that many in the end opted for silence—a species of radical acceptance—as the only truly effective way to continue to live. There could be no justice, no recompense—no appropriate earthly price that could be named to equal, and thus repay, what they had suffered. The way forward was to accept, in effect, that there was no way back—no *apokatastasis*, no restoration of prior things.

By exploring this, I do not wish to imply that my perception is that African Americans have chosen a path of silence and radical acceptance of wrongs suffered during slavery and the

[10] Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

century and a half following it. However, serious discussions of recompense have tended to be brief and truncated, or limited to quite small subsets of the population. Periodic discussions of the topic of monetary reparations have generally quickly broken down over the obvious legal—not to mention extralegal—problems that would attend any such effort. For example, who would be the legally culpable parties? The awardees? And, summoning again Lyotard's notion of the differend, what algorithm could adequately translate the toil and suffering of millions of blacks into a dollar amount? What rubric could define adequacy in that context?

Bracketing this question for now, what is crucial to the argument I am pursuing is simply that the absence of revenge exacted by African Americans against whites presents a problem that has received little attention in the psychoanalytic and anthropological literature. Mostly, focus has been directed towards the effects that revenge, or the absence of it, has on the victim. But few have given attention to understanding the effect it has on offenders when their victims opt *not* to seek justice or vengeance—a category of action that is different from forgiveness, about which much, both theologically and philosophically, has been said. We speak here of a different thing: not forgiveness, but simply the suspension of revenge.

By intersubjective logic, the choice of victims to simply *not* seek retribution presents a conundrum, for it means, in effect, that a victim is not acting *how the perpetrators know they would act* in such a situation. The choices of the victim are inscrutable, surpassing the perpetrator's known range of existential options. It therefore moves the perpetrator into an uncomfortable space of unknowing, a psychic *terra incognita*. Unless the rules governing this new space can somehow be intuited through an experience of metacognition or empathy, the experience of the perpetrator leads that person to believe that he or she is forever dwelling in a

space of merely *delayed* or *suspended* retribution, which at any moment could actualize its potentiality, the victim finally enacting the long-awaited retribution.

Such, then, is the psychic reality of the heuristic "white American," who cannot truly accept that black Americans do not intend to take revenge because he *knows—thinks* he knows—that if the situation were reversed, he would have had his revenge long ago.[11] Would still be having it. In the absence of this revenge, this long-delayed eschaton has undergone the transformation which all long-delayed religious cataclysmic visions undergo: It has transformed into fiction, shaping the imaginary lens through which our heuristic "white American" experiences his racialized fantasies and nightmares. It colors not only literary and filmic fiction, but also his modeling of the world itself, shaping perceptions of events in those places where pattern must be intuited from imperfect knowledge. Thus fantasy serves as a voluptuous and potentially limitless compensation, which acts as a receptacle for the psychic excess produced by the dramatic disjunct between one's expectations and manifest reality. As much—if not more—than by real events, the world can be haunted by our dreams.

One of the most striking examples of this racial imagination at work is in the dozens of news aggregation websites run by white supremacists, neo-conservatives, and crypto-fascists. Sites like *American Thinker*, the *Violence Against Whites* blog, *American Renaissance*, *WorldNetDaily* (recently rebranded as *WND*), *Blue Collar Philosophy*, the *Council for Conservative Citizens*, the *Independent Sentinel*, and *Moral Health* present news stories and opinion pieces, often masquerading as a "conservative" standpoint, which argue that black

[11] I am indebted to Vincent Brown for this rhetorical turn. For Brown's own reflections on the theme of black revenge, cf. Vincent Brown, "A Vapor of Dread: Observations on Racial Terror and Vengeance in the Age of Revolution," in *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn*, eds. Thomas Bender, Laurent Dubois, and Richard Rabinowitz (New York: New York Historical Society, 2011), 178-98.

Americans and those who sympathize with them are waging war against white America.[12] For example, in the weeks and months following the highly publicized slaying of Trayvon Martin—and subsequent acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerman—all of the sites listed above published numerous stories insinuating a widespread pattern of attacks against innocent, defenseless white Americans by mobs of blacks. These stories often claimed that, as the attacks were occurring, the attackers shouted things like, "This is for Trayvon!"[13] However, demonstrating that such stories of black revenge have appeal beyond the niche market of white supremacy, such stories were also carried in several major media outlets, and even in British tabloids (suggesting lingering anxieties after that country's own recent bout of highly publicized

[12] *American Thinker*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.americanthinker.com; *The Blaze*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.theblaze.com; *Loop 21*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.loop21.com; *Violence Against Whites*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://violenceagainstwhites.wordpress.com; *American Renaissance*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.amren.com; *WND*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.wnd.com; *Blue Collar Philosophy*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.bluecollarphilosophy.com; *Council for Conservative Citizens*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.topconservativenews.com; *Independent Sentinel*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.independentsentinel.com; *Moral Health*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.moralhealth.com.

[13] The *Violence Against Whites* blog hosts dozens of such stories, which can all be accessed through the menu http://violenceagainstwhites.wordpress.com/tag/trayvon-revenge-attacks/. *Weasel Zippers* blog, "Milwaukee: White Man Pummeled by Group Of Black Teens In Revenge For Zimmerman Verdict, 'This Is For Trayvon'. . .," July 16, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://weaselzippers.us/2013/07/16/milwaukee-white-man-pummeled-by-group-of-black-teens-in-revenge-for-zimmerman-verdict-this-is-for-trayvon/; Chelsea Schilling, "Wave of Black Mobs Brutalizing Whites: Dozens of vicious assaults since Trayvon Martin slaying," *WND*, May 3, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.wnd.com/2012/05/wave-of-black-mobs-brutalizing-whites/; *Blue Collar Philosophy*, "Matthew Owens Beaten By Black Mob As Revenge Attack For Trayvon Martin," April 24, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://bluecollarphilosophy.com/2012/04/matthew-owens-beaten-by-black-mob-as-revenge-attack-for-trayvon-martin/; Sara Noble, "Black Racist God Seeks Vengeance In Zimmerman Case," *Independent Sentinel*, July 16, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.independentsentinel.com/black-racist-god-seeks-vengeance-in-zimmerman-case/; Laurence Thomas, "Indefensible Black Vengeance Against Whites," *Moral Health* blog, August 2, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.moralhealth.com/2013/08/indefensible-black-vengeance/.

"race riots").[14] Notably, nearly all of these stories, in both mainstream news and white supremacy outlets, foregrounded the paranoid speculation that some official effort had been made to *conceal* that such attacks were taking place—a common first line of defense when people are called to defend why their paranoid fantasies are not more broadly perceived.

As mentioned earlier, discussion of black revenge films—and Tarantino's *Django*, in particular—have provided some of the only sustained opportunities in recent years for a discussion of this white imaginative obsession and the work it does in our culture.[15] While many

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[14] Jessica Chasmar, "Travyon Martin revenge killing in Memphis covered up? Victim's family question police account," *Washington Times*, August 22, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/aug/22/3-black-men-kill-white-man-memphis-facebook-page-h/; Matt Blake, "'This is for Trayvon': Hispanic man 'was beaten by gang of black youths' in alleged Zimmerman revenge attack," *The Daily Mail* (UK), July 16, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2365135/This-Trayvon-Hispanic-man-beaten-gang-black-youths-alleged-Zimmerman-revenge-attack.html; "Black teenager, 18, admits beating and robbing white man as 'revenge' for Trayvon Martin death," *Daily Mail*, April 26, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2135549/Trayvon-Martin-case-Black-teenager-admits-beating-white-man-revenge-Martins-death.html; Mike Opelka, "Another Senseless Murder You're Not Hearing About—And Some In the Family Wonder If It Could Be a Trayvon Martin Revenge Murder," *The Blaze*, August 22, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/08/22/another-senseless-murder-youre-not-hearing-about-and-some-in-the-family-wonder-if-it-could-be-a-trayvon-martin-revenge-murder/; Claudio Eduardo Cabrera, "White Man Beaten by Mob of Blacks in Alleged 'Revenge For Trayvon,'" *Loop 21* (n.d.), accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.loop21.com/life/revenge-for-trayvon-martin-beating-mobile-alabama; Mytheos Holt, "'We'll Find Him': Black Militia Organization Vows Vengeance on Trayvon Martin Shooter," *The Blaze*, March 20, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/03/20/well-find-him-black-militia-organization-vows-vengeance-on-trayvon-martin-shooter/.

[15] *Transition* Issue 112, "*Django* Unpacked," is an important collection of six critical essays on the film *Django*. Regarding black revenge in the film, in particular: Glenda R. Carpio, "'I Like the Way You Die, Boy,'" *Transition* no. 112 (2013): 1-12; Walter Johnson, "Allegories of Empire," *Transition* no. 112 (2013): 13-21; Yarimar Bonilla, "History Unchained," *Transition* 112 (2013): 68-77. The remainder of this footnote is a list of articles I have found relating to black revenge in film, almost all of which are about *Django*: Adam Serwer, "The Ethnic Revenge Flick," *Mother Jones*, October 27, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2011/10/ethnic-revenge-flick; Jordan Zakarin, "Quentin Tarantino Discusses Reviving Black Soldier Revenge Film," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 27, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/

commentators have focused primarily on the politics of representing themes of black revenge—in essence, whether or not one should or should not make a film like *Django*—what particularly

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quentin-tarantino-discusses-reviving-black-406437; J.L. Wall, "Vengeance is Clean; Vengeance is Cruel," *Ordinary Times*, October 19, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/blog/2011/10/19/vengeance-is-clean-vengeance-is-cruel; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Slavery Revenge Flicks," *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/slavery-revenge-flicks/246886/; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Toward a More Badass History," *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/toward-a-more-badass-history/266997/; Rod Dreher, "Django's Revenge Fantasy," *The American Conservative*, January 11, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/djangos-revenge-fantasy/; Walidah Imarisha, "Django Unchained: Revenge Narratives, Black Feminism, and the Need for Visionary Communities" (n.d.), accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.walidah.com/node/225; Todd Cunningham, "Slave-Revenge Film 'Django Unchained' Tracking Strongly With African-Americans," *The Wrap*, December 20, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.thewrap.com/movies/article/django-unchained-tracking-strongly-african-americans-70401; Brent Lang, "Quentin Tarantino: If You Think 'Django Unchained' is Violent, Try Slavery," *The Wrap*, December 7, 2012, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.thewrap.com/movies/article/quentin-tarantino-you-think-django-unchained-violent-try-slavery-68356; Noah Smith, "Django Unchained: A white revenge fantasy," *Not Quite Noahpinion* blog, February 25, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://noahpinionblog.blogspot.com/2013/02/movie-review-django-unchained.html; Chauncey DeVega, "Of African American Revenge Fantasies and Boardwalk Empire," *Open Salon*, October 12, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://open.salon.com/blog/chauncey_devega/2010/10/12/of_african_american_revenge_fantasies_and_boardwalk_empire; Ray Falcon, "Quentin Tarantino and his movie: Django Unchained, a revenge story of a black slave," *Latino Weekly Review* (n.d.), accessed February 10, 2014, http://latinoweeklyreview.com/?p=5190; Jon Harrison Sims, "The Left's New Fantasy: Murderous Revenge," *American Renaissance*, January 11, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.amren.com/features/2013/01/the-lefts-new-fantasy-murderous-revenge/; Alyssa Rosenberg, "'Django Unchained,' And Stereotype Subversion As Revenge," *ThinkProgress*, October 31, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2011/10/31/356517/django-unchained-and-stereotype-subversion-as-revenge/; Jermaine Spradley, "*Django Unchained* Controversy: A Look at the Conundrum Tarantino's Latest Created in Progressive Black America," *The Huffington Post*, January 11, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jermaine-spradley/django-unchained-controversy_b_2457739.html; Jamelle Bouie, "A Different Kind of Revenge Film," *The American Prospect*, October 28, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://prospect.org/article/different-kind-revenge-film; Scot Nakagawa, "Django In Chains: Why Revenge Is Just For The Movies," *Race Files*, January 10, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.racefiles.com/2013/01/10/django-in-chains-why-revenge-is-just-for-the-movies/; Bonnie Berman Cushing, "White fear of Black men," *Center for the Study of White American Culture* blog, March 10, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://euroamerican.org/wordpress/index.php/2013/03/10/white-fear-of-black-men/.

interests me is what it does for white audience to participate in *Django* by watching it. I would suggest that, for many whites, watching *Django* in a theater, primarily with other whites (as American movie theater audiences tend to skew towards racial homogeneity), was itself a performance of a certain kind of racial consciousness.

It is possible to think of *Django*, a film made by a white writer-director (Quentin Tarantino), as a ritual way for whites to experience black revenge. And, in particular, to experience black revenge in a format that allows them to adopt a "cool pose" of announcing, in effect, that *if* history had gone the way of *Django*, blacks would have been within their rights. In other words, white audiences can have the psychic experience of black revenge in a way that allows them to perform a kind of ritual mourning for white wrongdoing, even as the framing of it allows them to do so in a way that costs them nothing (other than the cost of the movie ticket and popcorn)—through which they can, in fact, *snack*, if they choose. This, then, is the true "excess" of the film, to use Slavoj Žižek's term for the ideological aspect of a commodity that provides the consumer with pleasure far in excess of the straightforward somatic pleasure it imparts.[16]

Furthermore, as I say, the viewing of the film permits white audiences to adopt a "cool pose" as whites who are enlightened enough to recognize the fundamental justice of what is being represented on the screen—who side with the cause of the black characters and freely embrace the repudiation of whites as villains. However, the white filmmaker recognizes the complication of this repudiation of the self, and provides white audiences with a white character, King Schultz—importantly, a *foreigner*, so as not to undermine the ritual rebuke of Americanness—on whom audiences can hang the hopes of their redeemed whiteness. This

[16] *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes (2012; Zeitgeist Films, 2014), DVD. In the film, Žižek describes, at length, his approach to cinema, which is heavily influenced by political philosophy.

redemption is perfected when the good white man redeems the sin of whiteness with his own death, a scapegoating that offers white audiences a redemption of their race. In other words, it does through a subjunctive, ritual action what real black revenge would do: it evens the score, creating the illusory sense that past wrongs have been balanced and it is now possible to go forward with an absence of guilt.

Voodoo and black revenge

Within this white American fiction of black revenge, imagined voodoo has a prized place. It is seen as a mystical force that is coded specifically as black—and not only black, but directed *against* whites, or anyone else who would stand in the way of black revenge. Because voodoo is coded as black, it means that anyone associated with its practice, regardless of their apparent skin color, is *blackened*—most especially *morally* blackened—through the logic of the American racial imagination which must sort all people unambiguously into *either* white *or* black. Therefore, uses of imagined voodoo provide opportunities not only to explore fears of black revenge, but also to ruminate on the idea that there are white race traitors. These race traitors are the prototypical American sleeper agents, those who wish to destroy America from the inside.

When pointing out that all things voodoo are inherently coded as black, it is important to note that the reverse is often true as well, particularly when it comes to religion. By this, I mean that black religiosity and spirituality are often, in popular culture, construed as inherently voodooed. One can see this clearly in Alan Parker's film *Angel Heart*, for example, in which it turns out that the black church in Harlem, where Harry Angel first meets Lucifer, is really just a

disguise for voodoo, even Satanism.[17] However, this can also be seen in the numerous and myriad representations of the black church in mainstream films and television shows—from *The Blues Brothers* to the title sequence of *True Blood*—which depict black religiosity as innately strange, frenetic, spasmodic, and frightening.[18] As I have argued earlier, I suggest that these representations are only legible to audiences within the context of the long history of representations of voodoo, which embed these individual representations of the black exotic within a resonance field of global black strangeness.

For example, the trope of the "mystical negro" makes the most sense within the context of imagined voodoo. The mystical negro is a black character, usually imbued with magical powers, who uses his or her abilities to aid the white protagonist. On the one hand, this trope is meaningful to white audiences as an example of the "faithful servant" (Tom) type. The faithful servant is the black character in a story (often set during the Civil War) who remains faithful to his or her white Master or Mistress, often defending him or her from "bad blacks" who wish to exact black revenge. In the context of the mystical negro, however, this type embodies an additional frisson of playing against the expectations of black spirituality as something that is coded as *against* whites. Therefore, the mystical negro is a type that plays against type. He or she is a sacrificial figure whose choice to harness black power to the benefit of his or her latter-day white master necessitates his or her death in recompense for the mystical negro's misappropriation of a power intended for black revenge.

One of the most classically Gothic examples of the voodooed nature of "the black strange" can be found in the increasingly popular "ghost hunting" genre of reality television show.

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[17] *Angel Heart*, directed by Alan Parker (1987; Lions Gate, 2004), DVD.

[18] *The Blues Brothers*, directed by John Landis (1980; Universal Studies, 2005), DVD; *True Blood*, created by Alan Ball (HBO, 2008-Present), television series.

Although there are more than a dozen such shows, they all follow a fairly standard formula. A small team of three to five people travels to a supposedly haunted building, typically conducting cursory research about the location during the daylight hours. Then, at night, the team is locked inside of the building (naturally, with all of the lights switched off) to discern—using a mixture of psychic, technologic, and brute techniques—whether or not the location is haunted. This is best understood as an inheritance of the positivist Enlightenment tradition, by way of Victorian Spiritualism, in which the only acceptable way to embrace spirituality is through evidentiary investigation (Scientific Method as religion). As with Spiritualism, the exercise of demonstrating a spiritual reality (or trying to debunk it, which I suggest is merely the cynical version of the same impulse) is transformed into the near totality of spiritual experience.

Questions of genre aside, the point I wish to make is that these shows are obsessed with slave hauntings. The functioning premise of spectrality adopted by almost all such shows is essentially the popular American folk notion of ghosts: Ghosts are the spirits of people who died with unfinished business or under horrible (usually violent) circumstances. Given this hypothesis, it seems as though the entire United States should be rotten with ghostly slaves. For the purposes of such shows, however, slave hauntings seem limited almost exclusively to plantation homes in the American South. This suggests that what is really at play here is the way that history becomes localized, written onto specific spaces the way a geographer might draw symbols on top of a map—and that it is this writing of history onto place which is so often signified by the word "haunted."

Fascinatingly, ghostly slaves are almost always characterized on these shows as falling within the purview of voodoo. While this may, in part, be because voodoo makes good television, I believe that the greater logic at play here is that all things which are both spiritual

and black—particularly if that spirituality is even a touch Gothic—are read as inherently voodooed. For example, on the show *Scariest Places on Earth*, an "ordinary" (read: white) family spent the night at the Magnolia Plantation in Derry, Louisiana while undertaking a series of tasks, such as spending time alone in certain rooms and out-buildings.[19] One of the tasks was to attend a voodoo ritual hosted by the New Orleans Voodoo priestess Sallie Ann Glassman, which supposedly fortified them for their encounters with the spirits.[20] The show *Ghost Adventures* also had an episode focused on Magnolia Plantation, during which they claimed to "uncover evidence of the slaves' voodoo rituals of revenge."[21] Another *Ghost Adventures* episode investigated the "Maysville Slave House"—a house in Mayville, Kentucky that is is actually called Phillips' Folly.[22] During the course of the episode, the investigation team brought in a pair of Ifá priests to pour libations in the hope of giving peace to the spirits of the slaves supposedly trapped in the house.[23] The choice to use Ifá priests again confirms the supposition

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[19] *Scariest Places on Earth*, "Haunted Voodoo Plantation," Season 2, Episode 12 (ABC Family, 2001), television series.

[20] Sallie Ann Glassman is a fixture of voodoo tourism in New Orleans. Initiated as a *manbo* (priestess) in Haitian Vodou by Edgar Jean-Louis (d. 2010), she 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, Thelemic ceremonial magic, yoga, vegetarianism, and New Age philosophy.

[21] *Ghost Adventures*, "Magnolia Plantation," Season 2, Episode 4 (Travel Channel, 2009), television series. Description from Travel Channel website, "Magnolia Plantation : Ghost Adventures : Travel Channel," accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.travelchannel.com/tv-shows/ghost-adventures/photos/magnolia-plantation.

[22] *Ghost Adventures*, "Kentucky Slave House," Season 4, Episode 24 (Travel Channel, 2011), television series. Information about the house from "Phillips' Folly," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 25, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillips'_Folly.

[23] Ifá is a highly organized and complex system of divinatory and religious practices from the Yorùbá people of West Africa and spread throughout the Atlantic world.

that essentially all forms of black spirituality are seen as interchangeable or continuous with voodoo.

What I find fascinating about the idea of slave hauntings as presented on these shows is that the revenge implicit in them is not anything in particular that the ghostly slaves *do*. Rather, it is the ghostly slaves' mere persistence—their ontology—that constitutes black revenge. This again evokes the notion that what these ghostly slaves really are is history. For the revenge of history, particularly history that one would rather forget, is its refusal to dissolve, or *resolve*. The voodooed revenge of ghostly slaves is a closed circle: because the guilt of slavery so enraptures us, the landscape becomes peopled with its ghosts—and because it is peopled with these ghosts, they haunt us with their history.

Nonetheless, there is a sleight of hand here to which we must be keenly attentive. By transforming the guilt of slavery into a Gothic event, the effect is to displace this guilt and transform it into a scene of abjection. For the event of the haunting is manifestly not about white guilt, but about black monstrousness. This psychic transformation reveals the truth that terror is easier to bear than guilt. However, it also explains why stories of spectral slaves are perennial—appearing in literature and film in every generation since the commencement of American slavery. Everyone knows that ghosts exist because they have unfinished business. But the unfinished business of the ghostly slaves cannot be resolved in its present configuration because its meaning has been bowdlerized. It sounds absurd to say, but in a very real way, it is true: We can't remember anymore why our slaves are haunting us.

Slave hauntings also play a crucial role in the television show *American Horror Story: Coven*.[24] Set in New Orleans, the season revolves around a supernatural race war, between the white witches of Salem (who have relocated to New Orleans), and the black practitioners of voodoo. An immortal—and immortally vengeful—Marie Laveau, played by Angela Bassett, leads the voodoo practitioners. In fact, after her hundreds of years of life, the impulse of revenge seems to be all that is left of the personality of the great voodoo queen—that and lust, which she sates zoophilically with her bull-headed black lover, Bastien.[25] Meanwhile, the descendants of Salem engage in endless drama and backstabbing uptown, in a Garden District mansion almost devoid of black characters. The only exceptions are a black albino who sometimes shows up to do their dirtiest tasks (such as burning people alive), and one black witch, Queenie (played by Gabourey Sidibe), a human voodoo doll who inflicts harm on others by harming herself. The talented Sidibe seems at sea playing this character, whose magical ability and anxiety about being rejected by her white "sister witches" are less character traits than crudely sketched stereotypes.

The race war between the witches and voodooists, portrayed as age-old, is renewed when the head of the witches, the "Supreme" Fiona Goode (*American Horror Story* fixture Jessica Lange), exhumes Madame Delphine LaLaurie, who had been made immortal by Marie Laveau so that she can suffer an eternity of torment buried alive. This was Marie Laveau's revenge, exacted in retribution when LaLaurie maimed Laveau's lover Bastien by permanently grafting a bull's severed head to his shoulders. Fiona doesn't entirely realize that she is renewing an

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[24] *American Horror Story*, Season 3 (*American Horror Story: Coven*), created by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy (FX, 2013-14), television series.

[25] In the chapter on voodoo and hypersexuality (Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo"), I will discuss the connection between voodoo and representations of black people's sexuality as bestial.

ancient blood grudge. She merely wants to know the secret to LaLaurie's immortality, as Fiona has cancer and, like all true narcissists, cannot accept that she will someday die.

What the show's viewers may not appreciate is the fact that Delphine Lalaurie was a real person, a New Orleans socialite chased from the city in the 1830s by an angry mob when she was caught torturing and murdering numerous of her slaves, often in sadistic acts of apparent eroticism.[26] Problematically, Lalaurie is sometimes described as a serial killer (extremely rare for a woman), a label that fails to contextualize how the system of American slavery licensed her actions. In fact, we might almost say that American slavery *needed* Lalaurie, whose actions demonstrated the Satanic, epicurean range of what is possible to enact on the human "meat" that one owns—revealing the fearful and rarely stated fact that American slavery was not simply about monetary profit, but was also an economy of *pleasure*.[27] That Lalaurie was driven from New Orleans does not mean, as some wrongly assume, that New Orleans society felt queasy about her actions. The lie is told on this by the fact that, after Lalaurie was forced to leave, a number of her most severely abused slaves were exhibited for public viewing, rather like zoo

[26] Note the slight spelling change. While the press release and IMDB page for *American Horror Story: Coven* spell her named as "LaLaurie," historical documents do not capitalize the second "L," rendering it instead as "Lalaurie." I have attended to this difference here as a way of further marking the cleft between fiction and reality. Cf. Carolyn Morrow Long, *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Victoria Cosner Love, *Mad Madame Lalaurie: New Orleans' Most Famous Murderess Revealed* (Charleston: History Press, 2011).

[27] In his recent book, the historian Walter Johnson has emphasized this same basic point—namely, that slavery was not only economically beneficially, but that slave masters took tremendous pleasure in owning and disciplining their slaves. Walter Johnson, *River of Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

animals.[28] If anything, Lalaurie was driven out for being excessively public about her abuses—in other words, for getting caught.

American Horror Story: Coven feels no compunction against showing black abjection. In fact, its opening gambit for the viewer's attention is a series of grisly scenes showing LaLaurie torturing and maiming her black slaves in a secret torture chamber. For those who might claim that the show's producers show these excesses of slavery to provoke feelings of moral outrage, it should at least give pause that these "exhibitions" of slave suffering reproduce the nineteenth century zoo-like exhibitions of Lalaurie's wounded slaves—in other words, slave abjection not as polemic (although perhaps it masks as such), but rather as erotic theater.

Never passing up an opportunity to show black revenge, the show takes the liberty of completely changing the real-life conclusion of Lalaurie's story. Instead of having her home stormed by a white or racially mixed group—who find that Lalaurie has already fled—the LaLaurie mansion is attacked by a group of blacks, including LaLaurie's slaves, led by Marie Laveau herself. The black mob kills LaLaurie's daughters—whom we later learn were (in the show) conspiring against their own mother because of her cruelty. LaLaurie herself is then buried alive in her courtyard, having already been made immortal so that she will suffer eternally. This less-than-subtle fictionalizing of the historical narrative has at least several ways that it enters into a problematic relationship with history. First, by having the LaLaurie mansion attacked by "blacks," the show anachronistically suggests the operation of a pan-African consciousness that almost certainly did not exist in New Orleans at this time. In fact, we know

[28] "The popular fury which we briefly adverted in our paper of yesterday. . .," *New Orleans Bee*, April 12, 1834, accessed February 10, 2014, http://nobee.jefferson.lib.la.us/Vol-009/04_1834/1834_04_0038.pdf.

of the historical Marie Laveau (who was a light-skinned mulatto and born free) that almost all of her interventions—mystical or otherwise—were done on behalf of wealthy *white* clients.

Second, the revenge storyline proposes that a highly theatrical black revenge-by-mob is what *should* have happened—and thereby enters into a critique of actual historical blacks, suggesting that less theatrical forms of resistance are undeserving of representation. To whit, news reports of the fire in the Lalaurie mansion—during which Lalaurie's victims were first discovered—was set by the enslaved cook, whom Lalaurie kept chained to the stove.[29] In her despair, the cook decided to burn down the house, with herself in it, as an act of rebellion against the conditions of her enslavement. However, this fire—and the particular agency-in-despair of this woman—are omitted from the show, perhaps because it cannot readily be translated into the show's preferred mode of torture porn. In other words, the show's obsession with acts of black *rage* refuses to make space for the other, real-life modes—whether subtle or even suicidal—by which actual slaves in New Orleans subverted the power of their supposed owners. By the time of the Civil War, almost three decades after the Lalaurie fire, accounts from numerous sources indicate that many enslaved people in Orleans Parish simply refused to work any longer for their masters, a form of enslaved agency which effectively gutted the institution of slavery even prior to its formal abolishment. By January 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation effectively ends slavery in the South, it is estimated that perhaps as many as one in four slaves in Orleans had run away.[30] These risky, small-scale rebellions, conducted by lone individuals and

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[29] "The conflagration at the house occupied by the woman Lalaurie. . .," *New Orleans Bee*, April 11, 1834, accessed February 10, 2014, http://nobee.jefferson.lib.la.us/Vol-009/04_1834/1834_04_0034.pdf.

[30] Thomas Joseph Davis, *Plessy V. Ferguson* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 9-11; Ira Berlin, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108.

collectives of enslaved people in the city of New Orleans—some of whom chose to immolate themselves, if necessary, rather than persist with the *status quo*—are censored by the show's narrative choices. In the process, it reduces their sophisticated and self-determining agency to revenge narrative, turning them into no more than an angry mob, the stereotypical mass of enraged black bodies.

On the *Los Angeles Review of Books* blog, Anne Helen Petersen published an insightful essay linking images of slavery in *American Horror Story: Coven* to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject.[31] As Petersen notes, "if you label an entire race as part animal, part man, part savage, part civilized, if you label that race as *abject*, then society will sanction the enslavement and othering of that race. In this way, racism—and slavery—becomes moral." In her generous reading of the intentions of *AHS: Coven*'s creators, Petersen makes the psychoanalytic error which I have already had numerous occasions to point out: she neglects to consider the historical context for such representations. In particular, what she does not consider is how the show, by cleaving so faithfully to the conventions of the Gothic genre, does not make subversive comment on the genre's conventions, but rather simply reproduces its most abusive tropes. In this way, it does not consider Saidiya Hartman's warnings that representations of slavery risk simply reproducing the conditions of the subjection of slaves.[32] In effect, such representations mirror the violence performed on enslaved people across time, and thus commit violence against the

[31] Anne Helen Petersen, "The Exquisite Repulsion of 'American Horror Story': An Essay on Abjection," *Los Angeles Review of Books* blog, October 21, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/deartv/exquisite-repulsion-american-horror-story-essay-abjection/.

[32] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

dead. Or, to summarize a point made by Walter Benjamin, the dead are never safe from the living.[33]

American Horror Story: Coven devoutly reproduces dozens of tropes of imagined voodoo (some which have already been deconstructed here, others which will be in coming chapters). These include the use of vèvè; the army of zombies that Marie Laveau resurrects to do her dirty work; and the fact that voodoo is coded as uniquely black—a fact which is used to woo the character of Queenie to Laveau's team, promising her that she with finally be with "her own people." However, what stands out as most repugnant is the insistence on the aptness of voodoo for black revenge—or, even more broadly, the insistence that black bodies are seething with the desire for revenge. The show frequently gives image to this internal state by representing black bodies as grossly contorted in paroxysms of hate and mystical death-dealing. In the opening credits, for example, almost all of the human figures are black or blackened. The racially black bodies are shown in extreme close-up, contorted and feral, snarling like animals. Black hands are shown making voodoo dolls, which they then stab violently and repeatedly with pins. Alternating with these "voodoo" vignettes are scenes of witches, who are shown wearing KKK-style robes and hoods—except, importantly, that the garments are *black*. These witches, who appear engaged in sinister acts, have in effect donned moral blackface, signified by their black robes: that is, they have dressed up as black people to perform actions which they consider morally black. In only two brief moments do we see a white figure in the sequence—most

[33] Walter Benjamin, "On the concept of history," trans. Dennis Redmond (1940; Marxist Internet Archive, 2005), accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm, ¶ VI: "The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious."

significantly, when one of the women briefly lifts her black hood to show a portion of a white face underneath.

Likewise, the only racially black magic seen on the show is also morally black magic. In a flashback to 1961, Marie Laveau raises a mob of zombies to take revenge for the lynching of a young boy in her community. In a highly cinematic ritual, Marie Laveau traces a vèvè for the lwa Maman Brigitte to the accompaniment of a solitary drummer, sacrifices a python, then sets a mysterious liquid on fire and drinks it.[34] This is intercut with scenes of white zombies rising from the grave and viciously ripping the lynch mob apart. While one tries to keep in mind that these white men are violent criminals who could have been sentenced to death under the laws of Louisiana, the framing of these scenes makes it difficult to keep in mind that *they* are the monsters. After all, the more obvious monsters are the zombies, and the master of the zombies, Marie herself, who is depicted as terrifying: As Marie's magic crescendos, she levitates off the ground, streaked with blood, her eyes rolling back in her head so that only white orbs show. This, then, is the face of black revenge, monstrous and animal-like. It is never shown as the equal of white justice—meted out by a white judge who, in a cool and detached fashion, weighs facts and makes a ruling on the basis of law. Although Marie's actions may be *just*, they are not *justice*—for blacks are never shown in imagined voodoo as having *justice*, only *revenge*.

Tropes of voodoo black revenge are also epitomized by the films *Sugar Hill* and *The Skeleton Key*. *Sugar Hill* (1974) is one of the finest examples of the blaxploitation genre of filmmaking.[35] Marki Bey stars as Diana Hill (nicknamed Sugar), the girlfriend of a bar owner

[34] Maman Brigitte is one of the Haitian Vodou *lwa* (spirits) who control the cemetery and the spirits of the dead.

[35] *Sugar Hill*, directed by Paul Maslansky (1974; Blaxploitation Film, n.d.), DVD. Not to be confused with the later Wesley Snipes film (1993) of the same name.

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 way to a swamp, complete with alligators, where they summon the assistance of the voodoo god Baron Samedi.[36] He agrees to help Sugar if afterwards she will become one of his brides. Once she accepts, what follows 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, and 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 white moll as a fulfillment of Sugar's contract. Sugar not only gets her revenge, she lives to tell of it.

In *The Skeleton Key* (2005), Kate Hudson plays Caroline Ellis, a live-in nurse hired by handsome lawyer Luke Marshall (Peter Sarsgaard) to assist an aging woman, Violet Devereaux (Gena Rowlands), in caring for her catatonic husband (John Hurt).[37] It quickly becomes clear that all is not well in the Devereaux house, and inquiries as to the absence of mirrors in the house lead to revelations of 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

[36] Baron Samedi is the son of Maman Brigitte, and he is likewise tasked with governing cemeteries and the dead.

[37] *The Skeleton Key*, directed by Iain Softley (2005; Universal Studios, 2005), DVD.

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.[38] If you don't believe, it has no power because it is a creation of the

[38] 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,

mind—essentially a rehashing of the idea that voodoo is *of* inferior minds, *for* inferior minds.[39] *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, evoking again the idea of "race traitors," people who appear white but who are actually black. 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 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,

Tara reverts to her cynical ways, while her mother continues to be sober and blissfully unaware of the counterfeit.

[39] Another variation on this theme is the commonly held belief that, while there is such a thing as good voodoo, 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, therefore 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*. 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. *Friday the 13th: The Series*, "The Voodoo Mambo," Season 2, Episode 2 (1988; Paramount, 2009), DVD. Cf. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti: A Film by Maya Deren*, directed by Maya Deren and Teiji Ito (1977; Microcinema, 2007), DVD.

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.[40]

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, inheriting the estate 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, and 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 clearly 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. In contrast, Sugar is charismatic and

[40] "Conjure of Sacrifice," *The Skeleton Key* Soundtrack, Edward Shearmur et al. (Varese Sarabande, 2005), CD.

beautiful, and her revenge seems justified. In addition, the violent deaths of her oppressors are rendered with such camp that they seem relatively minor and insignificant, allowing the viewer to sidestep the fact that Sugar is, at story's 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 the actress 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. As an affable, young, and 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 terrifying, seducing, humiliating, and then 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 construe this swap as a moment of triumph but rather as 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.[41] 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 a tizzy with word that Prince Naveen of Maldonia, a notorious playboy, will be visiting. Tiana's best childhood friend, the white and wealthy debutante Charlotte, schemes to marry the Prince. However, due to the machinations of the evil voodoo witchdoctor Dr. Facilier, this plan is subverted when both Prince Naveen and Tiana are turned into frogs. 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, while marketed as Disney's first black princess, Tiana might more accurately be 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 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, presumably after the Haitian dictator—but this was met with such outrage that the name was

[41] *The Princess and the Frog*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (2009; Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

changed to Dr. Facilier.[42] 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*), she is notably incapable of reversing Dr. Facilier's spell that binds Naveen and Tiana to the form of frogs.[43] 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.

Conclusion

The theme of black revenge provides an opportunity to reflect on the real work that imagined voodoo does in popular culture to communicate conflicted, problematic, and offensive messages about black people. While Chapter One contextualized these representations within

[42] Roger Moore, "Frog Princess: Disney fights 'Song of the South II' buzz," *The Orlando Sentinel*, May 11, 2007, accessed December 3, 2010, http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/ entertainment_ movies_blog/2007/05/frog_princess_d.html.

[43] The *ason* is the beaded gourd rattle used in Haitian Vodou by initiated clergy.

the broader sweep of Afro-Atlantic history, this chapter has highlighted not only why this context is important, but shown that representations of imagined voodoo are often purposely bereft of this context. To place them back into a history of exploitative representations, then, is to engage in the first step of undermining their racist content. Whether as spectral slaves, zombie-raising voodoo priestesses, or Disney princesses, manifestations of imagined voodoo offer essentialized and exoticized portrayals of blackness—which, more often than not, depict blackness as innately dangerous and vindictive.

When voodooed black revenge periodically crosses from fiction into the news, it tends to do so in ways that mingle these sinister qualities with derision and bathos. For example, in 2013, a Haitian woman living in the Boston area crashed her car, forcing a Boston Globe delivery truck off of Interstate 93. When police arrived, they found that the woman, Vivencia Bellegarde, was drunk and abusive. News stories reported that Bellegarde flashed several EBT cards at the white police officer, telling him that he was stupid to pay for food that she got for free. She then told the officer, William Kokocinski, that she would put a voodoo curse on him. The story was picked up by the national media, but was covered particularly avidly by the *Boston Herald*, the region's only major conservative newspaper.[44] As *Boston Magazine* quipped, Vivencia Bellegarde was the *Herald*'s dream villain—black; an immigrant from a poor, non-English speaking country; welfare-abusing; a drunk; and driving an expensive car; i.e. "a welfare queen,"

[44] Melissa Hanson, "Woman who allegedly smashed into Globe truck threatened trooper with voodoo, report says," *The Boston Globe*, August 7, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.boston.com/metrodesk/2013/08/07/woman-who-allegedly-smashed-into-globe-truck-threatened-trooper-with-voodoo-report-says/xOrFd8blN6agSyGP0HuVpO/story.html; Jack Encarnacao, "What the hex: OUI suspect charged in wild crash threatened cop with voodoo curse," *The Boston Herald*, August 7, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/local_coverage/2013/08/what_the_hex_oui_suspect_charged_in_wild_crash_threatened_cop.

embodying nearly everything that conservative's imagine is wrong with liberal-leaning America.[45]

Without question, Vivencia Bellegarde was a woman in the midst of making horrific decisions, and therefore an easy target—but given her lack of criminal record, I suggest that we cannot confidently assert anything about her character as a whole on the basis solely of this set of actions. More revealing is the adoption of Bellegarde by conservative commentators as a symbol of everything wrong with America. Most dwelled on Bellegarde's claim that she would use voodoo for revenge—claiming it, in many cases, as an ironic allegory for what they saw as the real "curse" on America, namely, people like Bellegarde. Conservative *Herald* commentator Michael Graham began his column,

> I don't know if Haiti's "voodoo" island magic is real, but I do know that America's new culture of dependency has worked its magic on Vivencia Bellegarde, aka the "EBT Voodoo Queen." Every sentence from her lips is an incantation straight from the "Culture of Dependency" spell book. Forget the three EBT cards and the racial slurs and voodoo curses for a moment and think about how amazing this is: A woman from a different country, with a different language spends just a few years in the United States—and she already speaks fluent "entitlement" like a native.[46]

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[45] Eric Randall, "Woman Suspected of Destroying Globe Delivery Truck is a Boston Herald Dream Villian [*sic*]: Meet Vivencia Bellegarde: a suspected welfare-scamming, voodoo cursing, drunk driver," *Boston Magazine*, August 7, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/blog/2013/08/07/woman-suspected-of-destroying-globe-delivery-truck-is-a-boston-herald-dream-villian/.

[46] Michael Graham, "'Voodoo Queen' gets culture," *Boston Herald*, August 25, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/opinion/op_ed/2013/08/voodoo_queen_gets_culture. Howie Carr, another *Herald* opinion writer, began his article about Bellegarde in a similar fashion, writing, "Look at it this way: Vivencia Bellegarde is only laying on the voodoo curses that Americans can't be bothered laying on anymore. Of course this is nothing more than what Gov. Deval Patrick would call an 'anecdote.' She's from Haiti, and as a newcomer to our land, it's just part of her cultural heritage that she would, as the state trooper put it, 'begin screaming that I was a "dumb motherbleeper" for paying for food when she gets it for free.'" Howie Carr, "Carr: Vivencia Bellegarde banks on us," *Boston Herald*, August 25, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/columnists/howie_carr/2013/08/carr_viven_cia_bellegarde_banks_on_us.

By now, we are all so numb to conservative pundits making such claims—and then insisting (in outraged tones) that they have nothing to do with race or racism—that this kind of offensive generalization about the poor, blacks, and immigrants has almost lost its ability to shock us. However, what makes this story a particularly useful site of inquiry is that it also was circulated widely on white supremacy websites, such as *American Renaissance* and *Stormfront*. In fact, when the story was published on *American Renaissance*, the language of the original *Boston Herald* article by Jack Encarnacao was already so charged with racist language that they didn't even bother to rewrite it: they simply reproduced it verbatim.[47] Likewise, if one adjusts simply for the fact that users of *Stormfront* feel free to use racial slurs, the comments posted there were essentially the same in content as those of conservative op-ed writers like Carr and Graham. In other words, white supremacists interpreted the story in the same way as supposedly non-white supremacist pundits. In fact, the only meaningful difference I found was that openly white supremacist commenters were more inclined to muse openly about the possibility that voodoo is a legitimately powerful mystical force for black revenge.[48] What this suggests is that white obsessions with the possibility of voodooed black revenge are not, strictly speaking, always cynical or ironic. Rather, the extent to which imagined voodoo has become emblematic of

[47] Jack Encarnacao, "What the Hex: OUI Suspect Charged in Wild Crash Threatened Cop with Voodoo Curse," from *Boston Herald*, republished on *American Renaissance*, August 7, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.amren.com/news/2013/08/what-the-hex-oui-suspect-charged-in-wild-crash-threatened-cop-with-voodoo-curse/; Whoopie, "DUI Haitian Ho Gonna Put a Hex On Us White Devils," *Blur Brain*, August 7, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://blurbrain.com/dui-haitian-ho-gonna-put-a-hex-on-us-white-devils/; "Those lovely Haitians" discussion thread on *Stormfront.org*, active August 7, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t986028/.

[48] I find this evocative of Kate Ramsey's astute observation that American legal action against voodoo practitioners during the occupation of Haiti had the ironic consequence of seeming to accept as legitimately powerful the very thing which they were trying so hard to discredit. Cf. Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*.

fetishized blackness has had the effect of imbuing it with real psychic power to harm—at least in the minds of those whites who fear it, and the blackness for which it has come to stand.

Chapter Three

"HOT VOODOO":
Voodoo and Hypersexuality

Did you ever happen to hear of voodoo?
Hear it and you won't give a damn what you do.
Tom-toms put me under a sort of voodoo
And the whole night long I don't know the right from wrong.
Hot voodoo, black as mud,
Hot voodoo in my blood,
That African tempo has made me a slave.
Hot voodoo, dance of sin,
Hot voodoo, worse than gin,
I'd follow a caveman right into his cave.
—"Hot Voodoo" as performed by Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus* (1932)[1]

Part I:
Imagined voodoo, the sexually perverse, and sociogeny

For virtually as long as the American racial imaginary has had a concept of voodoo, it has been explicitly connected with perverse sexuality. This fusion weds two separate discourses. The first is that black bodies, as an exceptional class, are supposedly uniquely and biologically endowed with sexuality that can be described as "inherently queered" or "voodooed." The second discursive thread is that Vodou, as a black religious tradition which appeared to pose real danger to whites, likewise came to be associated with deviant and disturbing acts, often of a sexual nature.

Within this chapter, I pursue the argument that popular American uses of imagined voodoo serve a crucial role in what Fanon calls "sociogeny," the construction of whiteness and

[1] *Blonde Venus*, directed by Josef von Sternberg (1932; Universal Studios, 2011), DVD.

blackness as reified categories of subjectivity. However, sociogeny is never a finished process, as categories of racial identity must constantly be refreshed and flooded anew with symbolic meaning.[2] Organized in particular as an extended exegesis on Fanon's argument that Negrophobia is fundamentally a sexual phobia, I suggest that imagined voodoo serves as a mechanism by which whites displace their most perverse sexual obsessions onto black subjects. This serves two important functions: it allows whites to repudiate these forbidden desires while still thrilling in them. It also constructs black subjects as fundamentally savage, a characterization that both necessitates and explains their low socioeconomic status.

As American anti-black racism has morphed increasingly into institutionalized forms, overt displays of anti-black racism have been forced underground or to the periphery of public discourse. However, while it may no longer be acceptable to argue openly that blacks as a class suffer from—or even delight in—a perverse form of sexuality, there is no comparable censor for what one can or should say about or through imagined voodoo. In particular because its usages tend to be isolated to low-art genres like horror and pornography, few cultural critics have taken such representations seriously. I argue, however, that these representations are precisely what we should be taking seriously because they are where racist views of black sexuality and black religion have taken shelter, hidden in plain sight.

In imagined voodoo fiction, practitioners of voodoo tend to be portrayed as gluttonous for sexual coupling, while at the same time ambiguously (and therefore subversively) sexed,

[2] I would argue that this "flooding" with meaning places race within the category of what Slavoj Žižek calls "ideology." For Žižek, ideology is particularly characterized by the way that it imbues objects and events with what he calls "excess"—a surplus of meaning which is greater than the sum of their parts, and provides subjects (consumers) with the sense of participating in meaningful arcs of history. Thus, ideology—for example, "racial purity"—is effectively apotheosized as a Big Other, and through consuming or acting in accordance with ideology, the subject undergoes something akin to religious experience. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes (2012; Zeitgeist Films, 2014), DVD.

gendered, and sexually oriented. Of equal interest is the way that qualities of black voodoo sexuality can, in many cases, be seen to migrate to white characters. This reveals a surprising porousness to racial categories, while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that it is almost always a bad thing when characters are voodooed or "blackened" in this way. Thus, voodoo often functions as a device to both explain the sexually transgressive behaviors of white characters, and pardon it because it is mystically compelled. This provides opportunities to explore the dynamic of the "race traitor," while also providing a mechanism for the return of the white character to the fold, through the trope of the broken spell.

In his seminal essay on the uses of voodoo in popular culture, Joseph Murphy draws insights from psychoanalysis to explore how imagined voodoo serves as a pressure valve for whites, projecting their most disturbing desires onto a cultural Other. Drawing on the work of Michael J. Dash, Murphy describes this using the psychoanalytic term "nostalgie de la boue"—literally, a "longing for the gutter." Murphy argues that the value of voodoo for whites is that it presents an opportunity to unleashed "primitive, atavistic forces . . . from the psyche." He continues,

> While these unrestrained forces are supposed to be fearful, they are also imagined to be a therapeutic release of repressed libidinal energy. . . . Voodoo . . . is not really saying anything about 'them,' its devotees, but about 'us', who create these images. The 'otherness' of black religion is created out of the 'otherness' within the psyches of the creators and supporters of the images. In these images of 'black magic' I see expressions of psychological forces of denial and projection.[3]

Murphy goes on to highlight how these projections tend to be sexual in character, writing,

> The erotic and ecstatic elements in African-derived religions are selected and transformed into images of unrestraint and become vehicles for white sexual and aggressive fantasies. They displace the 'other' within to an

[3] Joseph M. Murphy, "Black Religion and 'Black Magic': Prejudice and Projection in Images of Africa-Derived Religions," *Religion* 20, no. 4 (1990): 331.

> 'other' without. What is 'dark' and 'black' within the white psyche is projected onto what is 'dark' and 'black' in the social environment.[4]

Thus, voodoo imaginatively allows cultural producers to safely "play" with some of the most taboo and troubling aspects of human life, whether that be death or sexually transgressive practices. "Transgressive," of course, is a capacious term, and can mean anything from premarital or non-procreative sex, homosexuality, and miscegenation, to practices like sadism, rape, cannibalism, and pedophilia.

However, as I have raised earlier, a psychoanalytic approach to this topic is insufficient if it focuses solely on the role that these strategies play in the constitution of the white subject—what Scott calls the maintenance of the "boundaries of the (white male) ego."[5] This is because these psychic projections have real consequences, displacing dangerous white desires onto blacks. Fanon argues that this process is not simply a side effect of race, but is in fact what *constitutes* blackness—a process he calls "sociogeny."[6] Blacks thus are constructed as the ultimate Not-Us for whites.

In voodoo fiction, black sexuality is typically imaged as a literal and metaphorical darkness lying in wait, which the white hero or heroine must absolutely repudiate and defeat or risk being "blackened" by this sexuality—in effect, losing (or temporarily laying aside) white identity and white privilege. In the case of horror, this blackening also usually means a loss of life. Playing on tropes of the mammy, buck, tragic mulatto, femme fatale, punk/sissy/queer, transvestite, pimp, and coon—and set in stark contrast to images of sexually virtuous white

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[4] Ibid., 332.

[5] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 4.

[6] Fanon's notion of "sociogeny" has been discussed at length in Chapter One, "Imagining Voodoo, Imagining Blackness."

heroes and damsels in distress—the sexuality of imagined voodoo is operatic, scripted for a white (principally male) heterosexual gaze, and quite intentionally unwholesome, aiming to at once thrill and repulse. It thus permits the viewer or reader to experience an erotic charge from the doubly insulated position of both "not that" and "unwilling victim."

For the remainder of this chapter, I will examine in closer detail how imagined voodoo has been consistently identified with the sexually perverse. After providing a scholarly and historical perspective, I will explore Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, a text instrumental in the creation of imagined voodoo, examining how it constitutes itself as a libidinal text. Following that, I will examine a number of examples of the voodooed sexually perverse in popular film and literature. In Part II, I look at how voodoo sexually is often explored through the portrayal of sexualized "types," particularly those of the pimp, tragic mulatto, and femme fatale. I will then examine the trope of white women needing defense from black men. Part III examines the role of imagined voodoo in pornography. Part IV looks specifically at the eroticism of the figure of the zombie, ranging from popular film to pornography.

Blackness, imagined voodoo, and the sexually perverse

In his important rereading of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Darieck Scott acknowledges the challenges posed to the text by critics such as Homi Bhabha.[7] However, he argues that the most valuable contribution of Fanon's text remains its insights into how blackness is constituted as a vessel for displaced white anxiety and fear. Scott writes,

[7] Cf. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952). Translated into English as *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

> Fanon's essential point in *Black Skin, White Masks* [is] that blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality and death—fears, in other words, about the difficulty of maintaining boundaries of the (white male) ego, and fears about acknowledging the repressions and renunciations on which Western civilization depends. As such, blackness is an invention that accomplishes the domination of those who bear it as an identity. . .[8]

Later, Scott highlights what is, in effect, the central argument of this chapter, namely that "Negrophobia is essentially a sexual phobia, because blackness is primarily associated in Western (and Western-influenced) cultures with perverse, non normative sexuality."[9]

Scott goes on to express an understandable anxiety about the rhetorical effect of choosing to focus scholarly attention on the discourse that casts black sexuality as perverse.

> It is entirely possible that my search for something useful in the ever-problematic construction of black sexuality risks reproducing the familiar set of false equivalencies that make, say, Isaiah Thomas's sexual harassment case, Kobe Bryant's rape trial, Michael Jackson's trial for child molestation, Mike Tyson's conviction for rape, R. Kelly's child pornography trial, O.J. Simpson's murder trial, and so on, the obscuring spectacles—*and the consolidations of whiteness and its social and political privileges*—that they are.[10]

I share Scott's concern. However, like Scott, I am gripped by the conviction that sexualized stereotypes of imagined voodoo must be openly critiqued for the role that they play in the "history of state-sanctioned, population-level manipulation of sex's reproductive and pleasure-producing capacities" for black American subjects.[11] For that matter, one may as well simply say "American subjects" writ large, as these projections arguably warp and deform the sexuality

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[8] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 4.

[9] Ibid., 6. Scott later reiterates this point, writing, "that blackness is rendered by the various cultural, social, and economic processes of white supremacist domination as the exemplar of non normative genders and sexualities." Ibid., 21.

[10] Ibid., 7, emphasis added.

[11] Ibid., 8.

of both their makers and their victims—those who project them, and those onto whom they are projected.

Black American sexuality is indelibly linked to the discourse of Atlantic slavery which identified black subjects with exceptionalist qualities—that is, qualities that inhered naturally, hereditarily within their bodies.[12] It almost goes without saying that the vast majority of the exceptionalist traits assigned to blacks were, in fact, deficiencies, ranging from limited intelligence, inadequate moral and spiritual reasoning, to inclination toward criminality and violence, inability to control libidinal impulses, and outright inability to engage in abstract thinking. In some cases, theologians added to this the absence of a human spirit. In other words, the black man was Shakespeare's Caliban, whose childlike responses to the world lack forethought or the nuance of past experience; whose emotional life is blown to the periphery of extreme rage and sorrow, joy and misery; and whose moral simplicity does not preclude a malicious streak a mile wide.[13] Amidst these deficiencies and excesses, one of the most important was an absence of sexual morality and inhibitions, coupled with an unquenchable sex drive. White slaveholders often raped slaves, both by physical force and through psychological coercion—that is, through the promise of freedom, commitments to not separate family members, belief that sexual/intimate encounters might result in increased leverage, easier work,

[12] This is a dark side of the late Renaissance and Enlightenment, namely that the codification of race and race hierarchy was central to the Humanist project, which in part sought to place human beings within the same zoological scheme as the rest of the animal world. For most early anthropologists, this meant not simply seeing all human beings as the pinnacle of creation, but rather certain humans—principally whites, and even more specifically northern Europeans, Aryans, etc.—as the most developed, with all others ranked below in relative order. At the very bottom of this ranking fell blacks, a hinge between human beings and non-human animals.

[13] Notably, this is not an incidental comparison, given that *The Tempest* (c. 1610) bears at least some evidence of Shakespeare's familiarity with New World slavery and related discourses of racial difference—a theme he had also earlier explored in *Othello* (c. 1603).

material compensation, the emancipation of their children, and numerous other pressures that made the choices of enslaved people to engage in sex with their owners freighted by the master/slave dynamic. Nonetheless, within the logic of such couplings, whites often perceived blacks as the aggressors, with black women seen as voraciously desirous of sexual congress with white men.

Black men were often described as universally prone to engage in acts of sexual predation against white women. White descriptions of black male bodies tended to emphasize the stereotypically male hypertrophy of their bodies, while at the same time purporting them to be possessed of a feminine liquidity and voluptuousness. As Scott insightfully observes, black masculinity was (and arguably is still) seen as

> a self-contradicting and self-reinforcing position at once hypermasculine and feminine, exemplifying an erection/castration paradox. In this black male figure gender appears both in its idealized form (if extremely so) and in gender's undoing. . . [I]n this figure sexuality exists almost purely—but never truly so—as the excess, the feared. . .[14]

Taken altogether, these threads add up to a queered and gender-ambiguous body, even as this same hypersexuality was identified as a source of threat to both white female sanctity and racial purity.

Likewise, black women were often described in ways that suggested their bodies were queered: They were capable of extraordinary acts of "manly" physical strength and endurance, even as their bodies were simultaneously perceived to be uniquely, "naturally" well-suited to the task of mothering—in particular, to the foster mothering of white children. As such, enslaved

[14] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 19. Earlier, Scott also writes, "for black people in general, but black men in particular, the abject is *like* the feminine, or is definitively feminine—that is, to be abject is to be feminized. Again, to represent black male characters being sexually humiliated or violated is arguably effective on a visceral level only because the measure of autonomous or free selfhood is really masculinity, and the Other of the masculine is feminine." Ibid., 18.

women were ironically entrusted with the most important task, namely of raising and enculturating young white children.[15] But it is important to frame this, itself, as a sexualized discourse, since it was specifically the *bodies* of black women that were seen as suiting them to the task—visualized as the stereotypical mammy, voluptuous, big- breasted and hipped, capable of prolonged lactation. It is not simply that such a body was well-suited to mother, but that from such a body would naturally spring a maternal love.[16]

The weight of this discourse has been, and remains, an extraordinary burden for black American subjects, who must find ways of constituting their sexuality against a cultural backdrop that so dramatically and pornographically distorts it. As Scott writes, "Amid such pressures, *for which overdetermination seems too wan a description*, those who are ushered into or assume black social positions continually must enunciate those positions while contending with the articulation of blackness to sexuality—including, understandably, contending with it via denying its significance."[17] This denial has often taken the form of what has been called a

[15] For a feminist perspective on the role of women in enculturating children: Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?", in *Women, Culture, and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-87.

[16] Carol Duncan, "Aunt/y Jemima in Spiritual Baptist Experiences in Toronto: Spiritual Mother or Servile Woman?", *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Cultural Criticism* 9 (2000): 97-122. Amidst this discourse that othered and instrumentalized black sexuality, white sexuality took two principal forms, an unlicensed sexuality of illicit (often coerced) sex with blacks, and a licensed sexuality framed around the defense of white womanhood. Imagined to be constrained, decorous, feminine, proper, and virtuous, this perfected white femininity, however, was defenseless. With their supposed overweening carnality and sexuality, black men posed a constant threat to it. Idealized white heterosexual male sexuality (the "heterosexual" in this case being redundant) expressed its phallic nature as a defensive fist, seeing its most prominent role as guarding white female sexual and moral purity and virtue.

[17] Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 6, emphasis added.

"politics of respectability," which seeks to suppress the erotic and deny its power—at least as a public face presented to outsiders.[18]

Along those lines, the supreme irony of hypersexualizing Haitian Vodou is that, as a religion, it is profoundly invested in sexual propriety. This may surprise readers who are cursorily familiar with the religion. Often, outsiders are familiar with the sexual bombast of Vodou spirits such as the Gede, whose copulatory dances serve as both celebration of life and social commentary. And indeed, in many respects, Vodou can be described as reasonably sex-positive. However, it does espouse that there are appropriate and inappropriate times for sexual behavior. Not only would Vodouisants never have sex during a ceremony, which would be considered sacrilege, but Vodouisants frequently abstain from having sex before and after ceremonies for established intervals—a day at minimum, and forty days or even three months maximum in some cases—in order to protect sexual, spiritual, and moral purity. Moreover, Vodou is not naïve to the function of sex within systems of power and domination, and the hagiographies of many Vodou spirits are full of cautionary stories of sexual relationships gone awry. In spiritual counseling sessions, the spirits sometimes encourage adherents to enjoy having sex more often, but are just as likely to tell people to abstain from sex if it is implicated in patterns of excess, abuse, and debasement. Perhaps more than anything else, Vodou teaches that sex is a *private* matter.

An obvious question, then, is how Vodou, when transformed into imagined voodoo, came to be so strongly associated with excessive sexuality. While there may be no definitive answer, there is certainly an historical arc that can be traced. In fact, one of the earliest written

[18] For more on the "politics of respectability": Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Meta Language of Race," *Signs* 17 (1992): 251-274; Shayne Lee, *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Book, 2010).

descriptions of Haitian Vodou, offered by Moreau de Saint-Méry in 1797, describes the religion as one of ecstatic sexual orgies.[19] A white creole of French descent, Moreau de Saint-Méry published one of the most thorough eighteenth century descriptions of the French colony of St. Domingue during the period prior to the Revolution. He describes Vodou dances as frenzied, convulsive, and at times so impassioned that the dancers would literally be killed. Describing the "dance of the Vaudoux," Moreau de Saint-Méry writes,

> Faintings and raptures take over some of them and a sort of fury some of the others, but for all there is a nervous trembling which they cannot master. They spin around ceaselessly. And there are some in this species of bacchanal who tear their clothing and even bite their flesh. Others who are only deprived of their senses and have fallen in their tracks are taken, even while dancing, into the darkness of a neighboring room, *where a disgusting prostitution exercises a most hideous empire.*
>
> The contagion is so strong that Whites found spying on the mysteries of this sect and touched by one of the cultists discovering them, have sometimes started to dance and have had to go so far as to pay the Vaudoux Queen to put an end to their torment. [. . .]
>
> *In a word, nothing is more dangerous . . . than this cult of Vaudoux. It can be made into a terrible weapon. . .*[20]

These bacchanalian images certainly confirmed for many of his European and American readers that blacks were basically savages given to bestial behavior, in particular to behavior that emulated the berserking of animals in heat. However, what would have struck his contemporaries as perhaps most disturbing about this description is the allegation that *whites* did not have the power to resist its contagious power—a power reminiscent of Reed's psychic

[19] Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Déscription topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1797).

[20] Moreau de Saint-Méry, cited in Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic,'" 326.

disease of Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo*.[21] Moreover, Moreau de Saint-Méry warns that Vodou can be easily weaponized, turned into a liberative black power.

Emulated and outright plagiarized throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to describe supposed voodoo rites in the Caribbean, Africa, and the southern United States (especially Louisiana), Moreau de Saint-Méry's description struck on the perfect combination of religious mania, warning of impending black revenge, and hypersexuality—particularly sexuality turned violent. Ever since, these qualities have been central fixtures in imagined voodoo.[22] Taken to its most extreme, imagined voodoo is seen as a religion that eroticizes murder and cannibalism, particularly the murder of white subjects—and, as black revenge *par excellence*, the murdering of whites takes on an erotic charge.

This discourse, which specifically exoticized and eroticized voodoo, was so easy to create and sustain because there was a rich context for it: as early as 1492, the Caribbean became for Europeans an imagined space of "the savage," already peopled with cannibals—and to which they would soon import more "savages" from Africa. Columbus believed that a number of the Indians of the Caribbean and Latin America practiced cannibalism, a suggestion that was readily embraced by Europeans.[23]

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[21] For a lengthy discussion of Reed's novel, see Chapter Five, "Flipping the Script."

[22] For a discussion of how Moreau de Saint-Méry's description of Vodou/voodoo was plagiarized: Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

[23] In *Le Barbare imaginaire*, Laënnec Hurbon notes that the ascription of the practice of cannibalism has been a fixture of "civilized" beliefs about "barbarians" since at least antiquity. The Romans believed that early Christians practiced cannibalism. However, fears of cannibalism experienced renewed life during the Middle Ages when they were aimed at (among others) Jews, Muslims, heretics, and witches. These fears about the secret practice of cannibalism by Others—and, most alarmingly, by those hiding in one's midst—were embraced by the Inquisition, and carried to the Americas where they were written onto a new landscape of

Although beliefs in cannibalism seem as though they would have no place in contemporary thinking, Hurbon highlights how cannibalism figured prominently in descriptions of Haiti written by early twentieth century Marines, pseudo-historians, and travelers.[24] Taking their cue, it seems, from Spencer St. John, whose *Hayti: or, the Black Republic* (1884) in essence co-identified blackness with sorcery, savagery, and cannibalism, numerous other writers in the coming five decades would do little to distance themselves from this perspective.[25] H. Hesket Prichard's *When Black Rules White: A Journey Across and About Hayti* (1900), John Craige's *Cannibal Cousins* (1934) and *Black Bagdad* (1933), and numerous others all portray Haiti as a country overrun with savages who eat human flesh.[26] Craige suggests that eating Americans was common practice among the *cacos* "rebels" who fought the American Marine occupation.

Regarding the connection between hypersexuality and cannibalism, Hurbon cites the work of an nineteenth century American Jesuit missionary, Joseph W. Williams, who described

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Others, namely, Indians and later enslaved black Africans. In fact, the argument that black Africans engaged in religious cannibalistic practices became rolled up into the argument for why Christianization through enslavement was a necessary, soul-saving step. Laënnec Hurbon, *Le Barbare imaginaire* [*The Imaginary Barbarian*] (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988).

[24] Hurbon, *Le Barbare imaginaire*. For more on the history of cannibalism and colonial fantasy: Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003); Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London: Routledge, 2000); Reay Tannahill, *Flesh and Blood: A History of the Cannibal Complex* (New York: Stein and Day, 1975); Catalin Avramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, trans. Alistair Ian Blyth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[25] Sir Spenser St John, *Hayti: or, the Black Republic* (London: Smith, Elder, 1884). St. John's text was reprinted in 1889. St. John's book was also almost immediately translated into French and published in France. Sir Spenser St John, *Haïti ou la République Noire*, trans. J. West (Paris: Librairie Plon [E. Plong, Nourrit et Co.], 1886).

[26] Hesketh Prichard, *Where Black Rules White: A Journey Across and About Hayti* (Westminster [UK]: Archibald Constable & Co., 1900); John H. Craige, *Cannibal Cousins* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934); John H. Craige, *Black Bagdad* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1933).

voodoo as a "blood cult," and argued that cannibalism is the direct outcome of the "sexual arousal" that is caused by voodoo "orgies."[27] In particular, this orgiastic sexual energy is said to literally provoke a nervous mania that causes a devolution, so that voodooists experience something akin to a genetic change in response to voodoo. The religion actually causes them to digress to lower animal states, and in that lowered condition, they express their sexual arousal in this ultimate act of sexualized violence, cannibalism.[28]

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[27] Hurbon, *Le Barbare imaginaire*, 103.

[28] Often when voodoo cannibalism is eroticized, it is through the use of the trope of body- and identity- theft, which I argue is simply an oblique form of cannibalism. For example, in the film *The Skeleton Key*, discussed at length in Chapter Two, "The Fiction of Black Revenge," the body swapping of Papa Justify and Mama Cecile is accompanied by an erotic charge. Papa Justify uses the young white body of Luke to seduce Caroline. Following Mama Cecile's leap into Caroline's body, there are long shots of her admiring her own new cannibalized body, as well as her husband admiring it. In fact, the idea of crossing racial boundaries—of black bodies hidden inside of white bodies—seems itself to have an erotic charge within the structure of the narrative.

Likewise, in the thriller novel *The Faculty Club* by Danny Tobey (New York: Atria Books, 2010), it is learned in the denouement that the characters are all ensnared in a scheme to steal their bodies using a body-swapping machine powered by voodoo. There is little effort made to disguise the erotics implicit in the desire of the elderly Society's members to garner new, young bodies. In fact, the victim pledges are chosen precisely because of a combination of their attractiveness and ability to be transformed into powerful political and economic actors (other kinds of powers that are routinely eroticized).

Voodooed films and stories have done such an excellent job of painting a picture of the eroticized black cannibal that many people are, in fact, incapable of recognizing a real cannibal when they see one. As Coleman notes in *Horror Noire*, the real-life cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer was not only allowed to hide his practices in large part because of his white male status, but was literally (if unknowingly) abetted by police because of it. In one instance, police actually helped return one of Dahmer's victims to his home because the young black boy, Konerak Sinthasomphone, who was drugged and beaten, was said by Dahmer to be his lover. The boy's neighbors, two black women, insisted that Dahmer was lying, but were dismissed by police because they were deemed "unreliable." Subsequently, "Dahmer killed, dismembered, and partially consumed the boy." Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 192. Coleman then goes on to recount that this was not the only time that Dahmer's white privilege, vis-à-vis the testimony of blacks, allowed his real-life erotic cannibalism to be disguised. Later, the scenario was repeated when a black man, Tracy Edwards, fought off and escaped Dahmer while the killer was trying to handcuff him. Battered and with cuffs dangling from his wrist, Edwards flagged down authorities, leading them back to Dahmer's apartment. Again, Dahmer presented himself respectably and the police prepared to leave, when Edwards pointed out to the officers pictures

Voodoo, meet thy maker: Seabrook's *Magic Island*

W.B. Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929), written during the height of the U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti, is perhaps the single most influential work in the creation of imagined voodoo, and became something of an instant classic.[29] In the next chapter, "The Revenants," I will engage in another lengthy discussion of the text as it relates to the introduction of the zombie to American popular culture. In this section, I wish to look at how Seabrook's hypersexual interpretation of Haitian Vodou served as an important hinge between eighteenth and nineteenth century hypersexual depictions of Vodou, and the hypersexual imagined voodoo that it helped to invent.

Seabrook travelled to Haiti in the early 1920s as a journalist, with the goal of reporting on the Marine Occupation. However, it was Vodou that drew his attention the most, and he appears

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of real, mutilated bodies strewn about Dahmer's apartment as well as the knife with which Dahmer had threatened him. A successful lawsuit against the city by Sinthasomphone's family argued that police had to go to great racist and homophobic lengths to fail to see Dahmer as the monster that he was. As for Dahmer, he explained that he was taking the men, drugging and raping them, before drilling holes into their frontal lobes and pouring in chemicals to create silent, zombie (sex) slaves. From Coleman's description, the real-life impact of these fictions becomes clear. The fantasy of black cannibals and their erotic crimes prevented white first responders from being able to see the reality of the white monster who stood before them. Dahmer's real erotic cannibalism and murders, informed by imagined voodoo beliefs about zombies, had no space within the dominant pop culture epistemology to adhere, making his crimes literally unseeable. Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[29] W.B. Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929). Largely unknown now, Seabrook was a bestselling author in his own life and something of a minor celebrity. A *New York Times* columnist, occult enthusiast, personal friend of Aleister Crowley (himself an infamous Edwardian celebrity), self-confessed cannibal, alcoholic, and drug addict, Seabrook earned the reputation of being a sexual sadist (the purported cause of a failed marriage) and perhaps a Satanist. After his death, Seabrook's ex-wife wrote a highly sensationalize tell-all book about her former husband. Marjorie Muir Worthington, *The Strange World of Willie Seabrook* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966).

to have spent a considerable amount of time traveling around the country meeting Vodouisants and attending ceremonies. In the end, however, it is not Vodou which is presented in Seabrook's book, but rather his own libido, which he projects onto the black bodies of his subjects as though they were a sort of *tabula rasa* onto which could be inscribed his darkest fantasies. These sexual fantasies—which include bestiality, pedophilia, and the eroticization of blood and murder—are played out against a backdrop that perfectly reproduces standard tropes about black bodies: That they are inherently given to excessive pleasure, that they are overly emotional, that they are closer to animals, that they crave sex endlessly, and that black spirituality is in fact just the free-rein of sex.

In one of the most iconic passages from the text, Seabrook describes the climax of an imagined voodoo ceremony, in which "the gods" begin to possess the congregants.

> And now the literary-traditional white stranger who spied from hiding in the forest, had such a one lurked near by, would have seen all the wildest tales of Voodoo fiction justified: in the red light of torches which made the moon turn pale, leaping, screaming, writhing black bodies, blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened, drunken, whirled and danced their dark saturnalia, heads thrown weirdly back as if their necks were broken, white teeth and eyeballs gleaming, while couples seizing one another from time to time fled from the circle, as if pursued by furies, into the forest to share and slake their ecstasy.[30]

Seabrook engages in a kind of narrative schizophrenia, acknowledging the presence of an additional viewer, the "literary-traditional white stranger," whose racial marker and distance from the action—literally hiding in the bushes—offers a voyeuristic gaze that both Seabrook and the reader can identify as their position within the text. It is from this position of voyeur that we are given a description of "writhing black bodies, blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened" dancing in torchlight, a description that closely parallels that of Moreau de Saint-

[30] Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 42.

Méry. These Vodouisants are more animal than human, engaged in a religious rite that is more sex and sexualized violence than anything else. Periodically, they must rush off into the woods to slake their sexual appetites.

But then the perspective shifts, and the other Seabrook, the one with "unspying eyes," speaks to us.

> Thus also my unspying eyes beheld this scene in actuality, but I did not experience the revulsion which literary tradition prescribes. It was savage and abandoned, but it seemed to me magnificent and not devoid of a certain beauty. . . . They were reaching collective ecstasy by paths which were not intrinsically peculiar to their jungle ancestors, but which have been followed by many peoples, some highly civilized, from the earliest ages, and will be followed to the end of time or until we all become mechanical, soulless robots. . . . What, after all, were they doing here in these final scenes, when formal ritual had ended, that was so different from things which occur in our own fashionable and expensive night clubs, except that they were doing it with the sanction of their gods and doing it more successfully? Savage rhythm, alcohol, and sex excitement—yet there was an essential difference, for here was a mysterious something superadded. Lasciviousness became lust, which is a cleaner thing, and neurotic excitement became authentic ecstasy, the "divine frenzy" of the ancients.[31]

"Unspying eyes" is a peculiar double-speak, seeming to mean that he is not a voyeur, but alternately suggesting that Seabrook literally *does not see* what is happening in front of his face. And this seems accurate, for what follows is psychoanalytic projection, in which Seabrook established a dichotomy between voodooists and "civilized person[s]," arguing that civilization has lost touch with some deep libidinal power that voodooists, connected through their rites with their "jungle ancestors," still maintain. Seabrook in essence says that the voodoo ritual is, in a word, rutting, and laments that the spirit of it has been lost in "civilized" mating rituals that take place in white nightclubs. Summing up this sentiment, Seabrook writes, "There is nothing so

[31] Ibid., 42-3.

stupid and pathetic as an orgy that doesn't quite come off."[32] In the end of the passage, it comes back again to the blood: Seabrook believes that the literal imbibing of sacrificial animal blood facilitates a true surrender to carnality, and for this reason, it is in Haiti where "sacrificial blood flows freely" that such a thing is possible—and likewise impossible in the modern West.[33]

In one of the other moments of peak arousal in the text, Seabrook describes a sacrificial ceremony, at the climax of which Seabrook is supposedly initiated into the voodoo cult. In the ceremony, a young girl—perhaps fourteen or fifteen—is ritually substituted for a goat, so that it seems as though the girl will be sacrificed, but at the last moment, the goat is instead.[34] In a key moment, the goat and the girl face each other. She is on her haunches, crouched like a goat. As they face each other, locking eyes, Seabrook writes,

> By shifting slightly I could see the big, wide, pale-blue, staring eyes of the goat, and the big, black, staring eyes of the girl, and I could have almost sworn that the black eyes were gradually, mysteriously, becoming those of a dumb beast, while a human soul was beginning to peer out through the

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[32] Ibid., 43.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Earlier, Seabrook gives indications of inclinations towards bestiality when he writes, "It was simple; yet I find it almost impossible to tell. It was the sound of the terrorized, shrill bleating of the white he-goats, tethered out there in the shadows, as it pierced through yet was always dominated, sometimes drowned, by the symphonic female howling chorus of the women. It caused something that was elemental male in me, something deeper than anything that the word sex usually defines, to shiver in the grip of an answering, icy terror. Nor had this any remote connection with the fact that I, a white man, knelt there among these swaying blacks who would presently become blood-frenzied." Ibid., 37. That the sound of the goats bleating in terror causes Seabrook's arousal seems a kind of bestiality. But there is something especially unwholesome about the fact that it is the animal's *terror* to which he responds. And although he denies it, there seems to be in some way a connection to the fact that Seabrook is imagining the possibility of himself being the victim to these "blood-frenzied" "swaying blacks," a possibility he eroticizes but is unable to acknowledge because even he is made uncomfortable by this expression of his libido. This passage helps illuminate Seabrook's response to the ceremony of the girl and the goat, described in a chapter he calls "Goat-Cry Girl-Cry." Again, the trope of the cry of the goat returns, but in this case, it is transferred onto a young black girl, whom Seabrook is far more comfortable eroticizing.

> blue. . . . For as the priest wove his ceaseless incantations, the girl began a low, piteous bleating in which there was nothing, absolutely nothing, human; the goat was moaning and crying like a human child.[35]

In case the identification between the girl and goat were not already strong enough, only a few lines later, she is described as eating some proffered leaves in the fashion of a "ruminating animal."[36] In this passage, the goat, itself eroticized, becomes also a stand-in for Seabrook, whose sexual response to the bestialized girl must be filtered through several distancing devices in order to be abstracted away from easy identification as both bestiality (because he is aroused by how she is *like* an animal) and pedophilia. Not surprisingly, the climax for Seabrook is when, on the next page, the goat is finally sacrificed and the girl is sprayed with its arterial blood, at which moment she collapses in a way that mimics exhaustion following orgasm.

Lest there was any doubt that Seabrook longs to dwell in this orgiastic space, he declares his support even for voodoo human sacrifice—a religicized thrill-killing.

> Codes of rational ethics and humanly brotherly love are useful, but they do not touch this thing underneath. Let religion have its bloody sacrifices, yes, even human sacrifices, if thus our souls may be kept alive. Better a black *papaloi* [sic] in Haiti with blood-stained hands who believes in his living gods than a frock-coated minister on Fifth Avenue reducing Christ to a solar myth and rationalizing the Immaculate Conception.[37]

In the end, it could not be clearer: the necessity for voodoo has nothing to do with what it does for those who practice the religion. Rather, its necessity is in what it does for *Seabrook*, for whom it touches "this thing underneath"—a rather thin euphemism for his genitals. As the agent of this thrilling and sexualized violence, the "black *papaloi*" serves as an Africanist proxy (to use

[35] Ibid., 65.

[36] Ibid., 63.

[37] Ibid., 61-2.

Morrison's term) who is left to conduct the sexual violence that Seabrook craves but is too "civilized" to do himself.[38]

One of the greatest ironies of Seabrook's text is that it is peppered with occasional acknowledgements that it is more Seabrook's libidinal projection than *reportage*. In one of the wisest moments, Seabrook visits with a supposed "Voodoo hermit-saint," an old man whom Seabrook has heard is one of the greatest living authorities on voodoo. Portraying this as a moment of reverse discrimination, Seabrook writes that he felt mocked when the "little man with a wizened face . . . sneered at my sincerity and said, 'There is no such thing as Voodoo; it is a silly lie invented by you whites to injure us."[39] Of course, the sage is right: Seabrook's voodoo is a lie. The moment passes without any deeper reflection because Seabrook's text, like any libidinous projection, is incapable of standing up to self-scrutiny.

The closest Seabrook ever comes to acknowledging this is when he writes, after describing another "sex-maddened" and blood-soaked ceremony, "But I forget that I am writing the description of a Voodoo ceremonial in the Haitian mountains, and that excursions among the terrors aroused by elemental nightmares of my own soul are an unwarranted interruption."[40] The self-awareness of this realization is consistent with the schizophrenic splitting of voyeur and participant that we saw earlier. This is no great surprise, though, because if Seabrook were

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[38] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

[39] Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 27. Murphy, "Black religion and 'black magic,'" 332: "We know, and Seabrook knows, that the sage is right. The purposes behind the 'black magic' images of voodoo are racially motivated and serve social and psychological functions among the whites that create and support them." I agree with Murphy, except in that I don't agree with him that Seabrook necessarily "knew" this.

[40] Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 37.

capable of accepting the voodooed aspect of his own personality—the source of these lurid fantasies—he would not need to project them onto black subjects in the first place.

While *The Magic Island* is typically analyzed as the work of Seabrook alone, it is worthwhile to examine how the text is in dialogue with Alexander King's racist illustrations. King (1899-1965) was as complicated a personality as Seabrook. King's illustrations for *The Magic Island* were done relatively early in his career, which would later blossom as art editor for *Vanity Fair* and *Life* magazines. Clearly influenced by the primitivist styles of illustration popularized by the both the Modernists and the Harlem Renaissance, and with a distinctly Modernist eye for line and angle, King's drawings are technically highly accomplished. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 show the drawings that correspond to the two key episodes that I have described in *The Magic Island*. What is most striking is the juxtaposition between the highly sexualized torsos of the figures—they could be said to be transformed into contorted, writhing sex organs, with accentuated breasts and musculature—while their heads and faces and nearly those of donkeys, with grotesquely exaggerated features, sloped foreheads, fur-like hair, and dim-witted expressions. If Seabrook's text could be said to contain any ambiguity about his view of the subjects he portrays, King's drawings surely clarify that they are little more than bestial foils, screens upon which can be projected perverted, voodooed white sexual desire.



Figure 3.1: Illustration by Alexander King from Seabrook's *The Magic Island*



Figure 3.2: Illustration by Alexander King from Seabrook's *The Magic Island*

Hypersexual imagined voodoo in popular literature and film

Having outlined the theoretical and historical connections between imagined voodoo and hypersexuality—and having seen that play out in Seabrook's text—I now wish to show how these tropes played out in the broader field of early twentieth century American popular film and literature. As a genre, the motion picture first took shape through experimentations with racist depictions. Produced by Thomas Edison's company, one of the first motion pictures, *Ten Pickaninnies* (1894), showed racist depictions of black's dancing.[41] The first feature-length film and the first blockbuster film, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), is a romanticized recounting of the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, set in the American South against the backdrop of the Civil War. In the film, the KKK begins with the need of white husbands, fathers, and brothers to defend their white female relatives and female children from being raped and thrill-killed by newly-freed, sexually voracious black men. In one of the film's crucial scenes, the "renegade Negro" Gus chases the youngest Cameron daughter, Flora or "Little Sister," through the woods, intent on raping her. Eventually, Flora leaps to her death from a cliff rather than be violated—a death that is later avenged when the KKK kills Gus. As the first feature-length film, *The Birth of a Nation* is also arguably the first feature-length horror film, in which the "monsters" are blacks.[42]

[41] Likewise, the first feature-length film with sound (colloquially referred to at the time as "talkies") was the film *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson as a white blackface minstrel performer. *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Alan Crossland (1927; Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

[42] This discussion of *The Birth of a Nation*, and the following discussion of *Hoodoo Ann*, are both heavily indebted to Coleman's discussions of these films in her excellent book *Horror Noire*. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; Kino Internation, 2011), DVD;

In what is likely the first voodoo-themed film, *Hoodoo Ann* (1916), one can already see a subtle version of this at play. The short silent film tells the story of Ann, a young girl who is led to believe by a black fortune teller (played by Madame Sul-Te-Wan, who would go on to play many similar roles) that she is cursed and will remain so until she is able to marry. I see this as a subtle declaration that there is a sexual danger, coded as black, represented by an unmarried girl, upon which hoodoo—also coded as black by the presence of the black fortune teller—is able to capitalize. The power of hoodoo can only be broken when Ann becomes integrated into the stabilizing (white-coded) institution of heterosexual marriage—in other words, when she is made sexually normative.

One of the most frank early filmic representations of hypersexual voodoo can be found in *Blonde Venus* (1932), a pre-code film that portrays both extramarital sexual desire and marital infidelity.[43] Marlene Dietrich stars as Helen, an innocent young mother who begins performing in nightclubs to pay for her husband's lifesaving medical treatments, only to be seduced by a wealthy bachelor (one of Cary Grant's earliest film roles). The first musical number that Helen performs publicly is called "Hot Voodoo."[44] The subject matter is appropriate, given that the

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Hoodoo Ann, directed by Lloyd Ingraham (1916; Imagine Entertainment, 2007), DVD [bundled with *True Heart Susie*].

[43] Directed by Joseph von Sternberg, who had introduced Dietrich to a global audience in his film *The Blue Angel* [(1930; Kino Video, 2001), DVD]. By "pre-code," I mean that the film was made prior to the enforcement of the Hays Code, also known as the Motion Picture Production Code. This document, created in the early 1930s by the major Hollywood film studies, was a form of self-censorship in which the studios agree to not portray "objectionable" themes in their films. These included not showing sexual acts, marital infidelity, miscegenation, homosexuality, violent acts, people successfully getting away with crimes, and anti-American politics.

[44] Music and lyrics by Leo Robin and Richard A. Whiting, to my knowledge the only voodoo-themed song that either ever wrote.

narrative moment represents a moral hinge for Helen, a transformation from devoted wife to cuckolding siren.

The musical number begins with the sound of kettle drums played like tom-toms, as Hottentot chorus girls take to the stage in feathered tutus and black sequin corsets, carrying mock shields bearing grotesque tiki faces. Some are black women, while others are white women in blackface, but all wear stripes of war paint on their cheeks and are topped with large Afro wigs. Amidst them, a person in a gorilla suit ascends the stage. As the chorus girls encircle the gorilla, rocking back and forth, the person in the suit removes first one glove, revealing a delicate white feminine hand, the wrist adorned with a diamond bangle that flashes white. Another glove is removed and we see its companion, encircled with a matching bracelet. Catching the light, the hands rise to remove the head, revealing that the gorilla is none other than Marlene Dietrich, the Blonde Venus of the film's name. Shucking the gorilla costume completely, Dietrich—her own hair already bleached white-blonde for the film—dons a blonde Afro that is pierced through with arrows, as though she has just been fleeing from restless natives.

In Dietrich's signature contralto, Helen sings about how voodoo—in particular, the drums and dances of voodoo—cause her to embrace a kind of moral blackface. Coded specifically as an African and black ("black as mud") power, Helen likens herself to a slave who cannot refuse the illicit sexual behaviors that she feels compelled to perform. She sings of wanting to dance nude and have sex with anyone, even a caveman. The experience of hearing/feeling the drums is said to "bring up the heaven inside [her]," an apparent reference to sexual ecstasy. Although she begs to be saved, her actions speak differently: she honestly doesn't seem to mind. Near the end of the song, this state of moral laxness and surrender to libido is characterized as being "like an African queen." In other words, Helen/Dietrich is

blackened by her sexual surrender, and it is voodoo that specifically is named as having the hypnotic power to compel a chaste white woman to behave as though she were "black as mud."

Blonde Venus is one of the earliest film examples of a white character "getting voodooed"—that is, having negative qualities about their character communicated through a connection with voodoo. It is also one of the very early examples of on-screen voodoo being connected explicitly with a discourse of hypersexuality. In fact, in many early film portrayals, voodoo is often entirely conflated with sexual license. In the 1938 cartoon *Voodoo in Harlem*, for example, racist depictions of stereotypical black cannibals—looking more like apes than humans—sing,

> Voodoo in Harlem, nothing's taboo,
> Here on Lenox Avenue,
> who gets who's confusing who
> with our black rendezvous.
> There's a sayin' goin' 'round
> That a new religion's found.
> That's voodoo!
> Boys and gals down Haiti way
> throw away their clothes and say,
> "That's voodoo!"[45]

Less sensational, but no less disturbing, is the film *The Emperor Jones* (1933), in which Jones's death at the hands of "voodoo natives" is eroticized.[46] The film, based on Eugene O'Neill's play of the same title, follows the meteoric fall, rise, and fall again of Brutus Jones (Paul Robeson), an African American jailed for accidentally murdering a man during a bar fight. Jones is able to escape and ends up shipwrecked on an unnamed Caribbean island that is a thinly

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[45] *Voodoo in Harlem*, created by Walter Lantz (Universal, 1938), accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/sammondn/clips/harlem-voodoo-sm.mp4/view; Henry T. Sampson, *That's Enough, Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900-1960* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1998), 216.

[46] *The Emperor Jones*, directed by Dudley Murphy (1933; Image Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

disguised Haiti, one colored by O'Neill's own incredulity at the idea of a sovereign nation of self-governing blacks. As he portrays it, such a place inevitably governs itself through caprice, violence, superstition, and general idiocy. When Jones washes up on the beach, he is quickly made sovereign ruler of the island nation, gradually rising to the status of self-appointed Emperor, bolstered by duping the "natives" into believing that he is virtually invincible, only able to be killed by a silver bullet. Soon enough, though, Jones's rule crumbles, owing to his own corruption and malice, and he flees into the jungle, accompanied by the steadily crescendoing sound of voodoo drums. Literally haunted by ghosts from his past, Jones's sanity dwindles, a devolution that is concretized through the visual trope of having him begin his journey dressed in his imperial finest and gradually engage in a striptease, at last leaving him in only a pair of tight flesh-toned briefs. This slow striptease eroticizes Robeson's powerful physique, moving him closer and closer toward total undress. At the final moment when, in a striptease, there would be nowhere to go except sex, Jones is murdered by the angry natives, whose voodoo powers we learn have been drawing him inexorably towards this place on the beach, and the moment of his death. Jones is shot through the heart with a silver bullet, a very literal and intimate form of penetration that serves as an erotic substitute for sexual consummation.

In the related arena of early twentieth century popular literature, H.P. Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulhu" (written 1926, published 1928) is one of the earliest clear examples of pop culture fiction that draws the explicit connection between voodoo and violent hypersexuality.[47]

[47] It is worth noting that Lovecraft (1890-1937) fills his fiction with racist depictions of foreigners and racial minorities. The scion of a blue-blooded family from Providence, Rhode Island, Lovecraft's family experienced financial ruin in Lovecraft's childhood. A sickly person throughout his life, he appears to have suffered from an acute anxiety disorder which, following a stint in New York City, crystalized into extreme xenophobia. While living in New York,

Lovecraft's stories are full of villains who are racially Other—and as with Seabrook, frequently bestialized—and white male hero-protagonists who are scions of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Arabs figure prominently as religious devotees of the forces of supernatural, and notably *alien*, evil that permeate Lovecraft's fictional universe, as do "Negroes." In the "Call of Cthulhu," Lovecraft particularly singles out Cape Verdeans as devotees of voodoo—a novel choice but understandable, given that Lovecraft would have been familiar with the large Cape Verdean community of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, who worked in the whaling industry (as well as cranberry bogs). These communities were no doubt the inspiration for the sinister, "nautical-looking negro" who appears to cause the death of the narrator's uncle.

"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.[48] It is the second part that is of interest to us, and 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

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Lovecraft wrote in a letter to his friend and fellow writer Clark Ashton Smith, "The idea that black magic exists in secret today, or that hellish antique rites still exist in obscurity, is one that I have used and shall use again. When you see my new tale 'The Horror at Red Hook', you will see what use I make of the idea in connexion with the gangs of young loafers & herds of evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere in New York." [H. P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* vol. 2, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1968), 27; quoted in Peter Cannon, "Introduction," in H.P. Lovecraft, *More Annotated Lovecraft*, annotations by S.T. Joshi (New York: Dell Publishing, 2009), 5.] Reflecting on her husband's extreme xenophobia, Lovecraft's wife Sonia Greene would in hindsight write, "Whenever we found ourselves in the racially mixed crowds which characterize New York, Howard would become livid with rage. He seemed almost to lose his mind." [Lin Carter, *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 45.]

[48] 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.

> 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.[49]

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."[50] This is how their rite is described:

> Void of clothing, this hybrid spawn were braying, bellowing and writhing about a monstrous ringshaped 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.[51]

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, and well suited for the

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[49] H.P. Lovecraft, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (London: Gollancz, 2008), 208.

[50] Ibid., 213.

[51] Ibid., 212.

inferior. It is left to the reader or viewer to deduce on his or her own who these inferior people are.

Of most interest to us here is that Lovecraft draws an explicit connection between voodoo, violence, and base sexuality. Channeling Moreau de Saint-Méry, 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.

All of the examples I have discussed so far are from the first half of the twentieth century. What is shocking, however, is how stable these stereotypes are throughout the century, easily found unchanging and undiluted in examples from more recent decades. I would like to conclude this section with a discussion of two recent popular culture products—Alan Parker's film *Angel Heart* (1987) and the television show *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013-14)—in which many of these same tropes figure prominently despite intervening decades of dramatic social change.[52]

In *Angel Heart*, Mickey Rourke plays Harry Angel, a low-rent private detective hired by a wealthy client, Louis Cyphre (played by Robert De Niro), to track down the missing wartime musician Johnny Favorite, who is said to have skipped out on a contract.[53] Angel's investigation

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[52] *Angel Heart*, directed by Alan Parker (1987; Lions Gate, 2004), DVD; *American Horror Story*, Season 3 (*American Horror Story: Coven*), created by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy (FX, 2013-14), television series.

[53] While many of the examples of hypersexualized and voodooed black bodies that will follow are drawn from horror films, it is worth observing that the vast majority of horror films, even hypersexual ones, are notable for their lack of black characters. In her insightful feminist text

takes him from New York City to New Orleans, in search of a psychic (Charlotte Rampling) who may have helped Johnny Favorite 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. Upon slitting the throat of the bird, Proudfoot pours the blood over herself whilst grinding in the dirt, simulating copulation and orgasm—a tip of the hat to both the violence of voodoo sexuality, as well as its purported inclination to bestiality (per Seabrook, for example).

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 the film's most erotic scene, Angel and Proudfoot have frighteningly violent sex—at some point it clearly becomes rape. It seems that he is murdering her, as her blood is everywhere. Later, she is found savagely killed in Angel's bed, shot with his gun through her "snatch." The police regard her death without remorse: her marginal position as a voodoo priestess seems to not only forgive the sexualized violence performed on her, but suggests she was complicit in her own murder. This is worsened by the startling revelation that Proudfoot is, unbeknownst to her, Angel's/Favorite's daughter,

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Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing, Isabel Cristina Pinedo devotes one chapter to trying to understand why this is, and explicates the role that black characters play in the genre of horror. Drawing on Judith Halberstram's work on monsters, Pinedo notes, "Race is a structuring absence in the milieu of the contemporary horror film where monsters, victims, and heroes are predominantly white, a racially unmarked category. Halberstram suggests that the horror film avoids racially marking characters because in contemporary American culture race is already monstrified or 'gothicized,' by which she means 'transformed into a figure of almost universal loathing who haunts the community and represents its worst fears.'" Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 111; Judith Halberstrom, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 4, 18.

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.

It is eventually revealed that the protagonist Harry Angel is, in fact, the missing war-time crooner Johnny Favorite. As we learn, Favorite was both an affiliate of voodoo and of Satanism—relying on the supposed connection between voodoo and Satanism, as implied by Lovecraft and numerous others. The audience learns that, in order to escape a pact he has made giving his soul to the Devil in exchange for fame and occult power, Favorite engaged in a cannibalistic ceremony in which he ate the heart of the real Harry Angel, a cadet returned from the war, thereby gaining his identity.

The cannibalistic ceremony itself is "blackened" when it is revealed that the black musician and voodooist Toots Sweet assisted Favorite in the murder. In addition, it is subtly eroticized. First of all, we witness Favorite-Angel's broken recollections of the event: the image of a white sheet, spread out but in disarray, suggesting the image of a post-coital bed. The fact that the sheet is covered in blood seems intentionally to resonate with the other post-sex bed that we see, that of Angel and Proudfoot, also covered in blood because she has been murdered in the midst of the act. Moreover, in recalling what he knows of the ceremony, the character of Ethan Krusemark simply says that Favorite was able to lure Angel back to a hotel room where he murdered him, but does not say how. This insinuates homosexual undertones, offering the possibility that Favorite seduced Angel into going with him with the promise of sex. And in fact, the eating of Angel's heart by Favorite makes the most narrative and symbolic sense if interpreted as an overly literal euphemism for gay sex. Finally, I propose that magical body and/or identity swapping should be interpreted as a sexual act in itself, in which the voluptuous

loss of self that accompanies orgasm is extended indefinitely, so that the "thief" experiences the permanent orgasmic oblivion of no longer being him- or herself. As in the moment of climax, when memory becomes confused or jumbled as though blasted with radiation, Favorite can no longer remember his former life, and he has permanently merged with his partner. He has literally become Angel.

In an even more recent example, the television show *American Horror Story: Coven* reproduces a number of these same stereotypes.[54] The leader of the voodoo cult, Marie Laveau, has a lover, Bastian, who is a black man with the head of a bull. Not only does this reinforce stereotypes of black men as bestial, but it also relies on the trope that female voodoo practitioners are sexually perverse and voracious. In fact, the female voodooists can't seem to keep their hands off of this bull-headed lover. When Bastian tries to raid the house of the witches, the only black witch, Queenie—a human voodoo doll—begs him to have sex with her on first sight. It is unclear if he complies, but when Queenie is later found mortally injured by what appear to be quite intimate wounds, we are led to believe that they did in fact have sex. Later, when Queenie has left the witch coven to join Marie Laveau's voodooists, the young witches stumble upon her murdering a homeless man. She explains that he had raped several young girls and—in crypto-sexual revenge—Queenie rips out his living heart. A special effects shot offers a view from inside of the man's chest, as Queenie's fist enters in a gesture that replicates sexual penetration. She then explains that this violent sexualized murder is necessitated by Marie's voodoo magic, explaining that she needs a "dark heart"—leaving it unclear whether she is speaking of the man's race, his morality, or both.

[54] The show has already been discussed at length in Chapters One and Two, to which I will refer the reader for an introduction to the show and its themes.

Part II:
Voodoo's gendered stereotypes

In his classic study of representations of black characters in American films, Donald Bogle created a classificatory scheme, which he argues can be used to categorize nearly all black characters.[55] The principal "types" or stereotypical roles that he proposes are the tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the buck.[56] Discussed to some degree already, it can be noted that many these "types" figure prominently in fictional representations of imagined voodoo. However, I have found that there are several voodoo types that are more prevalent—and yield more through analysis—than any of the others. In this section, I will discuss four of these types. The reader will note that not all of them are necessarily drawn precisely from Bogle's classificatory system. The first that I will discuss is *the pimp*, which one could argue is a sub-type of the buck. The second is *the femme fatale*, which is similar to what Lisa Anderson identifies as the trope of "the whore."[57] The third is *the tragic mulatto*, which is often mixed or

[55] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th Edition (New York: Continuum, 2001 [1973]).

[56] *The tom* is a black male character who sacrifices himself in the service of whites. *The coon* is a buffoon who entertains whites through his "cooning." *The tragic mulatto* is a light-skinned black woman who is forever trapped between the racial worlds and longs for the love of a white man. *The mammy* is a corpulent black woman who is often sassy and funny, and whose role in life is to care for whites, particularly white children. *The buck* is a dangerous and sexually licentious black man who longs to sexually violate white women.

[57] Lisa M. Anderson, "The Myth of the Whore," *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 85-118.

fused with the femme fatale. The last—which in fact is a white character—is *the imperiled white woman*, whom white men must defend from the sexual and magical aggressions of blacks.

Voodoo pimps

One of the most recurrent archetypes in relation to imagined voodoo is that of the pimp.[58] Many voodooed pimps draw at least some of their iconography from the image of the Haitian Vodou *lwa* (spirits) Bawon and Gede. Masters of death, the dead, and cemeteries, the Bawon and Gede dress in the iconic style of undertakers, wearing fine black suits and top hats, often over bright purple shirts, smoking cigars or cigarettes, and carrying a striped cane that, when the

[58] It is so ubiquitous that it is spoofed by Darius James in his "self-help" piece "The Blackman's Guide to Seducing White Women with the Amazing Power of Voodoo, by Doctor Snakeskin," included in the "Pimp" chapter of his *That's Blaxploitation!: Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude (Rated X by an All-Whyte Jury)* [New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995]. The book is an idiosyncratic, often hilarious, and highly personal exploration of the impact that watching blaxploitation films as a young person had on the development of his personality and libido. "The Blackman's Guide to Seducing White Women with . . . Voodoo" is printed running down the side left and right columns of the "Pimp" chapter, accompanied by a flipbook cartoon of a pimped-out black monster (vampire? zombie?) ripping the head off of a white mustachioed man using his enormous prehensile penis. The advice piece begins with Doctor Snakeskin (seemingly James throwing his voice) reporting how, in high school, he, "like [his] polyester party-pals, . . . wanted to be a pimp" (99). He then goes on to narrate how, in college, he was able to get "the whyte pussy" (or "white ass," as he permits with a nod to sexual diversity)—and you can too. How? By using the power of "Voodoo—the true religion of the Amerikkan Blackman!" (105). At first, Snakeskin's voodoo pimping appears colored by revolutionary aspirations. He writes how, as a young person, "I envisioned a bloodless coup. I was going to hypnotize the pale-haired daughters of the oppressor with the rhetoric of third-world liberation SLA General Field Marshal Cinque style, turn 'em out with some acid dipped on the tip of my black nigger dick, and then instruct my cadre of politically correct hoze to fuck the white man to death in the name of oppressed peoples everywhere" (103). Ultimately, though, voodoo pimping as outlined is principally about pursuit of the pleasure principle using a touch of ritual—what amounts to New Age visualization and positive thinking—but mostly requires mastering the intricacies of women's menstrual cycles and the application (as cologne) of liberal amounts of fresh ball sweat, said to be an irresistible aphrodisiac. In the end, he suggests, "In the unlikely event my prescription fails you, walk the streets with your cock out. I guarantee—women will *stare*. And you'll get offers. Maybe only from scabby-legged bag women who neglected to take their Lithium. But, hey, *it's not called a 'magic wand' for nothing*" (111).

Gede dance their hip-grinding *banda*, is transformed into a symbolic erection with which they prod and jab any women they can get their hands on. Popularized by descriptions in mid-twentieth century books like Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen,* but described and even photographed in much earlier texts such as Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, the Gede's unique mixture of the macabre, childlike naïveté, and out-of-control sexuality was easily repackaged in popular culture as an emblematic black Gothic Other.[59] Combining both unveneered sex and death, the two things that mainstream American culture most fears and most hedges about with euphemism, the Bawon and Gede often appear as signposts pointing towards the presumed strangeness of Vodou as a whole.

One of the most iconic voodoo pimps is the character of Baron Samedi from the 1974 blaxploitation film *Sugar Hill*.[60] 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 white leader. Devastated, Sugar seeks the assistance of her family's resident voodoo priestess, Mama Maitresse. Sugar and Mama Maitresse make way to a swamp, complete with alligators, where they summon the assistance of the voodoo god Baron Samedi.[61] Baron Samedi is a rather sleazy, tattered character, dusted with graveyard dirt. But he is also a pimp extraordinaire, clad in a splendid black suit and a top hat that has seen better days, smoking a cigar, and carrying a pimp cane topped with a metal head of what seems to be his own likeness. In addition, he is

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[59] Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953); Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1938).

[60] *Sugar Hill* is also discussed at length in Chapter Two, "The Fiction of Black Revenge." *Sugar Hill*, directed by Paul Maslansky (1974; Blaxploitation Film, n.d.), DVD.

[61] The character of Baron Samedi is played in the film by the larger-than-life (6'4") African American actor, Don Pedro Colley. In addition to "larger than life," I would add "improbably named," as Don Pedro (or *Dan Petwo* in Haitian Kreyòl) is the name of one of the most important Petwo spirits.

accompanied by a cadre of zombie hoes, the semi-dead Brides of Baron Samedi. He agrees to help Sugar if she will afterwards become one of his hoes/brides.

The pimpifying of Baron Samedi has a number of effects. It is clear that it is attempting to embed a Vodou archetype within a supposed African American paradigm, configuring the god of death as a pimp because the genre acknowledges few other options for how black masculinity can be expressed. That the price of his assistance is to have Sugar as a willing sexual slave not only suggests a lack of imagination on the god's part, but also contracts the range of his supernatural agency—suggesting that, for all his power, Baron Samedi is rather shallow, with little else on his mind than what white producers might imagine the average black man is generally thinking about. On top of that, the fact that he is, in the end, happy to take an anonymous white bimbo in Sugar's place indicates a brutal race economy: even a generic white woman is to be preferred over Sugar. Moreover, his willingness to make a white woman into his "hoe" evokes racist fears of the sexual voraciousness of blacks vis-à-vis white women, i.e. he is only too happy to violate a white (and unwilling) woman.

A number of other voodoo films have taken at least some inspiration from the pimp-*Bawon* figure found in *Sugar Hill*. The fairly recent film *Bones* (2001) signifies on the blaxploitation genre, even co-starring Pam Grier, the unchallenged queen of blaxploitation films, as Bones's girlfriend.[62] In *Bones*, the rapper Snoop Dogg plays Jimmy Bones, a circa-1970 illegal gambling kingpin who is decked out in astonishing pimp style—immaculate pinstriped suit, black leather duster, wide-brimmed hat, smoked glasses, and exquisitely relaxed hair. A respected member of his community, Bones runs afoul of a group of drug dealers when he seeks to block them from bringing drugs into his neighborhood. Bones is murdered by them—stabbed

[62] *Bones*, directed by Ernest Dickerson (2001; New Line Home Video, 2004), DVD.

to death in a basement—but is resurrected decades later as a vengeful ghost, seeking revenge on those who betrayed him and destroyed his community. He is fought by Pearl (Grier), who has become a voodoo-styled psychic who uses her occult powers to try to break his reign of terror. In the film, there is a weird (and, I suspect, intentional) slippage between the character of Bones and the "real" (though perhaps no less fictional) persona of Snoop Dogg himself. While Bones is styled as a pimp, he is not a literal one—although Pearl/Grier is certainly styled in their scenes together as a pimp's favorite hoe. That said, the casting of Snoop Dogg has the effect of making Bones seem especially pimp-like. Snoop, who does little to alter his performance from his normal stage persona, became famous in the early nineties with his misogynist, violent rap lyrics on albums like *Doggystyle* (1993) and *The Doggfather* (1996).[63] Many of his songs celebrated the pimp and gangster lifestyle. Indeed, Snoop routinely appears in public wearing pimp outfits so exacting and detailed that his appearance must be interpreted as performance art. On the surface, Snoop's performance of the pimp archetype is hypermasculine—bragging about his inexhaustible virility, sexual skills, ability to get any woman he wants, hair-trigger temper, and the sadistic glee with which he will put down anyone who crosses him. At the same time, the hypermasculinity ironically comes out the other side, into a stereotypical femininity. Snoop's fussiness over his appearance, radiantly buffed long nails, and flowing curled hair all are more characteristic of women. Likewise, his signature pimp whisper-lisp, meant to communicate a sensual relaxed confidence in his control of both capital and women, would read feminine in virtually any other context. This uncanny felinity, when overlaid onto the supernatural pimp

[63] Snoop Dogg, *Doggystyle* (Death Row Koch, 2001 [originally released 1993]), CD; *The Doggfather* (Interscope Records, 1996), CD.

figure of Bones/Bawon, has the net effect of supporting stereotypes about the queerness and sexual deviancy of voodooed black men.[64]

In Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), Dennis Alan (a fictionalized version of Wade Davis) goes to Haiti to discover the secret of how zombies are made, convinced that voodoo secret societies know of a poison that can simulate death.[65] The villain Dargent Peytraud (Zakes Mokae), an evil sorcerer and chief of a secret police called the Tonton Makout, only really makes sense as a character when interpreted through the lens of the pimp stereotype. With a gold tooth and soft-spoken delivery, Peytraud is the master of the criminal and quasi-legal underworld. His first name literally means "money" in French (as in "*beaucoup d'argent*," a lot of money). His last name, on the other hand, is derived from the name *Petwo*, the "hotter" rite of Vodou that is often (if wrongly) associated with a kind of commercialization of spiritual power and spirits that can be bought and sold to acquire mystical power. And sure enough, Peytraud does live up to his name, exerting pimp-like mastery over a commercialized economy of both spiritual and police-state power. Likewise, we learn in the end that Peytraud is pimping souls, buying and stealing them and alienating their power, using it for his own gains. At the surface level of the plot, Peytraud's choice to see Alan, the white protagonist, as an enemy makes little sense, as it is unclear precisely what threat he poses to his regime. Within the context of Peytraud-as-pimp, however, their antagonism makes a great deal of sense: the pimp Peytraud is a businessman who controls a number of erotic commodities, one of which is certainly the body of

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[64] This reinforces Scott's point, cited earlier, that "black masculinity" (in scare quotes) is often "a self-contradicting and self-reinforcing position at once hypermasculine and feminine" (Scott, 19).

[65] *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, directed by Wes Craven (1988; Universal Studios, 2003), DVD. For a lengthier discussion of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and its author, Wade Davis, see Part II of Chapter Four, "The Revenants: On the meanings of zombies."

Marielle Duchamp, the female lead. But the zombie poison itself functions as a kind of eroticized capital, the apotheosis of everything exotic about Haiti. To lose control of the zombie powder, then, is to allow an exotic form of capital to be taken out of the country and made mundane, parsed by science into something comparatively banal. Therefore, it is in Peytraud's best interest to make sure to maintain Haiti's exotic/erotic appeal, which means using eroticized violence—the specialized punishment of the enraged pimp—to prevent Alan from succeeding. He first attempts to do so by abducting Alan and applying sadistic punishments to his nude body—including electroshock and a nail through his scrotum—to get Alan, cast here as an unruly hoe, to fall back into line. When this fails to work, Peytraud resorts to putting a dead and mutilated woman in Alan's bed, another eroticized crime that is aimed at forcing him to leave the country or face prosecution as a sadistic murderer. When all else fails, Peytraud threatens to harm Duchamp, cast as another of his "hoes," if Alan doesn't leave well enough alone. Notably, Peytraud says that he will not harm Duchamp if Alan steps off—and I'm inclined to take him at his word. A ho, after all, is a pimp's merchandise, and a dead ho can't work. A capitalist to the end, Peytraud wants to protect his business investments, not damage them.

In the 2009 Disney film, *The Princess and the Frog*, the villainous Dr. Facilier is patterned after the type of the voodoo pimp—although the sexual aspects are obviously toned down for the sake of acceptability in a children's film.[66] Nonetheless, Dr. Facilier dresses in the characteristic costume of the fused Baron-pimp, decked out in a ratty black and purple tuxedo, top hat, and cane. Speaking in a velvety and mellifluous baritone, Facilier is a "doctor" only in the sense that he is a self-styled hoodoo man, who divines with cards and trades in petty charms. However, Facilier is also part of a supernatural crime syndicate, controlled by the spirits of

[66] *The Princess and the Frog*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (2009; Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

voodoo, who manifest as sinister, animated Africanesque/tikiesque tribal masks. Facilier is a mid-level pimp, who steals the life-force of his victims in order to enrich himself, but he must pass some of the earnings on to the voodoo spirits, who are skimming their own portion. In the end, when he is unable to pay up, they take his own life as their payment.[67]

The voodoo femme fatale and the tragic mulatto

The female equivalent of the voodoo pimp would be the voodoo femme fatale. In imagined voodoo, female voodoo practitioners are willing and decadent lovers because their

[67] In the film *Angel Heart*, already discussed at length, the character of Louis Cypher (Robert De Niro, reportedly impersonating Martin Scorsese) turns out, naturally, to be the devil himself. Although white, Cypher's style and mannerisms fit the stereotype of the pimp perfectly. Immaculately coifed and permed, with long buffed nails, cane, and a slight lisp, Cypher reads "pimp" instantly. This is heightened by the liquidity and speed with which we later see him spring into violence. And like Dargent Peytraud, Cypher is a literal, if spiritual, pimp, buying and selling souls.

In contrast to the agentive sexuality of the pimp, black women in voodoo films are often portrayed as highly passive figures who exist principally to provide erotic entertainment, largely to men. In *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Dennis Alan (a fictionalized version of Wade Davis) 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. 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. Interestingly, Duchamp is contrasted by the presence of another femme fatale, if one will accept a bit of punning, given that she is not a deadly woman, but merely a *dead* woman. I am speaking of the dead bride, of whom Alan dreams twice. In both cases, she comes to him with her skeletal, rotted body dressed in the erotically charged garb of a bride. As it turns out, this is because she is a dead woman who has been buried in her wedding dress. In many respects, however, this dead femme fatale is ultimately of more interest to Alan than the living Duchamp, as the heart of discovering the secret of the zombie powder lies with the dead bride (the ingredients are left to putrefy in her grave).

religion and their blackness predispose 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. At the same time, they are often very dangerous, using lust to lure men to their doom, and using their voodoo powers to dispatch with competition or would-be lovers who scorn their advances.

The character of Sugar from the film *Sugar Hill* is a sort of femme fatale, which is a bit unusual because she is also the star of the film. Femme fatales tend to be relegated to secondary love interests or even villains. Nonetheless, Sugar uses her erotic power to get results: the assistance of Baron Samedi is secured by the promise that she'll have sex with him, and her murderous rampage is an erotic revenge for the murder of her lover.[68]

[68] A very recent, and very strange, instance of a voodoo femme fatale is found in a fake television commercial for the fake product Voodoo Mama Hot Sauce. There are, in fact, two dozen or more common brands of hot sauce that are either named voodoo-something-or-other, or else have marketing that references voodoo in one way or another. The short film was directed by Mallorcan filmmaker Marcus Kühne and stars two big stars: the British actor Rhys Ifans, and Bilonda Mfunyi, a Spanish pop star. Filmed in Mallorca, Ifans plays a pervy man who sexually harasses Mfunyi's character when both are sitting at a bus stop. Ifans, eating an ice cream cone, licks at the cone as though he were licking her vagina, all the while lasciviously staring at Mfunyi sidelong. Mfunyi, who in real life styles herself as a modern, fashionable urbanite, is dressed like a Mammy, her head wrapped elaborately with a front knot, and wearing an ill-fitting shirt and skirt with large silver hoop earrings. Arriving at the bench sweating in the hot sun, carrying her groceries, Mfunyi exudes a "don't mess with me" attitude. When she has had enough of being sexually harassed, she withdraws a hard-boiled egg from her groceries, peels it, salts it, and tops it off with the product, Voodoo Mama Hot Sauce. This gets the man's attention, and he is clearly prepared to eroticize the experience of watching her eat an egg. As the woman bites down on the egg, the sound of a large cat growling is overdubbed, along with the sound of crunching. The camera cuts to the man, grabbing his crotch in pain and dropping to the ground. Finally, the woman drops the egg and grinds it into the ground with her foot, all intercut with reaction shots (and sounds) of the man howling in pain as though his genitals are being ground to bits. In this way, the woman is transformed into a voodoo femme fatale, whose sexuality lures in the unsuspecting man. She then avenges herself in a hypersexual and violent way, using voodoo to literally eat the man's genitals (another example of cannibalism, as well). "Voodoo Mama Hot Sauce," directed by Marcus Kühne, YouTube video, posted by "Philippa Meek," July 1, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=mhjD19UJ_PY.

Often, although not always, the voodoo femme fatale is merged with the figure of the tragic mulatto, a common character in voodoo fictions—although, as an archetype, the tragic mulatto is certainly not limited to voodoo.[69] A key border figure within this sexual geography, the tragic mulatto is an archetype that—at least within the particular setting of the United States—has the particular quality of being an unthinkable organism. Since American binary race categories permit only the option of being white or black, the mulatto, as a racial mixture possessing "blood quantum" of each, is not only inherently tragic for being so, but also has a kind of cryptozoological quality, falling into a space that is epistemologically unthinkable—a quality that Shannon Winnubst identifies with the word "queer."[70] I believe it is heuristically productive to think of the tragic mulatto as a queer figure, inherently transgressive in her very fiber for being an admixture of not simply white and black, but also free and enslaved, and therefore at once both a willing/determining and coerced/determined sexual partner.

As a figure who purportedly combines in herself both the sexual license of black women and the sexual propriety of white women, the mulatto has long been the object of white male heterosexual desire. In this dynamic, her desire is seen to be something that can be acquired through commercial transaction—whether literally by being bought, or else through financial arrangements in which she is supported. Notably, such desire and arrangements are certainly not only the domain of fiction: throughout the Americas, the historical erotic and domestic

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[69] The figure of the tragic mulatto has been written about extensively. For more scholarship on the topic: Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*; Siobhan B. Somerville, "Inverting the Tragic Mulatta Tradition: Race and Homosexuality in Pauline E. Hopkin's Fiction," in *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 77-110; Lisa M. Anderson, "Mulattas, Tragedy, and Myth," in *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 45-84.

[70] Cf. Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

arrangements between white men and mulatto women are well documented, perhaps nowhere so much as in the city of New Orleans, where, throughout the nineteenth century, arrangements known as *plaçage* were common. In a *plaçage*, "placed'' mulatto women were given gifts of real estate, clothing, and money, an economic boost that many used to positively augment their socioeconomic position and that of 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.

In the context of fiction, the mulatto became permanently joined with the tragic—and not only the tragic, but the *erotically* tragic: an object of sexual desire, she is nonetheless incapable of being made a proper wife to either a white man—for whom she is too black—or a black man, for whom she is too white.[71] Therefore, the space of her sexual life is unlicensed, conducted outside of the acceptable space of marriage. Consigned forever to the periphery of acceptable

[71] One of the classic filmic tragic mulattoes is the character of Peola in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*. The film centers around the commercialized friendship of two women, one white and one black, who start a fantastically successful pancake mix business that makes both very wealthy. Played by Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers, respectively, the two women both have daughters. White Bea's daughter, Jessie, has a happy life full of the opportunities that her mother's wealth provides, while black Delilah's daughter Peola laments the lack of her opportunities because of her race. This is in spite of the fact that Peola is extremely light-skinned. Eventually, Peola runs away from home and gets a job working at a department store perfume counter, passing as a white woman. In the end, Peola's betrayal causes her mother Delilah to die of a broken heart. Peola returns during her mother's stately funeral, broken-hearted at having killed her mother and finally willing to accept her fate as a woman of color. Peola was played by Fredi Washington, a light-skinned black actress whose career was greatly limited by her refusal to pass as a white actress, a strategy/disguise that her agent and the Hollywood studios initially pressed her to adopt. Working mostly in the 1930s, Washington's light skin (she was said to look Italian or Spanish) made it difficult for her to be cast as a black character, as directors were looking for actresses who fit the stereotypes of the day. An active member of the NAACP, Washington also often refused parts that she felt were too racist. Nonetheless, Washington often ended up playing tragic mulattoes, and we'll return to her again in a bit in the discussion of her voodoo film *The Love Wanga*. *Imitation of Life*, directed by John M. Stahl (1934; Universal Studies, 2012), DVD; *The Love Wanga* [a.k.a. *Crimes of Voodoo*, *The Crime of Voodoo*, *Ouanga*, *Drums of the Jungle*], directed by George Terwilliger (1935; Something Weird Video, 2006), DVD.

society, her tragedy itself becomes an erotic charge, a longing that can never be satisfied but which she is destined to try, again and again, to rectify through increasingly desperate sexual and social avenues. Often found on her own in voodoo film and stories, when combined with the figure of the femme fatale, it is usually the case that her racial ambiguity is translated into a source of rage, an injustice that she uses her erotic and occult power to avenge.

One of the richest examples of a voodoo tragic mulatto is the character of Antoinette/Bertha from Jean Rhys's 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.[72] Based on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Rhys's novel is a reimagining of the life story of Bertha Mason, the congenitally deranged Creole wife of Rochester who is secretly kept locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall, and who ends her life burnt alive when she sets fire to the house. Notably, in both *Jane Eyre* and Rhys's retelling, Antoinette is not literally a mulatto, that is, a mixed-race person. Rather, she is a white woman who has been raised in the Caribbean and whose upbringing by and near blacks has tainted her, such that everyone effectively treats her as though she were a black woman. This ambiguity does not, I think, diminish the value of seeing Antoinette as a tragic mulatto—she clearly is—but rather points to the complexity of these analytical categories, in particular in historical perspective. During Brontë's lifetime, the term "Creole" was used to describe European whites born and raised in the slaving colonies of the Caribbean. A combination of factors—including heat and humidity, tropical foods and diseases, and proximity to blacks—were believed to have a literal and measurable effect on the physiology of Creoles. These changes predisposed them to moral turpitude, laziness, brutality, sexual

[72] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Popular Library, 1966).

laxness, and insanity.[73] Written about widely in Britain and Europe during the eighteenth century, and widely embraced as an uncontroversial and observable fact, these beliefs supported dual suppositions: first, that proximity to blacks and slavery had irreparable impact on whites, "blackening" them and perhaps even driving them mad; and second, that slavery was something radically separate from the moral space of the metropole, conducted by people whose very material fiber was altered by their engagement in such transactional forms, and who may in fact have been deranged by it. Therefore, slavery had no bearing on the moral space of the metropole; white slavers were radically different from whites in the metropole, who moved in an unconnected (and unimplicated) moral space.

Within the world of Brontë's novel, this translates into a radical disinterest in Bertha Mason's biography, or in interrogating the claim that she is criminally and morally insane—a claim that is made on the basis of her creolity and which Brontë's contemporary readers would have found a convincing device. Rhys's novel challenges these basic assumptions about creolity, humanizing Antoinette/Bertha by portraying her as a naïve, orphaned heiress who is largely uncomprehending of how her identity as a Creole woman "blackens" her and makes of her an object of derision.[74] The heart of the novel's action takes place in Rhys's native Dominica, where Antoinette and Rochester go to honeymoon. It is here that their initial, adolescent love unravels, as Rochester comes more and more to think of Antoinette as, in effect,

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[73] For more on the eighteenth century trope of the mad Creole as it figures in Brontë's novel: Sue Thomas, "The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 1 (1999): 1-17; Carolyn Vellenga Berman, "Colonial Madness in *Jane Eyre*" in *Creole Crossings: Domestic Fiction and the Reform of Colonial Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 122-143.

[74] For more on how Bertha Mason's identity as a Creole has the effect of blackening her: Susan Meyer, "'Indian Ink': Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy in *Jane Eyre*" in Charlotte Brontë, *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Charlotte Brontë's* Jane Eyre, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 43-75.

a black woman—congenitally mad, morally defective, and unfaithful in her love to him. This is cemented when Rochester finds out that Antoinette has taken a mulatto man as her lover, perfecting her transformation in his eyes into a mulatto figure.

Transformed against her will into a tragic mulatto, Antoinette turns to the magical aid of her slave-nurse, Christophine. Christophine is an Obeah woman, a practitioner of the pan-Anglophone Caribbean system of Afro-Caribbean magic. Christophine's magic works, in a sense, but too well: it makes Rochester deranged. It is this final "voodooing" of Antoinette that transforms the tragic mulatto Antoinette into the character of "Bertha," the mad Creole, a role that Rochester is able to project onto her using his power as a white heterosexual male.

One of the most complete mergings of the voodoo femme fatale and the voodoo tragic mulatto is the character of Clelie Gordon in the film *The Love Wanga*, a 1936 film starring Fredi Washington.[75] In *The Love Wanga*, Washington plays Clelie Gordon, described in the promotional material as "a lithe and yielding, love hungry child of the tropics!" Clelie, a light-skinned mulatto, is the owner of a planation, and has fallen in love with the white owner of the next planation over. Adam, the owner, has, for a time, entertained her advances. However, for Adam, it has always been a mere dalliance, whereas for Clelie, it has been the stuff of great love. As the film begins, Adam is returning to Haiti with his new bride-to-be, a white woman. Proving that her whiteness stops at the skin, Clelie is a master of voodoo, and determines to use her mystical powers to win back her love. To further complicate this love triangle, the film turns it

[75] Washington has already been discussed earlier as the tragic mulatto *par excellence* in the film adaptation of Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. Washington's film career was blighted by Code Hollywood's cowardice around casting a light-skinned black actress in mainstream films and—perhaps more surprisingly—"race" films as well. Washington, for example, appeared in the film of *Emperor Jones* opposite Robeson, but only after she agreed to use makeup to darken her complexion so that their on-screen romance would not be mistaken for being miscegenated. More often than not, Washington ended up cast as a tragic mulatto, one of the few options offered to a racially ambiguous black actress in the 30s.

into a square, adding Adam's black overseer LeStrange (played by white actor Sheldon Leonard in blackface), who is in love with Clelie. LeStrange believes, by the race logic of the film, that he is a far better match for Clelie than is Adam because they are both black.

The energy of the plot derives from the basic assumption that Clelie's miscegenated sexuality is inherently perverse, and that her recourse to the powers of voodoo is a natural extension of this perverse sexuality. Clelie's first magical action, in fact, is not against Adam but rather against his fiancée, whom she seeks to kill—and almost succeeds—by using a voodoo curse. In the end, it is only the intervention of LeStrange that enables her life to be spared. Ultimately, LeStrange murders Clelie, chasing her into the jungle and strangling her (a fairly Freudian method of murder), an act that is the closest he will ever come to having sex with her.

Washington is forced to deliver a number of racist musings about race. Early in the film, begging for Adam to return to her, Clelie says to him, "Oh, I'm crazy, mad about you. Forget this girl. What has she got that I haven't got? Look at me. Am I not as beautiful? As white?" Clelie is described on a number of occasions as crazy, both by herself and by other characters. This highlights a key element of what makes the mulatto figure so tragic, namely that she is the battleground for an internal psychic war between uncontrollable black sexuality and white desires for decorum. The mulatto is mentally eviscerated by this battle, and Clelie is no exception, made crazy (like Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*) by unfulfillable desires.

Later, during an argument with Clelie, LeStrange says to her, "[Adam's] going to marry Miss Langley. She's his kind. She's white." Clelie responds, "You think so? I'm white too, as white as she is." LeStrange responds, "You're not! You're black." Of course, they are both right, in a sense; but LeStrange is right in the ways that matter more, at least to the Jim Crow-era, One Drop Rule audience for which this film was intended. Trying to seduce her, LeStrange

adds, "Clelie, forget this madness. Your white skin doesn't change what's inside you. You're black, you hear me? You're black! You belong to us! To me!" He then kisses her, but she pushes him away and calls him "black scum." Eventually, though, Clelie is forced to admit that "[Adam] hates me. He despises me. I'm trash to him. Good-for-nothing trash. Black trash." In a strange turn, Clelie seems to ultimately embrace this notion of "black trash," even saying, "I'll show [Adam] what a black girl can do!"—an expression that crackles with both revenge and sexuality. Voodoo is part and parcel of this "black trash" identity, as it is arguably the blackest thing that Clelie can do—ironically undertaken in her pursuit of whiteness.

In defense of white women

A key aspect of voodooed sexuality, only briefly touched upon so far, is that it frequently fetishizes the sexual, corporal, and psychic defense of white women against forces that are coded as black.[76] This defense itself—a kind of anti-sex—is nonetheless sexualized because it is inseparable from notions of sexual virtue: what white women are ultimately being defended from is the threat of miscegenation. Nearly all of the examples of films cited so far include crucial plot threads that are about the protagonist defending white women. Harkening back to an earlier discussion, if we view *The Birth of a Nation* as the first horror film ever, we can argue that the defense of white women from black men is, in fact, the original horror film trope.

[76] Interestingly, this is reinforced by the central lesson of James's satirical "Blackman's Guide to Seducing White Woman . . . Using the Power of Voodoo." The narrator of the short, instructional self-help tract sees voodoo as a force principally to be used to get "whyte pussy." While he initially characterizes this as motivated by revolutionary intentions that will help to liberate blacks, by the conclusion, it is clear that his aims are more about fulfilling baser needs.

In some cases, these imperiled white women are actively involved in their own defense, and when this is the case, such defenses are typically unsuccessful. For example, in *The Skeleton Key*, Caroline is ultimately incapable of defending her own body from the literal invasion of the black characters, and Mama Cecile succeeds at donning Caroline's body while at the same time robbing Caroline of her carefully preserved sexual integrity.[77] Mama Cecile's first act after stealing Caroline's body is, in fact, to admire it appraisingly, indicating to the viewer that, along with her personality, Cecile has also translated her black hypersexuality into Caroline's white body.

White women need white men to defend their sexuality. In general, women in such scenarios adopt the stance of the damsel in distress—or, in a phrase I am adapting from a Michael Gruber interview, a "white ensorcelled woman." In an interview, Gruber, the author of numerous suspense novels that tend to revolve around exotic portrayals of brown people, says the following about the inspiration for his book *Tropic of Night*.[78]

> [J.] had recently returned from a trip from Algeria to Nigeria by car in company with a well-known black writer. This person had apparently gone nuts, seized upon J. as a symbol of white oppression, and arranged for a local sorcerer to curse her. She subsequently become gravely ill, and had to be yanked from death's embrace by her family.
>
> I had not previously met anyone who'd been ensorcelled, so I was fascinated. . . J.'s job at the hospital was working with people who'd been afflicted by sorcery, not normally a Medicare-covered treatment modality, but fairly common in Miami at the time. I hung around the fringes of the santería-voudoun [sic] world with her and observed a number of phenomena not easily explained by science.[79]

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[77] For an introduction to this film and its themes, I refer the reader to Chapter Two, "The Fiction of Black Revenge," where the film is discussed at length.

[78] Michael Gruber, *Tropic of Night* (New York: William Morrow, 2003).

[79] "An interview with Michael Gruber," *BookBrowse*, c. 2007, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/876/michael-gruber.

Gruber's sensationalized description of his friend's cursing suggests that even talented and brilliant Africans and blacks are only one unexpected twist away from taking to the practice of cursing the nearest white woman in sight. It is an absurd scenario, but one he seems to take quite seriously. This has the effect of not only villainizing *all* Africans—particularly African men—as people who simply haven't resorted to voodoo *yet*, but also casts white women as people who must be defended from such actions, fetishizing them as sensitive to such mystical malevolence. If I have introduced a certain amount of semantic slippage here in talking about voodoo, it is because Gruber's second paragraph grants this permission. In noting his experiences in Miami, he describes the community as the "santería-voudoun world," a meaningless portmanteau that highlights how—as for most producers, viewers, and readers of imagined voodoo—distinctions between different African and African diaspora religions are quite meaningless.

Often, texts and films that highlight the power of voodoo to threaten white women have the ensorcelled white woman be the love interest of the main character, as in Gruber's anecdote. In the Bond film *Live and Let Die* (1973), for example, Jane Seymour's character is abducted by voodooists, the leader of whom is the god Baron Samedi.[80] Again, Baron Samedi is portrayed as a pimp-like character, whose methods rely on stealing white women to get what he wants. In the film, Seymour's character is Bond's principal love interest, and saving her has the dual effect of accomplishing both her salvation and furthering his spying goals.

In Bernard Rose's highly effective and atmospheric horror film *Candyman* (1992), the spiritual battle of Candyman to penetrate the world of the living is literalized as a struggle to

[80] *Live and Let Die*, directed by Guy Hamilton (1973; MGM, 2007), DVD.

penetrate Helen's body with his hook.[81] Although a violent act, it is revealed through Helen's moans and sighs—more orgasmic than fearful—to be yet another example of sexualized violence. Although there are white men in the film who attempt to help Helen, because they do not believe that the Candyman is real, their defenses are partial and inadequate, focused instead on trying to remedy her apparent psychosis. Because of this, Helen is left to fend for herself, and quite unsuccessfully.

Based on a short story by Clive Barker, the film recounts the final days in the life of Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen), a graduate student in Chicago, researching a thesis on urban legends.[82] She is interested in stories about Candyman, the ghost of a murdered nineteenth-century free man of color who is believed by the poor black residents of Chicago's Cabrini-Green public housing project to be responsible for a spate of murders that have taken place there. Helen soon learns that these murders have, in fact, been committed by drug dealers. At this point, the supernatural injects itself into the story: the real Candyman (played by Tony Todd) shows up, a larger-than-life black man who drips blood and honey and has a giant metal hook for a right hand. In broken, poetic lines, he explains to Helen that his supernatural life is fueled by the beliefs and fears of people, and that because her research threatens to make people stop believing in him, he has come to restore his reputation. To do so, he has chosen Helen to be his victim, and her murder will cement belief in him. It is horror logic, for sure, but remarkably effective as a plot device.

Candyman is one of the only horror films that prominently stars a black actor, featuring a "monster" who is not merely "blackened," but literally African American. Although not

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[81] *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose (1992; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

[82] Clive Barker, "The Forbidden," in *In the Flesh* [*Books of Blood* vol. 5] (New York: Pocket Books, 2001 [1986]).

explicitly a voodoo film, the figure of the Candyman is voodooed on a number of levels. Returning to a point I made earlier, popular culture tends to construe all black spirituality as only legible through the lens of voodoo. And, lest is go without saying, by being a black monster, Candyman is already placed with a very small sub-category of monsters, the vast majority of which are connected with voodoo. In that sense, there is a considerable amount of priming to think of him as such. Perhaps most significantly, by spacially rooting the Candyman legend in Crimini-Green, the film places the legend in the context of a black community that is also voodooed through its connection with "superstitious" beliefs about magical supernatural predators and haints (ghosts).

The more crucial factor, however, that distinguishes Candyman from other supernatural slashers is that he is unusually charismatic and courts Helen, singularly and devotedly, in a seduction that eroticizes her eventual death at his hands. Coleman notes with disgust that *Candyman* as a film does little to distinguish itself from *The Birth of a Nation*, placing at its center a ravenously sexual and psychopathic black "boogeyman" who lusts to make white women the victims of sexualized murder.[83] There is little room to disagree with this: while Candyman murders black women, he is only interested in courting white women. His first love, the white daughter of a wealthy white land owner, is the reason he is killed: for the crime of falling in love with her after being commissioned to paint her portrait, his right hand (with which he paints) is sawed off, and then he is covered in honey and left to be stung to death by bees. After a long career of murder, it is only Helen, his first white victim, who captures his heart.

Candyman woos Helen repeatedly with the phrase, "Be my victim." The idea of the victim-cum-lover has appeared again and again in this section, and does not need much

[83] Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 189.

explication here. However, it is worth noting that repeated shots of Candyman plunging his hook—a murderous, barbed phallus—into women's (and men's) bodies serves as a visually acceptable swap for violent sexual intercourse. In the film's mythology, Candyman is summoned by speaking his name five times while looking into a mirror, a spell that is erotic on multiple levels—for it is rare that we find ourselves routinely muttering someone's name to ourselves, except that that person is our lover (or we wish he or she were). By having Candyman appear through the summoner's reflection, it suggests a profound erotic connection, in which the likeness of the summoner is mystically swapped/merged with the likeness of the summoned monster. Candyman tells Helen that "the pain, I can assure you, will be exquisite," eliding the so-called "little death" with real death. Likewise, he consoles her with the offer of a kind of erotic fame, saying, "Your death will be a tale to frighten children, to make lovers cling closer in their rapture." This eroticization is further cemented by his connection with the two fluids of blood and honey, both vital fluids and, in the context of the film, stand-ins for both seminal fluid and the merger of pleasure with pain.

In the 1987 film *The Believers*, Martin Sheen plays Cal Jamison, a psychologist recently relocated to New York City who is enlisted to give his opinion about a series of crimes that seem to involve ritualized elements drawn from Santeria.[84] He soon becomes romantically involved with neighbor Jessica Halliday (played by Helen Shaver). However, as Jamison dives deeper into the mystical in the course of his investigation, and converts from skeptic to believer, it is Halliday who ends up being the target of malevolent magic. First, during a dance scene, Halliday becomes nearly possessed by a spirit that is being summoned by Palo (played by the very accomplished actor Malick Bowens)—appropriately, the only black character in the film

[84] *The Believers*, directed by John Schlesinger (1987; MGM, 2002), DVD.

and, as it turns out, the evil leader of the cult that is behind the ritual murders. Next, Palo curses Halliday, who succumbs to a mysterious illness that, among other things, causes baby spiders to hatch from a boil on her face, in what is arguably the film's most disturbing scene. Interestingly, this mystical "illness" plays on Halliday's womanly vanity, reaching critical mass because she, out of embarrassment, refuses to leave the house with a terrible blemish on her face, rather than seeking medical attention. It is also significant that what the curse attacks is the appearance of her face, marring her beauty—in fact, making it horrific—in an act that stands in for the theft of her sexuality. Rendered comatose by the curse, it is Jamison who must save her, breaking the power of Palo by killing him.

Palo also inspires another anxiety, that of blacks who wish to harm white children. Palo's cult is motivated by the desire to have magical power and immortality, a desire that they believe they can fulfill by sacrificing a certain number of children. Jamison's son is selected to be the last sacrifice. When Jamison finds him, he is being kept naked in a cage. This inspires fears not only of child murder, but also of child molestation, raising questions of whether the sacrificing of the children may be a kind of Freudian stand-in for child sex as a way of stealing the power and purity of children.

A more recent example of white women's sexuality needing defense from voodoo comes in the 2004 film *London Voodoo*, directed, written, and produced by the transatlantic filmmaker and entrepreneur Robert Pratten.[85] Lincoln and Sarah Mathers (played by Doug Cockle and Sara Stewart) are an American couple who have moved to Greenwich, England for Lincoln's work. Soon after moving into their home, Sara discovers a hidden grave in their basement. It is the grave of an enslaved woman, who turns out to have also been an evil African voodoo priestess.

[85] *London Voodoo*, directed by Robert Pratten (2004; Heretic Films, 2004), DVD.

When the grave is broken open, her spirit enters the body of Sara, and thus begins a struggle for both her body and the soul of their family. Although Sarah engages in all sorts of crazy behaviors, like painting the walls of their home with vèvè, Adinkra symbols, and other mystical-seeming designs, what most disturbs her husband is that Sara becomes sexually voracious and dominant. Lincoln, after a moment's hesitation, responds with fear and revulsion, treating his wife as someone who has been blackened—both morally and racially—by the possession. He wants nothing so much as the return of his whitely sexualized wife, which is to say, a woman who has little overt sexuality to speak of. When he refuses her sexual advances, Sara yells insults that impugn his virility. It is only after this that Lincoln finally submits to the help of London's local community of voodoo practitioners, who perform a very Hollywood-style voodoo ritual that finally casts out the evil spirit and returns Sara to her normal demure ways.

In numerous other films, the need to defend white women plays a peripheral role to the plot, sometimes as part of a love triangle. For example, in *The Love Wanga*, Adam's white fiancée stands in for the approved, idealized way of healthfully and morally expressing sexuality, namely in the context of heterosexual white Christian marriage. Clelie, by contrast, offers the fulfillment of a darker kind of sexuality, one that exists outside of matrimony, outside of the blessing of the Church—and, most threateningly of all, one that crosses racial barriers in pursuit of its fulfillment. Adam's wife-to-be is of little significance as a character, but is of huge importance as a symbol of the duel between these two kinds of racialized sexuality, and as such becomes a pawn in the struggle. When she nearly dies from Clelie's curse, one is hard-pressed to imagine that Adam cares about her so much as he cares what she stands *for*, and seeks her restoration to health because it is his route to a legitimate expression of his sexuality. Her

defense, in fact, is itself a legitimate way of expressing his sexuality, as a sort of knight defending his lady from supernatural threat.

In *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, there is a peculiar dinner party scene sandwiched between Alan's two trips to Haiti. Alan believes that he has left voodoo behind when he left Haiti, but during the dinner party, everything goes wrong. He sees a mummy hand emerge from his soup. Then, juxtaposed with intercut scenes of a sinister voodoo ceremony being performed in Haiti, the hostess becomes possessed and begins eating glass, injuring herself. What I find especially interesting about this scene is that, of all of the Boston party guests, it is only the white woman who is shown to be uniquely susceptible to the powers of voodoo. She is almost like a lightning rod in this scene, targeted by the magic seemingly because of something constitutionally different about her. Alan's return to Haiti, then, is not just about his own unfinished business, but is about defending Boston itself, which has suddenly become susceptible to the remote powers of the long arm of voodoo. The symbol of Boston and its way of life is, naturally, a white woman, in the same way that the Marie is chosen to represent France, or Columbia to represent the United States. Thus, Alan's adventuring is converted into a mission to save his homeland, which, by synecdoche, the hostess has come to stand for.

Part III:
Voodoo and Pornography

Not surprisingly, pornography is not immune to the appeal of voodoo. Voodoo and voodooed characters or plot devices figure prominently in dozens if not hundreds of pornographic films. I suggest that the use of imagined voodoo in pornography should be seen as the apotheosis of the genre, in which its dark hypersexual themes are actualized through the vehicle of real sex and for the express purpose of sexual arousal. In particular, voodoo pornographic films most frequently fetishize interracial sex and the use of magic to compel people to perform sexual acts—whether degrading, miscegenated, homosexual, sadomasochistic, or just nasty—that they not only would not normally do, but for which they afterwards bear no moral responsibility because they committed these acts against their free will. The absolution of guilt likewise extends to the viewer, whose masturbatory voyeurism can also be forgiven as a compelled action.[86]

I am certainly far from being the first to note the problematic intersection between pornography and race.[87] Growing out of a feminist critique of pornography—which has largely focused on interrogating whether the relationship between pornography and the female bodies it

[86] Interestingly, I was unable to find any voodoo porn films that used terms like "hoodoo" or "conjure" in their descriptions or titles. This could be for a number of reasons, but suggests that voodoo is really the salient concept, and that most of what is known about voodoo, for the purposes of pornography, comes directly from Hollywood—in which the term "voodoo" is used frequently and almost exclusively—rather than any additional reading, where the term hoodoo might be more likely to be encountered. Hoodoo is also a term known more in the American South, and it is possible that the porn industry's roots in California introduce some regional biases. Notably, fantasies of the South, particularly the Old South, constitute their own field of fetishes within porn, including films that fetishize black slavery, as well as *Django*-like black revenge narratives.

[87] For this discussion, I have relied heavily on the scholarship of Jennifer Nash as represented in her doctoral dissertation. Jennifer Christine Nash, "The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009).

portrays is one of exploitation—scholars steeped in the tradition of critical race theory have likewise considered how pornography both portrays bodies that are taken for granted as black, while equally participating in a discourse that identifies those bodies as black. Although it is something of a truism at this point, it is safe to say that nearly all portrayals of black bodies in pornography are fetishistic—in particular black bodies engaged in sex with or next to white bodies.

During the 1970s, the so-called Golden Age of American porn, due in large part to legal rulings that required pornographic films to possess "cultural merit," pornographic films tried to emulate Hollywood movies extensively, with intricate plots and scripts, punctuated with frequent sex scenes. As legal restrictions relaxed and porn increasingly shifted to an online market emphasizing scenes rather than whole films, porn again drifted back toward gonzo pornography—that is, porn without plot, just sex.[88] Within this world, plot-driven porn has again becomes something of a niche market.[89]

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[88] The name appears to be borrowed from the term "gonzo journalism," which attempts as much as possible to give the reader or viewer the sense of being present in the events being portrayed, with little formal framing or distancing devices. While "gonzo pornography" also carries this sense, it is widely used simply to mean films that are composed entirely of scenes of tightly-filmed hardcore sex, with a conspicuous absence of *mise-en-scène*.

[89] There are exceptions, of course. For example, the gay male pornographic website *Cocky Boys* [www.cockyboys.com], directed by the *avant garde* pornographer Jake Jaxson, has in recent years begun producing high quality short films—often based around Gothic themes—in which pornographic scenes figure prominently. These include the series *Answered Prayers* (2013) and *The Haunting* (2013). Jaxson has cited Andy Warhol's pornographic films as an inspiration. In the past two decades, a new space has also opened up, inaugurated largely in Europe, of mainstream, big-budget films that feature actors engaging in actual sex, rather than simulating it (as is the practice in all Hollywood films). This has created a quagmire for censors and theater owners, despite the fact that such films often do not depict sex acts inherently more lurid than those being simulated by their Hollywood peers. Examples include *Sex and Lucia* (dir. Julio Medem, 2001), *Antichrist* (dir. Lars von Trier, 2009), and *Romance* (dir. Catherine Breillat, 1999). One of the few examples of an American non-pornographic film to use real sex is John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006). Mitchell, a gay man, is best known for his *Hedwig and the*

Anyone familiar with American pornographic films will know that all are now labeled with a number of keywords—often by scene rather than by film as a whole—which indicate to the would-be consumer what to expect in the film. In the online market, most websites—such as TLA, AVN OD, AEBN, and XTube—offer the consumer the option of searching for films and scenes by these keywords, thus enabling the consumer to very finely tune his or her (but mostly his) viewing, guaranteeing maximum bang for the buck. This also often enables what I would call "microviewing," that is, purchasing and viewing by internet streaming only a few minutes of footage, only enough that is necessary to reach orgasm and no more. In fact, many online porn websites are moving away from a monthly subscription model—the standard of the 90s and 2000s—and instead offering streaming rentals of scenes or videos for a finite period of time, usually 24 hours. In some cases, the videos are available for only one viewing of the purchased minutes, thereby acknowledging that pornography is largely a disposable genre of entertainment, meant to be viewed once and then never again.

Within this frenetic marketplace of pornographic production and masturbatory consumership, the way that pornographic films and scenes are labeled reveals a great deal about the expectations of the consumer as fed back to them by the expectations of the producer. The idea is to guarantee that the "correct" porn reaches the "correct" consumer with the minimal number of clicks. As I mentioned before, this is accomplished primarily through keywords, and

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Angry Inch (2001 [film]; late 1990s [Off-Broadway musical]), about an East German transsexual who suffers a botched sex change operation, moves to the American Midwest, and eventually becomes a rock star. *Answered Prayers*, directed by Jake Jaxson (2013, *Cocky Boys*), streaming video, http://www.cockyboys.com/featureFilms/answered-prayers/; *The Haunting*, directed by Jake Jaxson (2013, *Cocky Boys*), streaming video, http://www.cockyboys.com/featureFilms/the-haunting/; *Sex and Lucia*, directed by Julio Medem (2001; Palm Pictures/Umvd, 2004), DVD; *Anitchrist*, directed by Lars von Trier (2009; Criterion Collection, 2010), DVD; *Romance*, directed by Catherine Breillat (1999; Lions Gate, 2004), DVD; *Shortbus*, directed by John Cameron Mitchell (2006; Velocity/Thinkfilm, 2007), DVD.

then secondarily through short blurbs—an accompanying text that traditionally would have been on the back of a VHS box or DVD case, and now mostly serves as the description of the film on its internet page. Keywords are almost universally searchable on pornographic websites, and increasingly, so are blurbs, a brief description of the video.[90] The most basic keywords tending to accompany almost all films indicate the sex, gender, and sexual orientation of the actors (or at least their characters); the number of actors (solo, duo, ménage-à-trois, orgy, etc.); the sex acts being performed; and the physical description of the actors, with an emphasis on key characteristics like body shape, hair color, age, and skin color. A further layer of nuance comes with the pairings (daddies and sons, black on white, fat on thin, etc.).

Many classifications of activities, actors, and pairings tend to be labeled as "fetish" or "kink"—as distinguished from "normal" or mainstream sexual desires, which assumes as normative white male/female couples touching, kissing, dry humping, female-on-male oral sex, and male-on-female vaginal sex. Within this framework, all porn that involves black actors is rendered inherently queered or fetishistic. It is seen as—and labeled as—representing and fulfilling a niche market of erotic desires. Therefore, according to porn, being raced (white being the absence of being raced) is already kinky. Even more kinky is any porn labeled "interracial," suggesting that the eradication of anti-miscegenation laws did not eradicate the erotic frisson of it as a forbidden act. Not surprisingly, interracial porn has a different valence depending on whether the woman is black or the man is black. Porn in which the woman is white tends to emphasize the sexual vigor of the black men, and portray their sex with the white female actress in terms of conquest and domination. Conversely, white actors having sex with black actresses is more often framed in terms of the seductive power of the black woman, and the exotic desires

[90] It used to be that pornographic websites had some of the least sophisticated coding on the internet, but increasingly, they have some of the most sophisticated.

of the white man. Clearly, these characterizations cleave closely to the stereotypes about black sexuality explored earlier in this chapter.[91]

[91] It is worth noting that there is a grey area of references to voodoo in popular culture that are not expressly pornographic, but which exist for the purposes of erotic titillation, and which may loosely be described as erotica. One example has already been noted, that of the erotic mural of Marie Laveau in the Marie Laveau Bar in the French Quarter in New Orleans. As another example from New Orleans (where one can find many), the AFL indoor football team the New Orleans VooDoo calls its cheerleaders VooDoo Dolls. As the casting video for the Dolls makes clear, these women are present largely for erotic thrills, with their scant outfits and athletic routines. "2011 New Orleans VooDoo Dolls Final Auditions & Selection," YouTube video, posted by "alfvoodoo," Dec. 14, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= nQIumy3Ew5k.

Another example is the David DeCoteau film *Voodoo Academy*. David DeCoteau is a gay filmmaker who gained cult fame in the late nineties with his gay coming-of-age-and-leather film about a young man in San Francisco who enters into a borderline-kinky erotic relationship with an older man (*Leather Jacket Love Story*, 1997). *Voodoo Academy*, made in 2000, tells the story of a wayward youth whose antics land him in a strict religious boarding school. The school is run by the buxom Ms. Bouvier and Rev. Carmichael. Intended by DeCoteau largely as a vehicle for several of its young male stars—such as Riley Smith, Drew Fuller, Huntley Ritter, and Rhett Wilkins, who have all gone on to have minor careers in television and film—*Voodoo Academy* follows the pattern of many supernatural teen dramas that revolve around the theme that adults in positions of power are not to be trusted. In this case, Ms. Bouvier and Rev. Carmichael turn out to be Satanists (Ms. Bouvier, in fact, is a demon), and use their students to strengthen their demonic powers by turning them into living voodoo dolls. This transformation ritual involves the boys stripping down to their underwear, succumbing to fits of erotic torso rubbing, then being strapped down to a table, at which point the transformation to tiny voodoo doll is effected. A quite silly film, for sure, but interesting for its use of voodoo as an evil force that unleashes erotic powers, forcing the boys to behave in ways that would ordinarily be against their own better judgment. *Voodoo Academy*, directed by David DeCoteau (2000; Cult Video, 2000), DVD; *Leather Jacket Love Story*, directed by David DeCoteau (1997; Entertainment One, 2010), DVD.

Although not erotica in the classic sense, I was also fascinated to discover a website called "Junglevoodoo.com" that sells black market pharmaceutical male erectile aids like Cialis and Viagra. For just about every internet user—and certainly for anyone who has an email account—it is common knowledge that such drugs have an illicit trade. Such drugs have large contingents of recreational users who do not suffer from erectile dysfunction but use the drugs to achieve longer erections for marathon sexual encounters and orgies. It is these recreational users who seem particularly to be targeted by "Junglevoodoo.com." In a sense, I think it is fair to view such a site as itself erotic, teasing with what it promises. In particular, it is not simply offering the would-be consumer a *healthy* sex life, but a sex life that is full of exotic, illicit, risqué encounters combining the humid exoticism of the jungle—and its sexually liberated "natives"—as well as the morally unhinged sexual license of voodoo.

Moreover, erotic literature is a genre that deserves more attention in regard to this matter, but, for my part, I have been able to find relatively few examples of erotic literature that utilizes

There is a quite long list of pornographic films that utilize voodoo as a plot device, and, as already discussed, this tends to revolve around themes of sexual trickery and coercion/non-consent, as well as the absolution of guilt because the sexual actions performed under the spell of voodoo are committed unwillingly by people whose moral agency is temporarily suspended. [92]

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voodoo. In part, this may be an artifact of erotic literature being more difficult to search, as it is not collected and keyword-searchable after the same fashion that pornographic films increasingly are. I fully expect that there are likely numerous Harlequin and Mills & Boone novels—not to mention the dozens of other erotic publishing house imprints—that draw on the trope of the voodoo exotic/erotic. My sense is that it is unlikely they would depart dramatically from the other erotic models I am presenting here—but then again, the couple of examples I have found have been surprisingly literary and better studied than pornographic films. For example, the erotic novel *Voodoo Man* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2002), published in England under the pseudonym Johnny T. Malice, is set in Haiti and shows at least some familiarity with ethnographic literature about Haitian Vodou—likely the works of Alfred Métraux and Maya Deren. Johnny T. Malice also published a short version of the same story in a collection called *Divine Meat* by the same imprint (ed. David MacMillan [London: Virgin Publishing, 2001]). All of the stories in the collection are about gay male sexual encounters between humans and divinities.

Unfortunately, *Voodoo Man* and the story in *Divine Meat* are, if anything, made all the more offensive thanks to Malice's baseline familiarity with Haitian Vodou. Whereas the vast majority of the erotic, hypersexual, and pornographic material examined in this chapter exist within a feedback loop of imagined voodoo, *Voodoo Man* makes repeated references to actual sacred ceremonies, spirits, and symbols. As a result, the story is remarkably offensive. It tells the tale of a gay voodoo priest in the Haitian countryside who develops an erotic obsession for a young fisherman, who shows no sign of reciprocating these desires. However, during a voodoo ceremony, the fisherman is possessed by the spirit of Baron Samedi—and while possessed, has a sexual encounter with the voodoo priest. In time, it becomes clear that Baron Samedi wishes to see the two coupled, and eventually this is what happens. In the meantime, the voodoo priest engages in a number of masturbatory acts in front of his altars, even using sacred ritual implements as anal toys.

[92] This is very similar to how the psychologist Deirdre Barrett found that hypnotism functioned as a device in pornography. Deirdre Barrett, "Hypnosis in Film and Television," *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 49, no. 1 (2006): 13-30.

At the level of production companies, there are two large, prolific companies that take their name from voodoo, namely Voodoo House and Voodoo Media Group. Although both have fairly diverse catalogs of heterosexual porn (and I am including girl-on-girl, performed for a heterosexual gaze, as objectively distinct from lesbian porn), both are on the whole inclined towards producing gonzo films, with an emphasis on girl-on-girl, barely legal, interracial, anal, etc. In other words, the risqué end of standard heterosexual porn. On the whole, I can't say that I notice a substantive difference between these companies and numerous others. I mention them

For example, the blurb for the film *Voodoo Lust: The Possession* (JET Multimedia, 1989) describes the film in the following way:

> Enter into the world of Voodoo, where the magic powers of the cult provide worship, sex and insatiable lust to those in command. Dr. Roberts, a professor of anthropology, lusts after his beautiful student, Meg. Haiti in 1936 where the granddaughter of Dutchess Grandee, a voodoo priestess, he attempts to bring Meg under his sexual influence. Our adventure takes us back to Haiti. See how voodoo is used to influence sex and lust, but Meg uses her limited knowledge of the cult for her own ends and it goes

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only to highlight that "voodoo" is a term that is considered appealing as the name for a porn company, enough so that two large companies have nearly the same name. I cannot think of a single other religion that has a name that would be seem as appealing, let alone appropriate, to use as the name of a porn production company.

Likewise, several pornographic actors use stage names that reference voodoo. None is more famous or prolific than Voodoo—sometimes also credited as Voodoo Child—a French Canadian porn actor with the birth name of Alexandre Boisvert. Voodoo is perhaps the single most prolific male porn actor currently working in the American porn industry. He has been featured in hundreds of films and thousands of individual scenes, typically receiving top billing. Voodoo almost exclusively makes heterosexual porn (I could find only one film of his which was marketed for a gay male audience, and he did not have gay sex in the film). Voodoo or Voodoo Child is an unusual name for a white, French Canadian porn actor, but I believe the moniker was chosen by Voodoo or his handlers to signify his craziness, inexhaustible libido, and willingness to do just about anything heterosexual. Among his thousands of scenes, Voodoo most often seems to appear in situations that would be classified as kinky, whether it is barely legal (with an actress who just turned 18), male-in-female anal, "cherry pop" (sex with a virgin), interracial, or light BDSM. In recent years, Voodoo has gained the most notoriety for having sex with a female costar while they were tandem parachuting from an airplane. Voodoo and his costar were initially charged with obstructing the operation of an aircraft—a federal crime—despite the fact that the pilot was certainly aware of what the two planned. Perhaps because of this, and the fact that it was a "victimless" crime, the charges were eventually dropped.

There is also a host of porn actors whose names make some reference to zombies: for example, Zombie, a twink gay porn actor who has made a handful of jerk-off videos. The kinds of videos that Zombie makes tend to star actors who choose one-name *noms de guerre*, like Rodeo, Rocky, or Scooter, so in that sense, Zombie's stage name doesn't depart from the model. However, the choice of the name Zombie is still slightly odd, and summons notions of both erotic coercion and—I suspect his aim—the gothic or edgy. There is also a female porn actress called Kimmy Zombie, and a porn director who makes films under the name Rob Zombie (presumably not the horror film director and frontman of the band White Zombie). As with the production companies, I don't see any particular pattern to discern from these various references to voodoo, other than to say that references to voodoo are seen as appropriate names under which to perform pornographic acts, itself an astonishing fact and indicative of the fusion between popular notions of voodoo and hypersexuality.

> totally wrong! An exciting adventure of Voodoo power, sex, lust and possession.[93]

Within the film, voodoo figures as a handmaiden to lust, making it possible for those in control of the "cult" to have sex with the partners that they want.

A number of pornographic films feature a voodoo priest—often called a voodoo shaman—who uses the powers of voodoo to force young women to engage in kinky or sadistic sex with him. The assumption is that voodoo power is evil, and that rape falls under its purview. For example, in the film *Voodoo Dolls* (ZFX Productions, 1996), the female main character moves into an apartment without understanding that she has put herself into sexual, as well as physical, danger.

> Little does she know that the guy she thinks is the landlord is just the deranged son of the real owner, an ancient Voodoo Shaman. Using the cheap apartment as a lure, the Shaman is able to have a steady stream of pretty girls to play with. Using voodoo dolls to control the bodies and souls of his hapless victims, the Shaman is able to cause horrific hallucinations and sickness to those he attacks with his black magic. Once under his spell, the Shaman will drain the life from his chosen victim, terrorizing them until they die of fright.[94]

Notably, *Voodoo Dolls* is mostly a bondage film with pronounced elements of sadism and humiliation (of the women).[95]

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[93] "Voodoo Lust – The Possession" *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/121500/Voodoo-Lust-The-Possession. I have adopted the convention of placing the name of the studio after the titles of pornographic films, in lieu of the name of the director. With pornographic films, I have found that the studio is a more useful piece of information, as this tends to determine the tone and content of the film. In addition, many pornographic directors work under multiple pseudonyms, so the name listed in the film's credits often tells you very little.

[94] "Voodoo Dolls," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/90165/Voodoo-Dolls/.

[95] In a Brazilian Portuguese-language porn called *O Feiticeiro* [*The Fetish*] (Icaro Studies, c. 2004), two young men who break out in an unexplainable rash are told by a voodoo priest that

More rarely, pornographic films will feature voodoo powers that put women in charge, a twist of female domination. One example is *Tales From the Black Side 2* (Zane Entertainment, 1997). In one scene, Meagan Reed plays "a voodoo priestess who does a dizzying dance and conjures up Byron Long as some kind of angry spirit. Needless to say, all it takes to placate Long is a little lascivious loving courtesy of the breasty bad girl."[96] The classic blaxpolitation porn *Black Throat* (VCA, 1985) takes place in a bordello called Madam Mambo's House of Divine Inspiration Through Fellatio. The name plays on the honorific term "Mambo"/*manbo*, a Vodou priestess. In the film, Roscoe, an unemployed garageman, goes on an erotic odyssey within the bordello. Then,

> . . . when it seems that all is lost, Roscoe hears the distant beat of voodoo drums... coming from his room! Rushing back, they find Roscoe's apartment transformed into a strange voodoo temple. Could this be the Black Magic of Madame Mambo? A no-holes-barred orgy proves so, as Madame Mambo herself initiates Roscoe to the thrilling secret behind Black Throat. This is deep throatin' with an ethnic flavor that only the Dark Brothers could serve up.[97]

In addition to proposing a mystical economy that puts a woman—Madame Mambo—in charge, *Black Throat* plays on the duel exotics of black sex generally, described as "ethnic flavor," and voodoo sex—complete with its frenzy-inducing voodoo drums (à la Dietrich)—in particular.

Dovetailing with the theme of coercion and non-consent, many pornographic films alluding to voodoo use it to simply add an additional layer of depravity to the film, operating on

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the only cure for their ailment is to engage in homosexual sex (with the priest and one another), thus relieving them of any guilt because the sex is necessary as a kind of mystical medicine. *O Feiticeiro*, released by Icaro Studies (c. 2004; *HotMovies.com*, 2014), streaming video, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/155615/O-Feiticeiro/?vp=a.

[96] "Tales From The Black Side 2," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/115737/Tales-From-The-Black-Side-2/?video_id=115737&.

[97] "Black Throat," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/170439/Black-Throat/?video_id=170439&.

the assumption that voodoo is evil and essentially Satanic. These Gothic and Satanism-aesthetic films are generally created to appeal precisely to the *nostalgie de la boue* that Murphy discusses as being one of the principal appeals of voodoo. A classic example of this is the film *Sex Rituals of the Occult* (Distribpix/Video-X-Pix, 1970).

> Cum and join us in the finest in classic adult entertainment with ritualistic orgies that strain the bounds of the imagination... A voyage into the erotic land of the occult. You will surely see why this is the greatest occult classic of all time with voodoo, witchcraft, black mass, devil worship, animal worship and of course orgies galore.[98]

As is fairly evident from this blurb, *Sex Rituals of the Occult* doesn't really involve imagined voodoo in any substantive fashion, but makes reference to it in passing again as a sort of kindling, to set a mood of immoral, evil sexual decadence. The same can be said for the film *The Night of Submission* (Alpha Blue Archives, 1976).

> NYC voodoo cult practice ritualistic S/M! Rough sex auteur Davian delivers a straight-faced black magic story. New York reporters investigate the bizarre sex rituals of an underground voodoo cult. Wall to wall graphic orgies, up close whip wounds, and crucifixion![99]

Equally fascinating are black and interracial pornographic films that do not involve voodoo in the film itself, yet use the term "voodoo" in their promotional materials as a euphemism for black. For example, the blaxpoitation porno *Black Voodoo* (Arrow Productions, 1988) doesn't really involve voodoo in its plot, but uses voodoo as a way of emphasizing that it is a "race" film that invites the viewer to fetishize black bodies as "these big titty honeys . . .

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[98] "Sex Rituals Of The Occult," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/137543/Sex-Rituals-Of-The-Occult/?video_id=137543&.

[99] "The Night Of Submission," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/82953/The-Night-Of-Submission/?video_id=82953&.

[who] put a spell on you!"[100] Along similar lines, the description of *Black Chicks & White Dudes* (T.T. Boy Productions, 2009) says, "Rah has the best ass ever! She's super chocolate from Jamaica, and has the best voodoo pussy ever!"[101] And this description of the gay porno *Desires of the Devil* (Ari Productions, 1971): "Unknown to Jim, a black voodoo stud has the hots for him; and succeeds in luring him to his beach house AND his bed!"[102] As one final example, I cite the blurb form the film *Kimberly Kane's Been Blackmaled* (Vivid Premium, 2010).

> Kimberly Kane takes on her darkest challenge yet! In this voodoo style fuck fantasy shot in Super 8mm film and HD video, every scene is it's own world of mysterious creation. The fetish of interracial sex has always been Kane's most coveted desire. Pull back the red velvet curtain, destroy your inhibitions and witness Kimberly Kane being BLACKMALED.[103]

All of these films elected to use the language of voodoo to highlight how the films fetishize blackness, not simply as one of many possible types of bodies, but rather as an exceptional class possessed of a unique brand of sexuality. The "voodoo pussy" and spell-casting breasts, in a sense, vivisect the black female bodies to which they rightly belong, suggesting instead that black bodies lack a corporate identity or control of will, existing merely as a loose conglomeration of hypersexual parts exerting their own desires. Meanwhile, *Desires of the Devil* and *Kimberly Kane's Been Blackmailed* revolve quite obviously around the fetishized act of interracial sex (as opposed to the non-fetishized sex that millions of interracial couples have

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[100] "Black Voodoo," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/134210/Black-Voodoo/.

[101] "Black Chicks & White Dicks," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/151911/Black-Chicks-White-Dicks/?video_id=151911&.

[102] "Desires of the Devil," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/50281/Desires-Of-The-Devil/?video_id=50281&.

[103] "Kimberly Kane's Been Blackmaled," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/200009/Kimberly-Kane-s-Been-Blackmaled/?video_id=200009&.

daily), using voodoo as a way to heighten the sense of miscegenation as a forbidden act, even evil.

Part IV:
The Erotic Life of Zombies

In the next chapter, "The Revenants," I engage in an extended analysis of the role of the zombie in American popular culture. To bridge these two chapters, I conclude here with a short investigation of the eroticism of the zombie, which often presents itself as an opportunity to explore themes of sexual manipulation and the eroticism of the loss of control. Early filmic representations of zombies tended to portray them in ways that emphasized their erotic appeal as women deprived of volition and therefore open to both the control and voyeurism of the malefector—as well as the film director and audience.[104] I begin by examining several early mainstream Hollywood zombie films, concluding with an extended look at zombies in pornography.

Perhaps surprisingly, given its outsized importance in the United States, the zombie is a reasonably minor part of Haitian Vodou.[105] However, the concept of zombies (*zonbi* in Kreyòl) fascinated early ethnographers, tourists, Marine chroniclers, and critics of Haitian culture. While one is hard-pressed to find references to zombies in American culture prior to the Marine

[104] Cf. Steve Jones, "Porn of the Dead: Necrophilia, Feminism, and Gendering the Undead," in *Zombies are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead*, eds. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 40-61.

[105] This paragraph is offered as an extremely brief sketch of how zombies were introduced into U.S. popular culture. The next chapter, "The Revenants," sketches this history in greater detail. Readers who wish to know that history first are invited to read the next chapter and then return to this section.

occupation (1915-34), once the concept was introduced, the Hollywood film industry quickly created a number of big screen zombie thrillers that rocketed 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, and is enlisted by plantation owner Beaumont to turn the character of Madeline into the eponymous white zombie.[106] Madeline is determined to marry her fiancé Neil, but Beaumont hopes that by turning Madeline into a zombie, Neil will believe she has died—and then Beaumont can have Madeline for himself.

The title, *White Zombie*, is apt on a number of levels. First, the zombie extras are obviously whites in blackface. 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 is 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 demure, and will not turn away from the gaze. Posters of the film featured advertising taglines that 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."[107]

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[106] *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin (1932; VCI Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

[107] Bryan Senn, *Drums of Terror: Voodoo in the Cinema* (Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 1998), 27. Also, Gary Rhodes's exceptional study of the film *White Zombie* includes rich archival information about how the film was promoted, including reproductions of the highly racialized ad copy which was included in the press packs send to theaters in both the United

In communicating these sexual messages, the studio also chose to convey messages of racial outrage—a significant choice, given that this is not present in the film itself. By doing so, the film 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 *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943).[108] Set on the fictional Caribbean island of St. Sebastian, a stand-in for Haiti, the film stars Frances Dee—an actress said to be one of the most beautiful women in film, and who already had an extremely successful career at the time the film was made. Dee plays Betsy, an American nurse sent to St. Sebastian to care for the sick wife of a plantation owner. Her charge, Jessica (played by Christine Gordon), is utterly mindless—not comatose, but catatonic. Notably, this condition has done nothing to mar her exquisite beauty. It is unclear precisely what caused Jessica to be reduced to such a state; among the islanders, however, it is rumored that Jessica is a zombie.

With time, it is revealed that Jessica has been at the center of a love triangle with the two brothers, Wesley and Paul, who together own and run the plantation. Embroiled in a Cain-and-Abel struggle, Jessica has become a pawn in the struggle to see which brother will claim dominance. Wife to the older brother and mistress to the younger, Jessica swore to run away with Wesley, the younger brother, on the night she fell into her catatonia.

States and England. Gary Don Rhodes, *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2001).

[108] *I Walked With a Zombie*, directed by Jacques Tourneur (1943; Turner Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD [bundled with *The Body Snatcher*].

What is fascinating is that Jessica's zombie state in no way reduces the brothers' desire for her. If anything, it seems only to exacerbate it, as she is now the perfect object of desire for them to fight over, incapable of staking her own claims or voicing her own desires in the struggle. In fact, only the voodoo congregants of the island seem capable of recognizing that Jessica is, in fact, monstrous. However, their solution is hardly a moral high road, as they seek simply to lure her away and destroy her. In the end, this is precisely what happens. In the concluding scenes of the film, Jessica encounters the only other zombie in the film, Petro, who serves as a foil for her beauty. Played by Darby Jones, with shocking facial contortions that make his eyes appear to bulge from his head, Petro carries Jessica into the ocean, bearing her in his arms like a new bride being carried across the threshold, and presumably drowns them both.

By the seventies, most zombie films moved away from glamorous, sexy zombies, focusing instead on grotesque, diseased zombies that feast on human flesh. One of the last twentieth century 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 legendary Spanish horror film director León Klimovsky. *Rébelion* 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 release of the film in Spain. In several of the film's key scenes, the camera fixes on the voluptuous breasts of the female zombies, uncomfortably sexualizing the characters, who are made up to look dead.[109] Over time, however, the erotic

[109] *La Rebelión de las Muertas* [*Vengeance of the Zombies*], directed by León Klimovsky (1973; Bci/Eclipse, 2007), DVD. The discourse pursued in this chapter opens up new possibilities for considering the concealed erotic side of zombies. As discussed earlier, in the context of voodoo, the apotheosis of perverse sexuality is the act of cannibalism. Following this logic, I would argue that zombies participate to a degree in this erotic. Notably, since Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), zombies have been transformed from mindless automatons into flesh-craving killers. For many people, zombies are particularly known to crave brains, presumably

appeal of zombies largely waned, to be replaced with the horrific vision of the reanimated dead who are hungry for human flesh. However, in pornography, the erotic appeal of zombies has been maintained, and has arguably crossed back over into the mainstream with art porn films like *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*.

Otto; or, Up with Dead People (2008), by gay porn director Bruce LaBruce, is one of two zombie art porns that LaBruce has produced—the other being *L.A. Zombie* (2010).[110] Interestingly, LaBruce, who often addresses issues of race quite frankly and controversially in both interviews and his films, doesn't seem to draw any obvious connections between race and

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because they wish for the thing that they don't have, a kind of ritual gustatory reversal of fate. More recently, zombie apocalypse films such as *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2002) and *World War Z* (dir. Marc Forster, 2013), as well as the TV show (2010-present) and comic books (2003-present) *The Walking Dead*, tend to portray zombies as having rather indiscriminate taste for flesh—any will do, the more the better. What is fascinating about this is that the taste of flesh appears to be the last pleasure that remains for zombies, and in fact, one could suggest that they have become narrowly defined by this single libidinal desire. In the new BBC television show *In the Flesh* (2013), zombies—euphemistically identified as those suffering with PDS, or Partially Dead Syndrome—clearly derive sensual pleasure from eating human beings, a fact highlighted in the main character's periodic flashbacks to the time before he was medicated with the anti-PDS serum. While in this feral state, the hunting and eating of humans clearly bordered on the erotic, and in fact, he joined forces with a female zombie with whom he hunted, suggesting that hunting and eating human flesh is a sort of foreplay for zombies—or rather, the act itself, since they seem incapable of copulatory sex. *In the Flesh* inspired me to reevaluate other zombie apocalypse films, and consider how the out-of-control state of zombies has been reconfigured into an erotic of out-of-control violence and the fetishized act of cannibalism. *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George Romero (1968; Elite Entertainment, 2002), DVD; *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle (2002; Fox Searchlight, 2003), DVD; *World War Z*, directed by Marc Forster (2013; Paramount, 2013), DVD; *The Walking Dead*, created by Frank Darabont (AMC, 2010-Present), television series; *In the Flesh*, Season 1, directed by Johnny Campbell (BBC, 2013-Present), television series.

[110] *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*, directed by Bruce LaBruce (2008; Strand Releasing, 2009), DVD; *L.A. Zombie*, directed by Bruce LaBruce (2010; Strand Releasing Home Video, n.d.), DVD.

zombies in his films.[111] In an interview published in *Interview* magazine, LaBruce does cite the connection between zombies and voodoo, noting that one of the main characters in *Otto* has a name which is an anagram of Maya Deren, the famed experimental filmmaker, dancer, and scholar of Vodou.[112] Nonetheless, *Otto* is definitely much more of a zombie film than a voodoo film. According to LaBruce, it is not the mystical aspects of zombies that interest him, but the dual senses of zombies as both social outcasts and the ultimate consumers.

Set in Berlin, *Otto* is the story of a gay teen who is resurrected from the dead as a zombie with no explanation, digging himself from his grave in the film's opening scenes. For the remainder of the film, *Otto* wanders through Berlin, making friends, picking up sexual partners, partially eating them, and thereby turning them into zombies. For LaBruce, Otto's zombie nature is meant to be open to question, with the possibility that he is simply a delusional, mentally ill teenager—much like the main character of Harrington's *Night Tide* (1961), who may or may not be a vampire (but is certainly killing women), a film that LaBruce cites as a major influence.

In *L.A. Zombie*, released in two formats—art house and hardcore pornography—legendary gay porn actor François Sagat plays a chameleon-like space alien who goes around Los Angeles screwing men to death with his enormous barbed penis, then has sex with their corpses to bring them back to life so that they can continue to have sex. In interviews, LaBruce

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[111] LaBruce, who is married to a black man and lives mostly as an expat in Berlin, has produced a number of porns that eroticize Neo-Nazi skinheads. In one of them, *Skin Flick* (1999), a highly controversial scene depicts a gang of skinheads attacking an interracial gay male couple and forcing the white man to watch as they gang rape his black lover. In interviews, LaBruce has defended the role of pornography as a kind of exorcism, making scenes such as the above not only permissible in his viewpoint, but psychically valuable. *Skin Flick*, directed by Bruce LaBruce (1999; Strand Releasing, 2005), DVD.

[112] Ariana Speyer, "Up With Bruce LaBruce," *Interview*, Sept. 19, 2011, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/otto-bruce-labruce#_.

opines that whether Sagat's character is really an alien, or simply a mentally ill homeless man, is meant to be unclear. Acknowledging that he basically made the same film twice, once in Berlin and once in L.A., there are nonetheless some important differences in how LaBruce uses the idea of the zombie in the two films. In *L.A. Zombie*, the alien falls into the more conventional role of the "voodoo shaman" or puppeteer that we have observed in numerous pornographic and non-pornographic voodoo films—that is, the character who derives erotic pleasure from controlling the zombies. In contrast, *Otto* is far more unique and subversive, in the sense that the main character in the film is himself a zombie, and essentially narrates for the viewer the various challenges and existential dilemmas of his zombified life. I would argue that, at the time LaBruce made *Otto*, this was actually a quite novel concept, one which has since been copied (or at least adopted) by a number of television shows and movies.

It seems quite clear that, at least to a degree, both *Otto* and *L.A. Zombie* explore necrophilia, one of the great sexual taboos (along with incest) that the vast majority of humans share, regardless of culture. In *Interview*, LaBruce rather ambiguously notes that he isn't "particularly interested in necrophilia," but discusses the issue in greater depth in another interview he did for *Cineaste*.

> In my film the zombie regenerates life through sex, he fucks dead bodies back to life. In a way you could read the film as a regenerative metaphor, despite the necrophilia overtones. But Camille [Paglia] said you'd be crazy to try to defend this film on moral grounds, because it does contain imagery that will fundamentally offend the majority of the population, and people would find it preposterous for me to try to defend it on moral grounds when you have corpses getting fucked. She said it was entirely defensible, but on the grounds of artistic expression and the tradition of necrophilia in art and literature. She pointed out that Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe wrote about necrophilia and necromantic attachment.[113]

[113] Matthew Hays, "Queer Porn-Star Zombies Attack!: An Interview with Bruce LaBruce" (Web Exclusive), *Cineaste* 36, no. 2 (2011), accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.cineaste.com/articles/queer-pornstar-zombies-attack-an-interview-with-bruce-labruce-web-exclusive.

Beyond the frisson derived from portraying the sexually forbidden fetish of necrophilia, there are levels on which LaBruce is using zombie sex to talk about various forms of social death. One popular theory among cultural critics is that the increased interest in zombies in the 80s and 90s can be tied to the rise of the AIDS epidemic (a notion to be discussed at greater length in the next chapter). Whether this is universally true seems debatable, but surely in LaBruce's zombie films, zombieness is explicitly tied to the two principal ways in which detractors have characterized gay sex as contagious. In the first sense, homosexuality itself has been portrayed in twentieth and twenty-first century culture wars as something that one can contract. In the second sense, gay sex has been often seen as possessing exceptional qualities that make it uniquely culpable as a disease vector, in particular for the spread of HIV. Within LaBruce's zombie worlds, this fear is cemented by portraying gay sex as literally death-dealing. However, its victims are then reborn into a second kind of social death, namely as feared and fearful zombies. Playing on both the social ostracism of gay people—and, perhaps more saliently, the social ostracism of HIV+ individuals—this second zombie life is hardly an ideal existence, wedding the dual deaths of the body and the social subject. However, turning this dire circumstance on its head, LaBruce's zombies are not simply the "ultimate consumers" of flesh, but also the ultimate consumers of sex, which they undertake with an energy that is unmistakably bloodlust. In this way, their bloodied sex seems to invert the expectation that social death must be joyless. At the same time, because they are ultimate consumers—a kind of exotic peak predator—the sex cannot sate their lust, and must ultimately devolve into both physical violence and cannibalism as they attempt to fulfill the literal coupling that evades them at both the psychic and libidinal level. As discussed previously, cannibalism becomes a kind of proxy for completeness, a way in which to literally join with, and consume, one's partners. This

hyperbolic seeking of the zombies for ever more—and ever more exciting—sex, a nihilistic and mindless need for escalation, offers an embedded critique of pornography itself, the very venture in which LaBruce's films are seemingly engaged.

By contrast with LaBruce's cerebral zombie art porns, which seem to critique pornography itself, the vast majority of zombie-themed porns are both more transparent in their aims and less considered in their execution. A number of them flirt with necrophilia, transposing the supposed voracious desire of zombies for flesh to an equally voracious desire for sex. For example, the description for the film *Porn of the Dead* (Loaded Digital, 2005) reads, "Ever wonder what would happen if Zombies got tired of eating the flesh of the living? Well in writer/director Rob Rotten's movie 'Porn of the Dead,' during their off time, zombies decide to bump uglies, just like us humans. This time the sex is between the UNDEAD!"[114] In the film, porn actors made up to look like mud-streaked, blood-soaked zombies engage in gonzo sex with one another.

Night of the Giving Head (Rodnievision [Rodney Moore], 2009) embeds a critique of women who too-openly crave sexual pleasure, which under ordinary circumstances would cause them to be branded as "sluts," "whores," or "thirsty." In this case, their lust is so powerful it causes them to rise from the dead, still looking for sex. The film *Naughty Little Nymphos 6* (Notorious Productions, 2001) unites necrophilia, coercion, and miscegenation, as well as pedophilia. In one scene, adult actresses portray young schoolgirls who are forced to have sex with zombies.

> That tiny tart Sabrina has been warned time and again about wandering around and playing in the junkyard with her friend, Ariko. Now, because of her haughty ways she learns about "karma". Her friend happens upon

[114] "Porn of the Dead," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/114557/Porn-Of-The-Dead/?video_id=114557&.

> the zombies first, and Ariko is taken aback, and taken by Zombies who want her her [*sic*] flesh … in a lustful manner.[115]

The zombies, as well as a gangbanger character, are all played by black actors, while the schoolgirls are white and Asian. The studio, Notorious Productions, specializes in barely legal, age play (adult actors playing characters that are legal minors), and interracial porn, and so this film is not a radical departure from their usual fare. However, the particular arrangement of black zombie on white girl is astonishingly reminiscent of early race horror films, going as far back as *The Birth of a Nation*. The layer of necrophilia adds an additional element of discomfort, to be sure, but the core message remains that black men—*even when dead*—have inexhaustible lust for (underage) white women.

The vast majority of zombie porns, however, eschew necrophilia, and instead focus on the theme of compulsion that has been discussed already. In particular, these films tend to involve plots with sexy villains (whether aliens, sorcerers, spies, evil scientists, ninjas, or evil circus clowns) who are using their zombification powers to create "love slaves." In porns such as *Invasion of the Love Drones* (Alpha Blue Archives, 1977), *Super Quick #2* (Kick Ass, 2001), *Kung-Fu Girls 2* (Kick Ass, 2002), *FrankenHunter: Queen of the Porno Zombies* (Vidway, 1993), and *The Whips & Chains Affair* (London Enterprises Video, 1994), the exact term "love slave" is used on numerous occasions, and even when the term is not used, the concept is present. This suggests that the "love slave" fantasy is quite common (at least according to porn producers).

Fascinatingly, the idea of the zombie as a "love slave" is something that appears in several of the earliest zombie films. There is little reason to think that those currently making

[115] "Naughty Little Nymphos 6," *HotMovies.com*, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.hotmovies.com/video/8958/Naughty-Little-Nymphos-6/?video_id=8958&.

porns about zombie love slaves are familiar with this older zombie tradition, which predates Romero's cannibalistic iteration of zombie lore, to be discussed at length in the next chapter. These seemingly independent geneses suggest, then, that the appeals of coerced sex and the moral absolution that comes with the suspension of moral agency are common white American fantasies. Moreover, the exotic, hypersexual realm of imagined voodoo is an ideal place to house these forbidden fantasies, thereby guaranteeing the continued saliency of imagined voodoo for generation after generation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have built on the theoretical insights of the previous chapter to provide a framework for understanding hypersexual representations of imagined voodoo. Relying on insights principally drawn from Frantz Fanon, Darieck Scott, and Joseph Murphy, I argued that hypersexual imagined voodoo plays a role in creating and maintaining black subjectivity as a repository for white sexual anxieties. Using this hypothesis as an interpretive framework, I then analyzed the intimate workings of numerous representations of imagined voodoo. Focusing on film and literature, I have been especially focused on their uses of voodooed "types" such as the pimp, the femme fatale, the tragic mulatto, and the imperiled white woman. In particular, I have aimed to demonstrate the extraordinary resiliency of these tropes, which despite dramatic social change have remained largely static from the nineteenth century until the present day. Seeking its most dramatic instantiations, I have examined the working of imagined voodoo in

pornography. To build a bridge to the next chapter, I have begun to examine the zombie phenomenon through its connections to sexual perversion, voyeurism, and erotic control.

These hypersexualized themes are woven into all of the other chapters, whether it is as anxieties about the way that voodoo might be used as a tool for black revenge, or the ways that fears of zombies often stand in for the fear of black bodies. In particular, voodoo sexuality as a topic will return in the concluding chapter, "Flipping the Script," in which I examine how black writers and filmmakers have used the tropes of imagined voodoo to try to do the opposite of what it ordinarily does—that is to say, to try to create viable ways of constructing black identity, rather than perverting and distorting it.

Chapter Four

THE REVENANTS:
On the meanings of zombies

> Now, why have these dead folk not been allowed to remain in their graves?
> —Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse*[1]

> All monsters are 'undead'. And maybe they keep coming back because . . . they still have 'something to say or show us about ourselves'.
> —Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*[2]

Part I
Thinking Through Zombies

In this chapter, I think through the most visible and popular manifestation of imagined voodoo. While zombie films, books, and merchandise are now a multi-million dollar industry with new entries every week, few zombie fans are aware that the idea of the zombie derives from Haitian Vodou.[3] It was mainly through the writings of William Seabrook, published during the height of the U.S. Marine occupation of Haiti, that the concept of the *zonbi*/zombie received its fateful introduction to American popular culture. The zombie was quickly embraced, spawning stage plays, some of the first horror films, a popular cocktail, one of the most successful pinball machines ever—even a restaurant at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

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[1] Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 457.

[2] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 34.

[3] For a detailed discussion of the concept of the *zonbi* (zombie) in Haitian Vodou, consult Appendix A, "The Haitian concept of the *zonbi*."

In the past ten years, zombies have inspired a library of academic work, in particular in the field of cultural studies. In general, however, these studies have not been especially attentive to the historical origins of the zombie in Haiti, or its early connections to colonialist fantasy. Therefore, it is a helpful intervention to enter into dialogue with these recent reflections on the zombie in search of ways that, as a trope, the zombie remains a raced, classed, and subaltern figure. In part, I frame this around an attempt to answer the questions of whether the zombie is (still) black.

In the United States, the zombie has tended to be seen as a scion of horror, with little of value to tell us about either history or culture. However, as Mary Renda has argued more generally about the U.S. Marine occupation of Haiti, the entry of zombies into U.S. American culture is a visible harbinger of the more sweeping entry of Haitian culture into the United States.[4] This dramatic coupling or entwining of the two nations' histories and cultures is illustrative of the sort of irreversible and multi-directional entanglements that always attend military conquest. The history of the occupation of Haiti by the United States has tended to be told, if at all, as a story of an intervention that had almost incalculable impact on Haitian history and culture, but almost none on the United States. On the contrary, the importance of the zombie in American culture highlights the lasting impact of Haitian cultural ideas, and points towards more dramatic impacts on the way that race and otherness are rendered symbolically in the American cultural imagination.

[4] Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when zombies became cliché. Even by the early 80s, zombies had become sufficiently popular to show up outside of horror films.[5] For example, in 1983, Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video drew on the vocabulary of horror films, and in particular of zombie films, to create what has been widely praised as the greatest music video ever.[6] Following the 1980s, there was a lull in the production of zombie films, and with it, a mild dormancy period for zombies as a cultural phenomenon. In the late 90s, zombies began against to gain traction, and by the early 2000s, zombies were experiencing a renaissance of epic proportions. This has been tied to various phenomena, none more so than the terrorist attacks of

[5] There have been a number of excellent compilations about the history of zombies on film, and I will not attempt to replicate their work here. For the reader who is interested, I highly recommend Gary Rhodes's *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film*, which includes an excellent narrative history of the phenomenon. Gary D. Rhodes, *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2001). There are also several thorough encyclopedias: Jamie Russell, *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* (Surrey [UK]: FAB Press, 2005); Peter Dendle, *Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2000); Peter Dendle, *Zombie Movie Encyclopedia, Volume 2 (2000-2010)* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012). Demonstrating that it was not merely the image of zombies that fascinated early American audiences, but also the *idea* of zombies (particularly as a link to the uncanny colonial subject), Chris Vials has highlighted the important role that zombies played in radio plays from the first half of the twentieth century. Chris Vials, "The Origin of the Zombie in American Radio and Film: B-Horror, U.S. Empire, and the Politics of Disavowal," in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 41-53.

[6] The music video reportedly had its genesis in falling sales of the *Thriller* album, and one could argue that the metaphor of zombification—besides being an arresting film trope—resonates with the desired response of the audience, namely, that they would find themselves compelled to both enjoy the music and buy the record. Jackson is quoted as saying that he wanted to make certain that the zombies were not laughable, avoiding the path of bathos that zombies had taken during the height of their popularity in the 1930s with films like *Zombies on Broadway* (1945). While I can certainly recall finding the images of the *Thriller* video somewhat frightening as a child, as an adult, I am far more captivated by the impressive marketing savvy that allowed Jackson, director John Landis, and the creative team as a whole to foresee that zombies, as a trope, would have an astonishing longevity that one would hardly have expected in the 80s. However, with the meteoric increase in the popularity of zombies in the 90s and first two decades of the 2000s, Jackson's video continues to feel surprisingly contemporary—despite the 80s fashion. *Thriller*, directed by John Landis (1983), music video for Michael Jackson's "Thriller"; *Zombies on Broadway*, directed by Gordon Douglas (1945; Eurpac, 1991), VHS.

September 2001. While famous zombie authors such as Max Brooks are on record citing 9/11 as a major inspiration, I believe that it is probably best to think of the zombie boom as the product of a number of events—9/11 certainly among them, as well as the boom industry of war following it.[7] But in addition, we must factor in the increased awareness of the dangers of chemical weapons; the rising threat of contagious diseases like anthrax, avian and swine flu, flesh-eating bacteria, and antibiotic-resistant staph (MERSA); increasing distrust of government; and failing world economies, coupled with the persistent outsourcing of jobs and movement towards a service industry that makes many job more monotonous, less fulfilling, and more occult.

Whatever the cause, zombies are now everywhere. Zombies are in so many films that "zombie violence" has been added as an MPAA ratings category.[8] The bestseller *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* even added zombies to the classic Jane Austen text, including zombie fighting as a necessary life skill amidst the many other social and class anxieties central to the novel.[9] Meanwhile, for those who feel that just watching zombie films is too much critical distance, there are numerous zombie cultural phenomena that allow one to live the dream—or the nightmare, rather. For example, there is a zombie running app for iPhone and Android,

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[7] Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Max Brooks Is Not Kidding About the Zombie Apocalypse," *New York Times*, June 21, 2013, accessed June 24, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/magazine/max-brooks-is-not-kidding-about-the-zombie-apocalypse.html?hp&_r=0&pagewanted=all.

[8] I first saw this at the beginning of a theatrical trailer for the film *Warm Bodies*, directed by Jonathan Levine (2013; Summit Inc/Lionsgate, 2013), DVD.

[9] Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance—Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem!* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009).

called *Zombies, Run!*[10] It tracks one's running, creates routes, and then plays a soundtrack of being chased by zombies, presumably as encouragement. If this seems still too abstract, zombie runs are now organized in numerous cities throughout the U.S., in which extras—made up in full zombie makeup—chase after runners and attempt to catch them.[11] For the less athletic, there are zombie walks or parades, a kind of flash mob in which hundreds or even thousands of people show up *en masse* in D.I.Y. zombie makeup and shamble through the streets.[12]

And finally, for those who find that zombies hold an amorous appeal, it is possible to have a zombie wedding in New Orleans, conducted by the ordained staff of the Voodoo Authentica store in the French Quarter.[13] The Voodoo Authentica is an interesting case of a store that promotes itself as being an authentic representation of Haitian Vodou—a purported departure from the other voodoo tourist traps in the heavily touristic French Quarter. However,

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[10] Developed by the British company Six to Start, it debuted c. 2010.

[11] Courtney Rubin, "At Zombie Races, It's Survival of the Undeadest," *New York Times*, July 31, 2013, accessed August 2, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/01/fashion/at-zombie-races-its-survival-of-the-undeadest.html?_r=0.

[12] Macca Sherifi, "Zombies descend on Mexico City," *Gap Year*, November 28, 2011, accessed August 2, 2013, http://www.gapyear.com/news/150827/zombies-descend-on-mexico-city; John W. Morehead, "Zombie Walks, Zombie Jesus, and the Eschatology of Postmodern Flesh," in *The Undead and Theology*, eds. Kim Paffenroth and John W. Morehead (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 101-123. Interestingly, the idea of the zombie parade has a surprisingly long history. The promotional material for the first zombie film ever made, *White Zombie*, encouraged theater owners in both the U.S. and England to stage zombie parades through town to promote the film, a suggestion that we know from historical photographs was done on at least several occasions, including in Chicago. In Haiti, carnival in Jacmel often includes people dressed as *zonbi*, being led either chained or roped together by someone dressed as a *bokò* (sorcerer). There is every reason to suspect that this is an antique tradition, bolstered by the fact that the parading of new *zonbi* past their ancestral homes is a requirement to complete the transformation to *zonbi*, according to traditional *zonbi* lore. Cf. Gary Rhodes, *White Zombie*.

[13] "True Voodoo Zombie Wedding," YouTube video, posted by "BlankPaigeTV," March 5, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMsrC3pJ-y0. This is an example of what Carolyn Morrow Long refers to as "gothic weirdness." Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

shopping in the Voodoo Authentica quickly makes it clear that the store does not sell the vast majority of items necessary for the practice of Vodou, as one might expect to find in a Haitian botanica. Instead, the store is mostly focused on folksy art objects, items more associated with hoodoo—such as premade washes, baths, oils, and candles—and New Orleans voodoo. In this sense, the Voodoo Authentica is true to name—if in the slightly ironic sense that it *authentically* represents imagined *voodoo* in a way that aims to pass it off as an *authentic* religion. This kind of double blind, obscured from both directions, raises meaningful questions about how authenticity and sincerity mingle with both cynicism and devil-may-care attitude when it comes to the way that Haitian Vodou is commercialized in an American capitalist context.

Zombies are good to think with[14]

Given the fact that zombies don't actually *do* much, it may at first seem rather surprising to learn that zombies have been, and continue to be, of considerable interest to twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers and thinkers. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari even go so far as to claim that zombies are "the only modern myth." Meanwhile, nearly a dozen monographs and edited volumes have been published in the past two decades that take zombies as a serious philosophical topic. While the reader might initially be thrown by the fact that the titles of these books and articles frequently catch their academic writers in a moment of exuberant silliness—for example, *Chicken Soup for the Soulless*—don't be confused:[15] these

[14] The title of the section signifies on the famous aphorism by Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Animals are good to think with."

[15] Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).

works treat zombies as an extremely serious object of philosophical reflection, setting them in conversation with the likes of Spinoza, Marx, Foucault, Derrida, and Žižek.[16]

The relevant and oft-quoted sentence from Deleuze and Guattari is as follows: "The only modern myth is the myth of zombies—mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason."[17] Setting aside the use of the adjective "only," which can be chalked up to rhetorical excess, the fundamental point that Deleuze and Guattari are aiming to make is that the zombie exemplifies the condition of modern life. Throughout *Anti-Oedipus*, the authors challenge fundamental assumptions of both Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxian eschatology. Deleuze and Guattari are particularly interested in how the libido is not repressed, as Freud claimed, but rather is deeply central to daily activities. The zombie is libido made flesh, a perfect desiring machine that has the singular aim, in every molecule of its being, of fulfilling its libidinal urges.

At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari are interested in the older, Haitian vision of the zombie as a slave—the aspect they gloss when they say that zombies are "good for work." In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second part of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they emphasize, "The myth of the zombie, of the living dead, is a work myth and not a war myth."[18] In this configuration, the zombie is the perfect representation of the worker alienated from his labor.

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[16] For an excellent general introduction to the role that zombies have played in modern philosophy, see Dave Beisecker, "Nothing but Meat? Philosophical Zombies and Their Cinematic Counterparts," in *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, eds. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 191-206.

[17] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 335; Brent Atkins, "A Rumor of Zombies: Deleuze and Guattari on Death," *Philosophy Today* 51 (2007): 119-124.

[18] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 470; cited in Tina Peppin, "'Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock': The Living Dead and Apocalyptic Dystopia," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 6, no. 3 (2010): 40.1-40.15.

Instrumentalized by the sorcerer, the zombie is, like the modern worker, deprived of discretion over the use of his labor, as well as control over the product of his labor. Exploring this concept, Maria Warner writes that zombies "embody a vision of human existence that was precipitated by a chemical fusion of slavery, its abolition and its reinstatement, excited and fired in the kiln of poisoned power relations… Zombies embody the principal ghostly condition of our time."[19] Later, she adds, "The zombie is a specter still tormented by the carnal condition of being, especially toil."[20]

Therefore, the zombie is Marxian alienation made flesh, exemplifying the "monstrous effects" that come from the estrangement from both labor and human relationships that is the costs of this kind of economic and social arrangement that renders workers fundamentally dead-in-life.[21] In addition to laborers, zombies exemplify many other experiences made possible by the schizophrenic qualities of modern life, including refugeeism, statelessness, and the social death that accompany economic destitution, language ghettoization, and disease. As such, in the words of John and Jean Comaroff, the zombie "dramatizes the strangeness of what has become real."[22]

Elsewhere, Deleuze further elaborated on how the zombie captures the essence of modern life, which he likened to an ongoing apocalypse, writing, "If we are steeped in the Apocalypse

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[19] Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 357; cited by Pippin in "Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock."

[20] Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 359.

[21] Lars Bang Larsen, "Zombies of Immaterial Labor: The Modern Monster and the Death of Death," *e-flux* #15 (2010), accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/zombies-of-immaterial-labor-the-modern-monster-and-the-death-of-death/.

[22] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants and Millennial Capitalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002), 779–805.

[i.e. the biblical Book of Revelation], it is rather because it . . . is a book for all those who think of themselves as survivors. It is the book of Zombies."[23] Deleuze is contrasting contemporary life, which he suggests has descended into a kind of perpetual apocalyptic vision, with the Gospels and their promise of liberation and redemption. Likewise, K. Silem Mohammed has recently explored how zombies constitute "a Spinozan force of decomposition, a completely non-moral and completely liberated interaction of matter with other matter."[24] Again, in so doing, he is contrasting zombies, as an allegory of modern life, with the salvific grace of Jesus, the ultimate compositional force—that which makes two parts greater upon their encounter—versus decompositional, that which robs something of its life essence upon contact, e.g. zombies.

Moreover, many thinkers have seized upon the idea that the zombie is a hyperbolic embodiment of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century consumerism. Inspired in part by Romero's choice to set his second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead*, in a shopping mall, Larsen muses,

> Capitalism is not a totalitarian or tyrannical form of domination. It primarily spreads its effects through indifference (that can be compared to the zombie's essential lack of protagonism). It is not what capital does, but what it doesn't do or have: it does not have a concept of society; it does not counteract the depletion of nature; it has no concept of citizenship or culture; and so on. Thus it is a slave morality that makes us cling to capital

[23] Gilles Deleuze, "Nietzsche and St. Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Cf. Craig Hickman, "Symbols of Life: Deleuze reading D.H. Lawrence," accessed February 11, 2014, http://darkecologies.com/2013/01/14/symbols-of-life-deleuze-reading-d-h-lawrence/. This is from Deleuze's commentary on D.H. Lawrence's *Apocalypse* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

[24] K. Silem Mohammed, "Zombies, Rest and Motion: Spinoza and the Speed of Undeath," in *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*, eds. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammed (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), 91-102; Danielle Shroyer, "Spinoza, Deleuze and zombies," May 13, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, http://danielleshroyer.com/2011/05/13/spinoza-deleuze-and-zombies/.

> as though it were our salvation—capitalism is, in fact, what we bring to it.[25]

Larsen goes on to explore how modern consumerism voids consumers of any real subjectivity through the proposition that buying things is an authentic way of experiencing oneself. Larsen argues that this process creates a consumerist feedback loop that dismantles personal history, social connections, and real experiences as paths to subjectivity, replacing them all with a commercial transaction. He writes,

> In other words, one's own subjectivity becomes a product one consumes, by being provided with opportunities to consume one's own time and attention through emotive and cognitive responses to objects and situations. . . Cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen calls such self-consume [*sic*] *Eigenblutdoping,* blood doping. Just as cyclists dope themselves using their own blood, cultural consumers seek to augment their self-identity by consuming the products of their own subjectivity. According to Diederichsen, this phenomenon is a "solipsistic and asocial horror" . . .[26]

Through this insidious process, consumers are reduced to desiring/purchasing automata, whose legitimate subjectivity is replaced by a series of capitalized transactions. Driven by what Deleuze and Guattari call "libido" or "work," and what Warner calls "toil," zombies exemplify this desubjectified, perfect consumer, every atom of their being resurrected to a permanent and bottomless hunger that drives them to the commercialized transaction of consuming their neighbors. As David Pagano writes,

> The ruptured body that only superficially hampers purposive movement defines. . . zombies, who do not need closure (of the skin). Whatever regions of their bodies remain covered by skin stand only as signs of the superfluity of any particular somatic functions that those regions once performed. Like the homogenous space of the New Jerusalem, the

[25] Lars Bang Larsen, "Zombies of Immaterial Labor."

[26] Ibid.

> zombies' bodies contain parts that are functionally undifferentiated, "perfect" in their absolute reduction to hunger.[27]

In fact, zombies have become the favorite metaphor for all things modern. The financial crisis of 2007 has been blamed, among other things, on "zombie banks" and "zombie mortgages," which, if taken literally, would seem ironically to claim that the financial system itself is a zombie—as well, it would seem, as those it consumes.[28] Along the same lines, Chuck Klosterman has speculated that the appeal of zombies is that "contemporary people are less interested in seeing depictions of their unconscious fears and more attracted to allegories of how their day-to-day existence feels."[29] He goes on to add:

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[27] David Pagano, "The Space of Apocalypse in Zombie Cinema," in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, eds. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), 77.

[28] Bennett Sims, the author of *A Questionable Shape* (Columbus, OH: Two Dollar Radio, 2013), has said of this nomenclature, "Zombies embody a modern anxiety about globalization and societal collapse, which might explain their appeal as metaphors for these crises. . . Economic meltdowns are said to be caused by 'zombie banks' and 'zombie mortgages,' and the CDC prepares for real epidemics with fake zombie-survival guides." Ron Charles, "Why won't zombies just die?," *Washington Post*, June 24, 2013, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2013/06/24/why-wont-zombies-just-die/?hpid=z11. Other notables: Linguistic zombies, "corporate zombies," and "zombie litigation": Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan, "'Corporate Zombies' and the Perils of 'Zombie Litigation': The Walking Dead in American Judicial Writing," in *Zombies are Us*, 76-85. Also "zombie voters": Glenn Kessler, "The case of 'zombie' voters in South Carolina," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2013, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-case-of-zombie-voters-in-south-carolina/2013/07/24/86de3c64-f403-11e2-aa2e-4088616498b4_blog.html?hpid=z4. Also zombie tax law: John Schwartz, "Estate Planning for Savvy Zombies," *New York Times*, July 7, 2012, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/business/mutfund/estate-planning-for-the-savvy-zombie-essay.html?pagewanted=all; Daniel W. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[29] Chuck Klosterman, "My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead," *New York Times*, December 3, 2010, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/05/arts/television/05zombies.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&gwh=B633D131FCD75084EC988405E89C0C45&.

> . . . zombie killing is philosophically similar to reading and deleting 400 work e-mails on a Monday morning or filling out paperwork that only generates more paperwork, or following Twitter gossip out of obligation, or performing tedious tasks in which the only true risk is being consumed by the avalanche. The principal downside to any zombie attack is that the zombies will never stop coming; the principal downside to life is that you will be never be finished with whatever it is you do. . . This is our collective fear projection: that we will be consumed. . . Yet this war is manageable, if not necessarily winnable.[30]

In other words, from a "pop" perspective, zombies appeal because they are a hybrid of what our life is *already* like and how we fear it could become even worse. The zombie apocalypse, then, operates as a hyperbole for the cube-monkey lifestyle. Precisely as Deleuze and Guattari argue, the zombie is the embodiment of the Marxian alienated proletariat. In this sense, the growing phenomenon of zombie parades could even be seen as a form of protest, with the proletariat performing the zombie identity as a way of critiquing their forced identification with the trope.

Because of this increasing identification, I believe that Klosterman is incorrect when he goes on to write, "Zombie love, however, is always communal. If you dig zombies, you dig the entire zombie concept. It's never personal."[31] Traditionally, this may have been true, with zombies always as hordes, rather than in the individual. However, in recent years, this dynamic has been shifting, with zombies being increasingly represented in the individual—and in fact, as main characters or even narrators, as for example in *Warm Bodies*; *In the Flesh*; and *Otto, or Up With Dead People*.[32]

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] *Warm Bodies*, directed by Jonathan Levine (2013; Summit Inc/Lionsgate, 2013), DVD; *In the Flesh*, Season 1, directed by Johnny Campbell (BBC, 2013-Present), television series; *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*, directed by Bruce LaBruce (2008; Strand Releasing, 2009), DVD. These films have been discussed in Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo," in Part IV, "The Erotic Life of Zombies."

The zombie as hero provides an opportunity to explore the long-term consequences of what it means to experience subjecthood in social death. The list of opportunities to be socially dead is, if anything, increasing as global society becomes more wealth-driven, less concerned with the welfare of the lowliest. HIV, for example, as a condition that is now identified as paradoxically both fatal *and* a manageable disease, leaves millions in the limbo of being, perhaps for decades at a time, socially and sexually dead, contagious (like zombies) through intimate contact—in other words, a life in death. Likewise, racism, homophobia, poverty, political persecution (including through the capaciously enlarged category of "traitor"), alienated labor, technologically-rendered anonymity, and mental illness leverage millions of humans into similar categories of life-in-death, what we might call zombihood. Therefore, the move towards the zombie as hero suggests a cynical acquiescence to the idea of "life in death" that increasingly *is* the condition of post-modern life: the zombie hero as a way of exploring this new life *in extremis*.

Are zombies (still) black?

This discussion of the philosophical weight of zombies might lead one to think that questions of race have all but dropped out of zombiedom. However, on the contrary, it is clear that zombies are, in many ways, still fundamentally raced as black in popular culture, a fact that periodically reasserts itself in rather shocking ways. This takes a variety of forms, some as minor as the zombie boy/non-zombie girl relationship at the center of the film *Warm Bodies* being described in the *New York Times* review as a "mixed marriage."[33] The following two

[33] Manohla Dargis, "It'll Be a Mixed Marriage: Just One of Them Is Alive," *New York Times* January 31, 2013, accessed August 1, 2013, http://movies.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/movies/warm-bodies-written-and-directed-by-jonathan-levine.html?_r=0.

examples drawn from the news are far more dramatic examples of how zombies continue to be racialized.

In Miami on Saturday, May 26, 2012, a Haitian-American named Rudy Eugene, likely high on the drug known as "bath salts," violently attacked a homeless man named Ronald Poppo, gnawing at the victim's face for nearly twenty minutes before being fatally shot by Miami Police. When the story first broke, it was briefly pitched by the news as a cautionary tale of drug use, particularly the use of "bath salts," a synthetic amphetamine known to provoke transient (or sometimes permanent) psychosis, extreme violence, insensitivity to pain, and extraordinary physical strength.

However, in subsequent days, a more sensational angle was picked up, with the story being dubbed "The Miami Zombie." Posts began to circulate on the internet claiming the attack to be a sign of the so-called zombie apocalypse.[34] And then, as if by magic, the news story transformed into the plot of a zombie movie. The anonymous homeless victim became a real person with an improbable story: former brainiac tormented by decades of alcoholism.[35] Ubiquitous side-by-side mugshots of Eugene and Poppo, found as the header of nearly every news story, emphasized that the victim was white and the perpetrator black. The nudity of the attacker was accentuated, and the fact that he first stripped the victim before gnawing his flesh, intimating unsavory sexual undertones. No longer did Eugene simply gnaw at the victim's face; he was a "cannibal." The security footage was released so all of America could watch a real-life

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[34] "11 Signs of the Zombie Apocalypse: 'Miami Zombie & More," *The Daily Beast* (n.d.), accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.thedailybeast.com/galleries/2012/05/30/10-signs-of-the-zombie-apocalypse-miami-zombie-more-photos.html.

[35] Helen Kennedy, "Victim of 'Miami Zombie' attack graduated from Manhattan's Stuyvesant High School," *New York Daily News*, May 30, 2012, accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/victim-miami-zombie-attack-graduated-manhattan-stuyvesant-high-school-article-1.1086770.

zombie snuff film.[36] Eugene's Haitianness was played up. And finally, Eugene's girlfriend came forward with the dramatic accusation that her boyfriend was suffering from a voodoo curse.[37] She insisted that Eugene was a good Christian who left the house that morning carrying his Bible, and was either drugged or cursed by as-yet-unnamed voodooists.

Other than his Haitianness, there is no explanation for why Eugene would have been targeted for a voodoo curse, but in some ways his innocence makes for an even better story of evil preying upon good, if flawed, people. Not if, but *when* the story is turned into a Hollywood film, the Tampa Bay Times already provided the tagline that will no doubt appear on the poster: "She has never believed in voodoo, until now."[38] So the story came to highlight many major elements long associated with voodoo: curses, cannibalism, zombies, perverse sex acts, nudity, black revenge, and mind control.

Allow me to say that I feel very sad for Eugene's girlfriend. No one wants to be the woman on the news insisting that her lover is not a monster. She was in a horrible situation, and I understand why she felt the need to propose a narrative, however improbable, that explained how the person she knew and the person who ate a man's face were somehow the same person. However—and it is a weighty however—if she had pointed the finger at any religion other than Vodou/voodoo, the headlines would have been very different. For example, if the media interviewed a grieving girlfriend of a man who had committed a heinous crime, and she

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[36] "Security Video shows entire Miami 'zombie' attack," *CNN Online*, May 30, 2012, accessed August 1, 2014, http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/30/security-video-shows-entire-miami-zombie-attack/.

[37] Nadege Green, "Girlfriend: 'Miami Zombie' may have had voodoo spell that made him chew off a man's face," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 31, 2012, accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.tampabay.com/news/bizarre/girlfriend-miami-zombie-may-have-had-voodoo-spell-that-made-him-chew-off-a/1232922.

[38] Ibid.

said, "Jews made my boyfriend kill," public sympathy would quickly turn to dismay and outrage. The woman's story would become entirely about latter-day anti-Semitism, or perhaps mental illness.

But from the media's perspective, Vodou/voodoo is good for business, especially in Miami, a city that has even more claim to being America's Vodou/voodoo City than does New Orleans. Miami has the largest population of Haitians living anywhere outside of Haiti, and also one of the most vibrant Vodou communities in the world. Of late, this Vodou community has increasingly been the subject of softball "human interest" news stories, which typically take an ambivalent-to-tolerant stance on Vodou. Let us call the Miami Zombie the counter-punch, then. Lest anyone forget, as far as popular culture is concerned, the real story about Vodou is not communities of immigrants struggling to live prosperous, dignified lives. It is zombies, it is thrill-kills, it is black-on-white violence, it is curses that turn good to evil as casually and abruptly as the flipping of a coin. If, in the same story, it is possible to adopt a somewhat mocking tone in relation to Eugene's girlfriend—that she could believe such a preposterous notion—then so much the better. They will mock even as they chide, caution, and horrify.

Astonishingly, in the same week that Rudy Eugene attacked Ronald Poppo in Miami, an equally gruesome "zombie" crime occurred in the suburbs of Baltimore. The perpetrator, Alexander Kinyua, and his victim, Kujoe Agyei-Kodie, were both students at Morgan State University—Kinyua an undergraduate, Agyei-Kodie a doctoral student on leave due to visa problems. On May 25, 2012, Kinyua murdered Agyei-Kodie, who was temporarily living with him and his family, at the family's home in Joppatowne. Then, Kinya dismembered Agyei-Kodie's body, eating parts of his brain and heart. The story was quickly identified as "zombie-like," and numerous internet sites heralded it as a sign of the zombie apocalypse.

As in the case of the "Miami zombie," a number of irrelevant racial elements of the Baltimore story were frequently highlighted in news reports. For example, in the coverage by WPTV, the Baltimore NBC affiliate, a point was made to emphasize that both men were from Africa—as though it were a meaningful connection between the two men that one was born in Kenya but emigrated as a young child, and the other had lived in Ghana for most of his adult life. Moreover, the story emphasized Agyei-Kodie's immigration woes, making him sound like a fugitive waiting to be deported to Ghana. Most interestingly, the story emphasizes that Morgan State is an HBCU, a fact cited in regard to Kinyua's psychotic Facebook ramblings, posted prior to the murder: "In February, Kinyua posted a question on Facebook, asking fellow students at historically black colleges and universities if they were 'strong enough to endure ritual HBCU mass human sacrifices around the country and still be able to function as human beings?'"[39] Flatly stated, if what one finds most worthy of remark in that quotation is that Morgan State is a black school—rather than that Kinyua is clearly psychotic—that is highly revealing of one's biases and editorial vision. The story concludes by drawing explicit connections between the Baltimore and the Miami "zombie" case, as if the connection were not already clear enough: The two cases of "zombie" "cannibalism" have already been linked for the reader by emphasizing that these were "black" crimes, with cultic overtones, linked to either Africa or its New World "outpost" of Haiti. Not surprisingly, Kinyua was later diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, although the possibility is never explored in any of the news coverage

[39] HBCUs are Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Sarah Brumfield, "Alexander Kinyua 'zombie-like' attack: Maryland man who ate roommate's brain ranted online, cops say," *WPTV*, June 3, 2012, accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.wptv.com/dpp/news/news_archives/alexander-kinyua-zombie-like-attack-maryland-man-who-ate-roommates-brain-ranted-online-cops-say.

from the time of the crime. It is almost as though no explanation is really necessary because Kinyua's blackness is already something akin to probable cause.

Recalling that the Greek word "apocalypse" means "revelation," I propose that if there is a zombie apocalypse—that is, a zombie revelation—it is this: in the supposedly post-racial America of Obama, racist tropes remain more alive than ever, judging by the ease with which a tragic news story can be converted by a few news cycles into the script of a zombie film. Note, though, that saying that these stories were reformatted to conform to a racist trope is not the same as saying that news agents are racist. If anything, it is more alarming to consider the opposite: namely, that racist narratives remain so comfortable and deployable, come so readily to hand, and compel such visceral responses from their audiences that they are told and retold, even by people who should know better.

Part II
Four key sources for the American zombie

The history of the zombie in the United States is also a history of colonial encounter. As discussed already, the zombie was introduced to the United States largely as a result of the military occupation of Haiti (1915-1934). During this period, Haiti became, for many white Americans, the paradigmatic exotic Other—an investiture which helped to justify the military intervention, even as it provided a locus for exploring fantasies and anxieties about blackness more generally. Within this discursive space, the zombie became the axiomatic exemplar of Haiti's intractable strangeness, a figure construed as equal parts horrific and laughable.

In this section, I look at four key texts that helped create the American notion of the zombie as we now know it. The first, Seabrook, effectively introduced the concept of the zombie to an American audience. Hurston, the second text, was equally instrumental in this process. Both assayed—like Davis, the fourth text—to wed seemingly mutually exclusive ways of representing the zombie. On the one hand, they all portrayed the zombie as the paradigmatic Gothic Other, a symptom of Haiti's irreducible strangeness. But in addition, all offered the zombie as an object for positivist scientific scrutiny, situated within a larger narrative framework that upheld the superiority of Western scientific knowledge over indigenous systems of knowing. The third text, George Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead*, departed radically from this project—dramatically altering the manifest qualities of the zombie, even as it restored to the figure some of its most Haitian qualities—namely, its prerogative to comment on dynamics of class and power.

Seabrook's *The Magic Island*

When Seabrook published his book, *The Magic Island*, in 1929, it was at the height of the American Marine occupation of Haiti. Americans read the book voraciously, drawn to his descriptions of Haiti's exotic and scandalous religious culture. Zombies, in particular, came to emblematize everything that was weird and backwards about Haiti—in other words, the wrongs that Americans were supposedly there to fix. Already discussed at length in the chapter "Hot Voodoo," I will focus my attentions here on those parts of Seabrook's book that are specifically about zombies.

The chapter ". . . Dead Men Working In the Cane Fields" is told as a classic Master-and-coon fabliau, with Seabrook playing the sophisticated white who listens with forbearance to his informant Polynice's Gothic tale of zombies.[40] Then, in classic Gothic fashion, the fantasy becomes reality—sort of: Polynice offers to take Seabrook to see real life zombies for himself. At first, Seabrook is frightened and struck dumb by the sight of the zombies. However, his white mind quickly recovers, and Seabrook is able to perceive what his informant—too gullible to be as urbane as he appears to be—fails to consider, namely, that there must be some *natural*, rational explanation for the zombie phenomenon. He at first considers the possibility that the zombies must simply be mentally disabled or brain damaged people. However, it is a discussion with Dr. Antoine Villiers that finally sets him on the "right" course, when Villiers cites the famous Article 246 from the Haitian Penal Code, in which poisoning someone to give the appearance of death, such that the person is buried, will be charged as murder, "*no matter what result follows*"—in other words, regardless of whether the person is then resurrected as a zombie.[41] Nearly a full decade before Hurston, Seabrook has already published the claim that

[40] In the chapter, Seabrook relies on two informants, Constant Polynice and Dr. Antoine Villiers. Although I have been unable to find more information about Dr. Villiers, I have found that Polynice, described by Seabrook only as a "farmer," was a great deal more. As Kate Ramsey notes, Polynice is profiled in René Rosemond's *L'Énergie Nationale: Les Précurseurs*. The book is largely a work of Who's Who propaganda and ego-stroking. It praises the collaboration between President Lescot's government and large Haitian-American businesses, profiling the major business leaders in Haiti at that time, most of whom were foreign, American in particular. Polynice is described as a senator from Gonâve who owns "vastes propriétés de la Plaine du Cul de Sac" [*"vast tracts of the Plain of Cul de Sac"*]. In other words, he is not a farmer, he is a plantation owner! René J. Rosemond, *L'Énergie Nationale: "Les Précurseurs"* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie du College Vertieres, 1942), 139.

[41] William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1929), 103.

zombies are created by biochemical means—but placing this revelation in the hands of Villiers highlights that this idea was certainly not new to Haitians.[42]

Early in the chapter, Seabrook gives this introductory description of the concept of the zombie:

> It seemed (or so I had been assured by negroes more credulous than Polynice) that while the *zombie* came from the grave, it was neither a ghost, nor yet a person, who had been raised like Lazarus from the dead. The *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has had time to rot, galvanize it into movement, and then make of it a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation or the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens.[43]

In this passage, Seabrook is lampooning bourgeois Haitian society. If Seabrook's writing is even vaguely subtle about his intended target, King's facing illustration leaves absolutely no doubt (Figure 4.1). It shows a group of blacks, dressed in the sophisticated fashions of the Harlem Renaissance, in a salon setting. However, the salon is being dominated by the image of a grotesque, animal-like black sorcerer in the upper left, whose arms are outspread in the iconic pose of hypnotism and mind control. The blacks in the salon, falling under his sway, have the confused, slack-jawed look of the drugged, as though they are already themselves halfway to being zombies. The plate is captioned, ". . . strange tales are told of Voodoo in the boudoir and

[42] As Kate Ramsey notes, this was one of the only sections of the Haitian Penal Code that was translated into English for the benefit of Marines stationed in Haiti. This had the awkward and ironic effect of reifying the ontological reality of precisely the "false" practices that they were meant to be suppressing. It also reinforced the image of Haiti as a land of sorcerers, suggesting that such practices were so widespread and grave that they had to be made the focus of a considerable portion of the law. Cf. Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 160.

[43] Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 93.



Figure 4.1: ". . . strange tales are told of Voodoo in the boudoir and salon." Illustration by Alexander King for Seabrook's *The Magic Island*.

salon."[44] By situating these zombie retellings within the milieu of the Haitian salon (and bedroom), Seabrook aims to make Haitian bourgeois life seem utterly uncanny to an American reader, with even the intelligentsia and middle class revealed to be mere pretenders to European and American culture—in fact, awash in a sea of superstition. With this portrayal, Seabrook engages directly in an act of nationalist propaganda, by suggesting that those most likely to serve as Haiti's ruling class are too gullible and superstitious to be able to competently do so without American intervention.

Seabrook presses even harder on the issue, making it not simply a matter of Haitian vs. American, but black vs. white. He quotes Polynice as saying, "Superstition? But I assure you that this of which you now speak is not a matter of superstition. Alas, these things—and other evil practices connected with the dead—exist. They exist to the extent that you whites do not dream of, though evidences are everywhere under your eyes."[45] The expression "under your eyes" becomes quite interesting in the context of Seabrook, because so much of any critical analysis of his book must dwell on the question of seeing versus not seeing—or, put differently, on the outer eye versus the inner eye. Seabrook repeatedly acknowledges, in moments of critical distance, that what he is writing—as in the passages discussed in the chapter on hypersexuality—are exotic fabrications. Nonetheless, he is here claiming, in effect, that only his *white* eyes are capable of really seeing the truth of things—even if it is a projected truth, a sight that is being produced by his inner, imaginative, or libidinal eye. A few pages later, Seabrook interrogates Polynice again:

[44] Ibid., facing 93.

[45] Ibid., 94.

> "You are not a peasant like those of the Cul-de-Sac; you are a reasonable man, or at least it seems to me you are. Now how much of that story, honestly, do you believe?"
>
> He replied earnestly: "I did not see these special things, but there were many witnesses, and why should I not believe them when I myself have also seen *zombies*? When you also have seen them, with their faces and their eyes in which there is no life, you will not only believe in these *zombies* who should be resting in their graves, you will pity them from the bottom of your heart."[46]

By taking recourse in the Enlightenment notion of reason—that Polynice is a *reasonable* man—Seabrook in effect is saying, "but you are not like these other blacks!" In other words, "whiten up." Polynice's reply goes over Seabrook's head, as he evokes the deep cultural knowledge of oral tradition to support the notion that the knowledge he claims is from reputable sources and therefore carries the valence of truth, no less so than "scientific" or "rational" knowledge. To the same degree that Seabrook cannot understand Polynice, or refuses to, Polynice misunderstands Seabrook as well—in a sense, committing the error of taking him *too much* at his own word. Seabrook has taken shelter in the idea of rational knowledge, and so Polynice reasonably contends that once Seabrook has seen zombies himself—has, as it were, collected evidence of the phenomenon—then he, too, will believe "his own eyes."

In fact, Polynice underestimates, among other things, the inoculative power of Seabrook's whiteness against anything that cleaves too close to a black epistemology. Below is their last exchange on the subject of zombies.

> [Polynice said,] "Look here, I respect your distrust of what you call superstition, and your desire to find out the truth, but if what you were saying now were the whole truth [i.e., that zombies are just people with severe mental retardation], how could it be that over and over again, people who have stood by and seen their own relatives buried have . . . found those relatives working as *zombies*, and have sometimes killed the man who held them in servitude?"

[46] Ibid., 100.

> "Polynice," I said, "that's just the part of it that I can't believe. The *zombies* in such cases may have resembled the dead persons, or even been 'doubles'—you know what doubles are, how two people can resemble each other to a startling degree. But it is a fixed rule of reasoning in America that we will never accept the possibility of a thing's being 'supernatural' so long as any natural explanation, even far-fetched, seems adequate."[47]

In other words, Polynice is saying to Seabrook that his own accounting of the phenomenon fails to meet the basic standard that he has set for it, namely that it is rational. Seabrook's explanation fails this test because it does not offer a reasonable or satisfying explanation for the phenomenon in its entirety, as Polynice outlines. Seabrook's reply is astonishing. He states that "Americans"—by which we must conclude he means whites—will accept even a "far-fetched" explanation before they'll accept one that involves the "supernatural." What Seabrook in effect is saying is that the "rational" explanation *does not even need to be rational*. It needs only to adhere to a "white" epistemology, one approved by the dominant colonial narrative that white methods of knowledge production always and inevitably triumph over black methods of knowledge production.

During his encounter with the woman that Seabrook describes as the zombie "keeper," Lamercie, she snaps at him, "'*Z'affai' nèg' pas z'affai' blanc*' ["*Zafè nèg pa zafè blan*", in standard Kreyòl orthography]," which he translates as, "Negroes' affairs are not for whites." While this overly literal translation of the expression is possible, a more accurate translation might be, "Haitian/insider things are not for foreigners/outsiders"—which is, in effect, what Seabrook's informants have been trying to tell him all along. While Seabrook hears numerous stories about zombies, he fails to comprehend the level of knowledge, privy to the insider or "initiated," that is being communicated to him. Instead, he stays mired in questions of

[47] Ibid., 102.

ontological reality, a topic that his informants repeatedly describe as being of manifestly little interest. Therefore, as Seabrook is explaining why white epistemology is superior, he is literally showing himself to be the fool who doesn't understand the point of what he's being told.

An excellent example of this failure of understanding is Seabrook's response to the initial zombie story that Polynice tells him. In the story, Polynice tells of zombies working for Hasco—the Haitian-American Sugar Company—under the direction of a *bokò* (sorcerer) named Ti-Joseph and his wife Croyance. Hasco was, in Seabrook's words,

> . . . an immense factory plant, dominated by a huge chimney, with clanging machinery, steam whistles, freight cars. It is like a chunk of Hoboken. It lies in the eastern suburbs of Port-au-Prince, and beyond it stretch the can fields of the Cul-de-Sac. Hasco makes rum when the sugar market is off, pays low wages, twenty or thirty cents a day, and gives steady work. It is modern big business, and it sounds it, looks it, smells it.
>
> Such, then, was the incongruous background for the weird tale Constant Polynice now told me.[48]

The Hasco company was, in fact, one of the motivating powers behind the Marine occupation, since its significant investiture in Haiti was part of the American capital that the military was sent to protect from Haitians themselves. As Karen Richman details in her book *Migration and Vodou*, Hasco accumulated massive tracts of fertile land in Haiti by effectively defrauding people out of their family's farms.[49] Leveraged into selling these smaller farms to Haitian investors under the direction of Hasco, the company was able to amass enormous plantations, larger than any in Haiti since before the Revolution. These same former-landowners were then obliged to return to laboring as day laborers, working the land that they had formerly owned, and were paid a pittance for their toil. Although Hasco is now long gone from Haiti, Richman notes that, to this day, that sort of underpaid, anonymous day laborer is called a *zonbi* by many in the

[48] Ibid., 95.

[49] Karen Richman, *Migration and Vodou* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

Léogane Plain—signifying their anonymity, the meaninglessness of their labor, and the degree to which they are alienated from its outcomes. They are, in effect, no better than zombies toiling a field for their master.

Therefore, Hasco, which Seabrook says is an "incongruous background," is neither incongruous nor background, but rather absolutely central to the moral message of the story being told. As Kate Ramsey points out in her analysis of this passage, the idea of having zombies literally toiling for Hasco is a way for the Haitian oral community to assert its moral vision: it proclaims that Hasco is essentially a slaveholder, using human beings *as though* they were zombies to generate the maximum amount of profit, while accepting no responsibility to the community that it has disrupted and is draining of its resources (labor, land, etc.).[50] The story presents a critique on multiple fronts: of Hasco itself; of the American occupation that makes it possible; of the puppet Haitian government that capitulated; and of the capitalist system itself, which makes zombies through the alienation of labor. However, the subversive nature of this story is clearly lost on Seabrook, whose only response to Polynice's story is to interrogate the ontology of the zombies.[51]

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[50] Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 170-176.

[51] It is interesting to consider the possibility that the subversive nature of the story may also be lost on its teller, Polynice. In Rosemond's *L'Énergie Nationale*, Polynice ironically is profiled only a few pages before the executives of Hasco itself, and in amongst the many captains of industry who had made possible and benefitted from the very kind of exploitation that Polynice's story decries. Of course, this is one of the possible ironies of the tradition of orality that Polynice praises, namely, that the tradition you are helping to survive may be wiser than you are, and even critical of your position in ways that are coded such that they will not be obvious to you. In this case, by telling a story that he heard from others because he found it entertaining, Polynice is in fact telling a story that critiques his own position and ends up making both Seabrook and Polynice look foolish.

Hurston's *Tell My Horse*

By 1936, when she secured funds from the Guggenheim Foundation to travel to Jamaica and Haiti, Zora Neale Hurston was already a noted figure in the Harlem Renaissance. When the result of her research was published in 1938 as *Tell My Horse*, the general consensus was disappointment. It sold poorly, and many—including her former informal advisor Melville J. Herskovits—noted that it failed to deliver as anthropology. In more recent decades, with the revival of Hurston's reputation as one of the great American writers of the twentieth century, a spirited debate has ensued about whether and to what degree *Tell My Horse* constitutes one of Hurston's rare failures.

For our purposes, what is of principal interest is that Hurston's *Tell My Horse* included several chapters about Vodou/voodoo secret societies and their activities, including an entire chapter about zombies, which purported to publish the only existing photograph of a zombie. In the United States and Europe, this portion of the book fueled the already considerable popular appetite for information about zombies. In a 1943 radio interview with Mary Margaret McBride, Hurston shows reticence and obvious fatigue when asked to talk about zombies. By then, it was five years since the publication of *Tell My Horse*. She was promoting her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, and was clearly tired of fielding questions about zombies.[52] This highlights the deep ambiguity that Amy Fass Emory identifies in Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, springing at least in part from the many conflicting obligations that Hurston saw her book as necessarily trying to fulfill—anthropology; popular entertainment, which she feared verged at times on a kind of minstrelsy; her desire for literary greatness; and her commitment to the Harlem Renaissance's project of art as racial upliftment.

[52] "Zora Neale Hurston on Zombies," YouTube video, posted by "sauviejo," November 22, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmKPjh5RX6c.

Both Gwendolyn Mikell and Amy Fass Emery have, with varying levels of nuance, mounted defenses of Hurston's portrayals of Haiti and Vodou in *Tell My Horse*.[53] Mikell focuses on how *Tell My Horse* functions as an experiment in style, exploring the text's intensely private and narrative ways of performing anthropology, prefiguring the reflexive turn in anthropology. Mikell insists that Hurston manages to convey to the reader the inherent logic of the Vodou tradition, as a Vodou insider would experience it. Unfortunately, this claim is limited by Mikell's own lack of knowledge about Vodou: she does not realize that Hurston in fact presents a very convoluted version of Vodou ritual logic and order, such that most Vodouisants would find it quite perplexing.

Emery, on the other hand, is interested in the fundamental impossibilities of *Tell My Horse*, how Hurston felt obliged to satisfy too many criteria in the same text, resulting in the text itself being a sort of "zombie," deprived of the opportunity to self-determine its destiny. While I am sympathetic to these arguments, I do think that *Tell My Horse* distorts the reader's perception of Vodou, and (if only accidentally) helped contribute key notions to the foundation of imagined voodoo. Perhaps the most damning evidence of this is, ironically, in Mikell's and Emery's essays, both of which reveal heavily distorted and dark views of voodoo as shaped by Hurston's work.

I find Hurston's *Tell My Horse* especially problematic because she presents it as a work that will correct "dark" impressions that the reader might have about Vodou. In particular, Hurston portrays herself—through her multiple positionalities as a black woman and an anthropologist, one of the leading authorities on black transatlantic religious and cultural

[53] Gwendolyn Mikell, "When Horses Talk: Reflections on Zora Neale Hurston's Haitian Anthropology," *Phylon* 43, no. 3 (1982): 218-30; Amy Fass Emery, "The Zombie In/As the Text: Zora Neale Hurston's 'Tell My Horse,'" *American Review* 39, no. 3 (2005): 327-36.

traditions—to be uniquely situated to present "the truth" about Vodou. This combination of social scientific posturing and Hurstonian bombast compels the reader to trust that Hurston is an absolute authority on the Vodou religion, when in fact this was not the case.

For the remainder of the discussion on Hurston, I will focus on Chapter XIII of *Tell My Horse*, called simply "Zombies," looking both at what specifically Hurston had to say about zombies, as well as noting some of the uses of the voodoo Gothic mode within the chapter. Hurston begins,

> What is the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Zombies? I do not know, but I know that I saw the broken remnant, relic, or refuse of Felicia Felix-Mentor in a hospital yard. Here in the shadow of the Empire State Building, death and the graveyard are final. It is such a positive end that we use it as a measure of nothingness and eternity. We have the quick and the dead. But in Haiti there is the quick, the dead, and then there are Zombies.[54]

While "subtle" may not be the first word to spring to mind in describing this passage, there is an incredible amount of narrative finesse at play here. First of all, Hurston invokes again the idea of "truth," over which she has by this point established herself as a purported authority. The foreshadowing of mentioning Felicia Felix-Mentor, the real-life zombie that Hurston met and photographed, is especially compelling, since at this point the reader has no idea who she is. Hurston describes herself and the reader as being "in the shadow of the Empire State Building," a way of declaring her own allegiance to American epistemology, while also stating her commitment to a kind of American dream of progress, with which she assumes the reader also identifies. Then, in earnest, Hurston performs in the Gothic mode by summoning the specter of death and claiming that, in Haiti, there is a third space—between life and death—a monstrous or

[54] Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 456.

grotesque space with which she has personal experience. She goes on to describe Haiti as a country beset with fear of this grotesque—in other words, as a non-rational space.

The majority of the chapter focuses on relating the details of a ceremony that Hurston calls "Ba Moun" (lit. "Give Person"), which she says is the principal cause of zombification. During the ceremony, a person, aided by a Vodou priest or sorcerer (bokor [*bokò*]), summons a voodoo spirit and agrees to give that spirit a loved one to eat every year in exchange for prosperity. Each year, then, the voodoo priest goes to claim the victim on behalf of the spirit, sucking their soul out so that they die, to be later resurrected into a new life of zombie servitude. Hurston describes the ceremony in elaborate detail, as though she were hiding around a corner watching the ceremony occur. Exact and very specific dialogue is repeated, seemingly verbatim. Hurston even describes the cry uttered when the priest pricks the victim's finger, cementing the deal. Despite these minute details, Hurston could not have witnessed such a ceremony. Instead, what Hurston reports are rumors she was told—or perhaps that she even invented whole cloth—all filtered through her Gothic imagination.

Hurston goes on to briefly relate several stories about real life zombies, complete in some cases with dates of occurrence or initials of informants. However, as a reader, one is aware that Hurston recognizes the problem with telling these stories to an American audience. It is the same challenge Polynice had with Seabrook: namely, what passes as authoritative and convincing within the context of an oral tradition—the recitation of supporting evidence that one has heard from reputable sources—does not pass muster as evidence from a Western, positivist standpoint. Therefore, Hurston presents the ultimate positivist evidence: a photograph of a zombie. This is accompanied by Hurston's narrative of actually meeting this zombie, the Felicia Felix-Mentor mentioned in the opening paragraph of her chapter. We learn that Felix-Mentor

was found naked on the side of the road and later identified by her brother and husband, who claimed she was their loved one who had died twenty-nine years before. Somehow, she either escaped or was freed from her zombie master, and was able to find her way back to the farm where she grew up. However, she was so deranged that she was institutionalized in an asylum in Gonaïves.

Hurston's motives in taking a photograph and presenting it to the reader are unclear—particularly whether she felt compelled to do so. Her description of the episode is extremely disturbing, seemingly to Hurston as well as to the reader.

> I took her first in the position that she assumed herself whenever left alone. That is cringing against the wall with the cloth hiding her face and head. Then in other positions. Finally the doctor forcibly uncovered her and held her so that I could take her face. And the sight was dreadful. That blank face with the dead eyes. The eyelids were white all around the eyes as if they had been burned with acid. It was pronounced enough to come out in the picture. There was nothing that you could say to her or get from her except by looking at her, and the sight of this wreckage was too much to endure for long.[55]

Hurston describes the episode as a kind of rape, with the woman needing to be held down, forcibly uncovered, and photographed "in other positions." The end result, a now famous photograph, shows a woman of indeterminate age, with eyes shut, standing like a sleepwalker, dressed in an ill-fitting white hospital gown, posed in front of a fence, some trees, and the edge of a building. The background is overexposed. In *Tell My Horse*, it is captioned simply, "Felicia Felix-Mentor, the Zombie."

The problem with the photograph as positivist evidence, of course, is that it is impossible to know what one is really seeing. Although readers would have been much less accustomed to seeing trick photographs in the 1930s, and certainly did not possess the vast vocabulary of

[55] Ibid., 469.

cinematic special effects now available, nonetheless the photograph would have seemed—and remains—inscrutable. Photographed through an act of violation that left her vulnerable before the camera, the reality of Felicia Felix-Mentor remains largely closed to the viewer, whose knowledge of her is left barely enriched by the representation.

Instead, our interest returns to Hurston herself, the woman behind the camera. Emery notes how the photograph, and the preceding violation that make it possible, stands in for the text itself—the ways that it was in effect zombified by the many conflicting forces and motivations pulling at Hurston.[56] On the other hand, I am fascinated by how, as a Gothic character, Felicia Felix-Mentor serves less as a metaphor for the text than as a foil for Hurston as Gothic heroine. To the degree the Hurston feared Vodou secret societies and their work, Felix-Mentor enters the text as a warning of what Hurston could *become* were she not careful. Therefore, the viewer is seeing in Felix-Mentor a self-portrait of Hurston as she fears she may become.

Like Seabrook, Hurston finds comfort and safety in the explanatory power of science. After her encounter with Felix-Mentor, she and the asylum doctors retreat to a "more pleasant" area of the hospital.

> We discussed at great length the theories of how Zombies come to be. It was concluded that it is not a case of awakening the dead, but a matter of semblance of death induced by some drug known to a few. Some secret probably brought from Africa and handed down from generation to generation. . . . These secret societies are secret. They will die before they tell. . . . Dr. Legros said that perhaps I would find myself involved in something so terrible, something from which I could not extricate myself alive and that I would curse the day I had entered upon my search.[57]

Portraying herself as the daring adventurer, Hurston continues to insist that, if there is a scientific secret to be discovered, she will discover it. However, the Haitian doctors give her dire warnings

[56] Emery, "The Zombie In/As the Text," 330.

[57] Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 469-70.

that she may, in fact, experience it first hand. Again, this fits with the Gothic mode that Hurston is utilizing.

This passage of Hurston's *Tell My Horse* is likely the book's most famous, in large part because it is often credited as being the first case of someone trying to offer a scientific explanation for zombies. In fact, as has already been explored, Seabrook makes essentially the same claim, and it is clear that long before either of them published their texts, Haitians had popularly supposed something along those lines. In both cases, the authors make clear that the zombie drug is not their own original idea, but one readily suggested to them by Haitian informants. In fact, Haitians have long been open to the suggestion that scientific explanations, and religious or magical explanations, are far from being inimical, but can offer compatible or symbiotic explanations for a phenomenon like zombies. This tells the lie on the triumphalist Western trope—sadly still very alive—that Haitians thought zombies were created by magic, while Westerners *really* deduced (all on their own) the science behind it.

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*

If, as a director of horror films, George Romero seems somewhat out of place in this genealogy, it is nonetheless impossible to present a history of zombies in American culture without including the tremendous impact of Romero's films. His *Night of the Living Dead*, filmed on a small budget (~$100,000) and released in 1968, was unlike anything film audiences had previously seen.[58] Filmed in black and white in a neo-realist style, the minimal (and highly realistic) special effects and slow pacing were almost unprecedented in horror films. Moreover,

[58] *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George Romero (1968; Elite Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

when Romero's film was released, zombies had been largely dormant for the better part of two decades. As the Haitian occupation receded further and further in the memories of most Americans, the greatest international concern was Communism. While films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) drew on a zombie aesthetic of somnambulistic comportment and loss of free will, the real monster at the center of such films was not zombies, but Reds. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* was a radical departure in both its domesticity—nearly the entire film takes place inside of one farmhouse—and its focus on the micropolitics of small group relationships. Set amidst the worst of the social fallout of desegregation, it is not incidental that the main character of Romero's film is an African American man, Ben (Duane Jones), who must fight off hordes of average people who now want him dead.

Romero's films include a serious element of social critique, especially American race relations. Indeed, Romero's zombies engage with the same notions of race and class that Haitian zombie mythology does. In fact, Romero's work may even be more in the spirit of Haitian zombie stories, despite some adaptations, than the work of Seabrook, whose principal interest is in determining whether or not zombies truly exist (and if so, how). Romero's film almost couldn't care less about how the zombies come to be. Rather, it is the outcome that is of greater interest—and, in particular, how the crisis instigated by the zombies exposes the humanity of the film's characters.

Interestingly, Romero did not think of the film as a zombie movie, which is not surprising given that his revenants were, in both form and desire, a radical departure from all prior zombies. Loosely adapting the novel *I Am Legend*—decades later turned into a Will Smith film—the film in fact offers very little explanation for what the revenants (or "ghouls," to use the film's term)

are.[59] While boarded up in the house, the characters learn from radio and television reports that the dead are rising from their graves—no further explanation is provided. Eventually, and a little too confidently, the television reports that the cause may be radiation, or something more exotic, dispersed when a space probe to Venus was detonated during its reentry to the Earth's atmosphere. Frankly, what the narrative emphasizes is how irrelevant the cause of the zombies is to the fate of anyone in the movie—all of whom are eventually killed anyway.

Until Romero, zombies were all created by sorcery, biochemistry, or some combination of the two, and were controlled one way or another by a master (for example, a sorcerer or a mad scientist). This conventional kind of zombie is more an object of pity than fear, and the fear they inspire is a horror of becoming like them. Romero's zombies, on the other hand, rise from the dead with a terrible hunger for human flesh. They shamble from their graves, moving at a slow but determined pace, murdering and consuming all with the misfortune to cross their path. Moreover, their bites are contagious: after one has been killed by a zombie, one will resurrect as one of them, continuing and advancing the terrible cycle. If this is largely the popular understanding of zombies today, it is all the more astonishing, given that Romero basically invented that contagious and quickly multiplying creature.

In one of the film's earliest scenes, Ben, an African American man, rescues Barbra, a young white woman, from a horde of zombies, the first we have seen in the film. They take refuge in a farm house they believe to be abandoned, but which later proves to be sheltering five other people in the basement, a revelaton not made until almost halfway through the film. Two are a young white couple, Tom and Judy. The other three are a white family, the Coopers, dominated by the paranoid, unyielding, and controlling Harry Cooper. Ben and Harry soon

[59] Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (New York: Gold Medal, 1954); *I Am Legend*, directed by Francis Lawrence (2007; Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

come into conflict, as Harry insists that everyone must shelter in the basement, while Ben refuses, insisting that it is a deathtrap and that they are safer upstairs. Over the course of the night, all of the film's characters die through a series of zombie attacks and mishaps, including a car explosion that takes place during an ill-fated escape attempt. At last, only Ben remains, holed up in the basement. When a militia arrives in the morning, killing and burning all the zombies, Ben is mistakenly shot and killed by the all-white militia. The film closes with several stark photographs of Ben's body being burned on a pyre, shots evocative of documentary photos of black lynchings by white mobs.

Although we know nothing about his life prior to the commencement of the film, the viewer is left feeling that Ben is probably not a horrible person, and his destruction at the end points to his entrapment within a system that is, in every respect, set against him. Of this system, we must say that the zombies are merely endemic to it and certainly not the cause of it. The casual disregard with which Harry feels authorized to treat Ben, as well as the bureaucratic ease with which the militia assumes that Ben must be destroyed, gesture to a world in which Ben as a black man is, even under optimal circumstances, a second-class citizen. This marginal status is minimized even further under the exceptional circumstances portrayed in the film.

Within this context, then, we should interpret Romero's zombies as birthed from a number of uniquely modern anxieties—much as Haitian zombies were born from some of the first anxieties that we can characterize as truly modern, namely fears related to race and slavery, self-determination, the commercialized self/body, and the alienation of labor.[60] Romero's zombies set in deep relief anxieties about the dehumanizing qualities of post-modern life in the West, as well as fears that the afterlife may be unable to bear the traditional religious freighting

[60] Cf. Larsen, "Zombies of Immaterial Labor: The Modern Monster and the Death of Death."

of being what gives life meaning. But likewise, they also terrify because of what they destabilize and shake loose: set amidst moral panic and anarchy, *Night of the Living Dead* shows people behaving badly in all the ways that are always lurking beneath the surface of polite society, impulses which people manage to more or less successfully suppress. Released in the late 1960s, Romero's film highlights how America, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, was ready to blow apart into raced, classed, and gendered factions at the slightest provocation. Relying upon the hyperbole of horror, Romero sets this collapse in the context of an apocalypse, but it is clear that his critique is meant to impress on the audience what every savvy observer knows: that it would not take anything so extreme as an apocalypse to provoke such a shattering. On the contrary, it was happening—continues to be happening—every day in less dramatic but equally mortal ways.

Romero's contribution to the zombie mythos, then, almost cannot be overestimated. Prior to Romero, Americans' interest in zombies had borne the obvious marks of an imperialist genesis: the zombie as exemplary of the beliefs about an exotic and primitive Haitian Other. In many respects, Romero restored to the zombie many of the modern anxieties that characterized the *zonbi* in Haiti, reimaging those questions for a specifically American post-modern context, and with the absence of the American imperial exotic that had supplanted them from the 30s through the 50s. This truly reimagined zombie became the prototype that almost all subsequent American and global depictions of zombies take as their basis.[61]

[61] At the same time, we must acknowledge that Romero's zombies' cannibalism—an addition that, from Romero's perspective, was largely a critique of consumerism—nonetheless introduces into the zombie mythos a grotesque act that has been a part of imagined voodoo since its inception. Therefore, Romero's zombies, which seem on the surface to be such a radical departure from imagined voodoo, in a certain respect insist on the fusion between imagined voodoo and cannibalism in an even more emphatic way than the American zombie mythos had

Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and *Passage of Darkness*

In the 1980s, Wade Davis was a doctoral student at Harvard University in the then-growing field of ethnobotany—in subsequent decades something of a sunk ship, except as it has been rolled up into anthropology. Davis was advised by Richard Evan Schultes, the father of the modern discipline of ethnobotany, whose friend, Nathan Kline, was a psychopharmacologist who, in the 80s, was director of the Rockland State Research Institute of New York. Kline had worked for thirty years researching and practicing psychiatry in Haiti.[62] He strongly believed that the folktales of zombies that he had heard in Haiti belied a physical reality to zombification, and that zombies were created by a pharmacological agent—one that could be of enormous scientific interest. Kline wanted Schultes himself to travel to Haiti to investigate, but Schultes instead sent his student Wade Davis.[63] What exactly Davis found and experienced while in Haiti remains a topic of speculation. This is despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the fact that Davis wrote two books that reported his conclusions. In these books, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Passage of Darkness* (1988), Davis adopted radically different styles of address and genre.

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previously. For a longer discussion on the connections between cannibalism and imagined voodoo, see Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo."

[62] David Inglis, "The Zombie from Myth to Reality: Wade Davis, Academic Scandal and the Limits of the Real," *scripted* 7, no. 2 (2010): 359. Note that Inglis published nearly the same article as "Putting the Undead to Work: Wade Davis, Haitian Vodou, and the Social Uses of the Zombie," in *Race, Oppression and the Zombie*, eds. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 42-59. Because the essays are so similar, to avoid confusion I will consistently refer only to the open-access version published as "The Zombie from Myth to Reality" in *scripted*.

[63] Richard Evans Schultes, "Preface" to Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), xviii.

The Serpent and the Rainbow reads like a work of genre fiction, with Davis cast as a colonial adventurer penetrating the mysteries of the yet-uncivilized outpost. If this description sounds evocative of George Lucas's highly successful *Indiana Jones* franchise, one must note that the first film in the series, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was released with great success in 1981, around the time that Davis did his research in Haiti and only a few years before he released *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. While Wes Craven's film, based on Davis's book, was criticized by Davis for making a mess of his *serious* research, it seems evident that Craven merely took what was already foregrounded in the book—namely, Davis's outsized vision of himself as a Jones-style marauding hero—and gave it an appropriately exaggerated Hollywood treatment.

Besides Indiana Jones, it is clear that Hurston and Seabrook were both major literary influences for Davis, particularly in matters of style. Like Seabrook, Davis's book contains an episode in which Code 246 of the Haitian Penal Code is cited as "evidence" for the reality of the zombie phenomenon. Also like Seabrook, Davis's book contains a number of passages that exoticize and even trivialize Haitians. For example, when he first arrives in Port-au-Prince, he writes,

> It presents all the squalor and grace of any Third World capital, yet as I drove into the city for the first time, I noticed something else. The people on the street didn't walk; they flowed, exuding pride. Physically they were all beautiful. They seemed gay, careless, jaunty. Washed clean by the afternoon rain, the whole city had a rakish charm. And it wasn't just how things appeared, it was something in the air, something electric—a raw elemental energy I had never felt elsewhere in the Americas.[64]

While describing Haitians as "careless" (a Freudian malapropism, since he seems to mean "carefree") during the worst of the Duvalier dictatorship's oppression may strain the reader's credulity, Davis insists on writing about Haitians almost as though they were part of nature,

[64] Wade Davis, *Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 45.

untroubled by past or future, almost like animals—"elemental," he says. Davis confesses, "The nation baffled me. Stunned by her multitudes, awed by her mysteries, dumbfounded by her contradictions, I paced."[65] Fascinatingly, Davis here makes Haiti female, which highlights the extent to which Davis thinks of Haiti as a land to be penetrated by the ordering power of his scientific knowledge, a kind of phallus. His book's *raison d'être* is to argue that phallic Western scientific knowledge is a superior epistemology which has the capacity to dominate and order Haitian indigenous epistemology, which has no "use" beyond itself, i.e., is sterile—whereas the knowledge he hopes to produce by inseminating it with scientific ordering principles has "use," is reproductive.

Davis notes that Hurston had intuited that zombies were created by a chemical agent, and like both Hurston and Davis, he has a considerable fascination with Haitian secret societies, which in one way or another are the subject of nearly half of Davis's text. Davis even includes a chapter titled "Tell My Horse," after the title of Hurston's book, in which he credits her with being the first to make the connection between zombies, secret societies, and pharmacology. The book is written in a fluid style reminiscent in some respects of Hurston, and in others of a potboiler. It follows Davis as he journeys around Haiti in the company of Rachel Beauvoir, the teenage daughter of the *oungan* and chemist (by professional training) Max Beauvoir.[66] The Beauvoirs serve as two of Davis's primary informants, and Rachel Beauvoir works as translator

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[65] Ibid., 64.

[66] More recently, Max Beauvoir was elected head (*Ati*) of a national organization of Vodouisants, called KNVA (Kongrès Nasyonal Vodouwizan Ayisyèn [National Congress of Haitian Vodouisants])—a distinction which has led some to incorrectly label him "The Pope of Vodou." Beauvoir frequently grants interviews for newspapers and television, and zombies are a frequent topic of discussion. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, now an adult, is an influential Haitian scholar and Vodou priestess (*manbo*). She is currently Vice-Provost of Research and Chair of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at L'Université d'État d'Haïti [The State University of Haiti].

for Davis, who does not speak Kreyòl. Working with a Haitian *bokò* (sorcerer), Davis eventually penetrates the secrets of the Haitian secret societies, thus going further than Hurston, whom he argues "was never able to attend one of [the secret society] gatherings herself."[67] Thereafter, he is taught how to produce the zombie poison from an assortment of plant and animal components, notably the pufferfish, which often contains lethal quantities of the paralytic drug tetrodotoxin.

Even as Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* was roundly criticized by academics upon its release, it became a popular bestseller. It is worth considering that the factors that contributed to *The Magic Island* becoming a hit in the 30s were likely the same factors that contributed to the success of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Against a backdrop of Haitian "boat people" regularly washing up onto (or being turned away from) the Florida coast to flee Duvalierism, *The Serpent*

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[67] Davis, *Serpent and the Rainbow*, 210. Davis was highly influenced by articles written by the Haitian political anthropologist Michel Laguerre, who in the early 1980s argued that Haitian secret societies should be thought of not as criminal organizations or Satanists, but rather as a form of government. In the absence of a functional central government, he argued, secret societies worked as an indigenous legal system, empowering their members to enforce the informal laws of Haitian sociality and, when necessary, punishing wrongdoing. For extremely serious crimes, Laguerre argued, zombification existed as a form of capital punishment, enacted by the secret societies as judgment in "cases" brought before them by members of the transgressor's community. In the case of Clarvius Narcisse, the zombie that Davis was able to meet and interview, Narcisse had committed the crime of selling his family's land. To sell one's family's land is, according to the justice system of the secret societies, the most severe crime that one can commit, worse even than murder. While the westernized official laws of Haiti acknowledge the legal right of someone to sell family land if he or she is the legal inheritor of this land, in the parallel indigenous Haitian justice system—enforced by the secret societies—it is impossible to own one's family's land because it is held corporately by the entire family, including the ancestors (whose remains often continue to reside on the land).[67] Moreover, the land is more than just a source of physical livelihood: it is also the family's spiritual lifeblood, providing the necessary site to access the chthonic forces, the *genii loci*, that are at the center of all Vodou rituals. Therefore, to sell the land of the family is to deracinate the family in every sense—essentially, to cut the roots of a tree. For those convicted of such an act by the secret societies, death is the punishment. As the ultimate form of social death, zombification is an eloquent solution, as it allows the person to be put to death, while still serving as a laborer. Laguerre makes the argument that the secret societies are a form of parallel government, but it is Davis who ran with the idea, setting out to prove how and why zombies were made. Michel Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

and the Rainbow was released in the early years of the AIDS crisis, at a time when the virus was believed to have begun in Haiti. Davis is almost prescient when he notes how, "For Americans, in particular, Haiti was like having a little bit of Africa next door, something dark and foreboding, sensual and terribly naughty."[68] For American readers in the 1980s, Davis's sensationalized book confirmed that Haiti—this place with its endless stream of disease and refugees—was a land suffused with the hypnotic combination of sorcery and weird science. In the same year that *Serpent and the Rainbow* was published,

> the *Journal of the American Medical Association* ran an article entitled "Night of the Living Dead", which contained these assertions: "Do necromantic zombiists [sic] transmit [AIDS] during voodooistic rituals? . . . Even now, many Haitians are voodoo *serviteurs* and partake in its rituals . . . [they] may be unsuspectingly infected with AIDS by ingestion, inhalation or dermal contact with contaminated ritual substances, as well as by sexual activity."[69]

In other words, Davis's fusion of sorcery and science endorsed and invited the libidinal reassertion, by both culture makers and scientific "experts" of lurid fantasies of Haiti, as a land of black magic and illicit sex.

Not surprisingly, there were many academic criticisms of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. On the surface, critics tended to focus on what might be called problems of genre, namely, that the book was too narrative and insufficiently focused on the "proof" required by science, likening the book to the discredited work of Carlos Castaneda.[70] David Inglis argues, however,

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[68] Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, 208.

[69] Inglis, "The Zombie from Myth to Reality," 357, citing Paul Farmer citing the article. Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[70] Inglis, "The Zombie from Myth to Reality," 364. Carlos Castaneda was trained as an anthropologist at UCLA, where he received his doctorate for his study of a Yaqui (indigenous Mexican) healer named Don Juan Matus. During the late sixties and early seventies, Castaneda

that what underpins all of these critiques is, at heart, Davis's choice to treat zombies as an ontological fact, rather than a culture-bound belief. By insisting that zombies *really* exist, Davis was bucking the trend within cultural anthropology to talk about cultural *beliefs*, while at the same time, the laboratory analyses of the purported zombie poisons that Davis collected were insufficiently robust to serve as pharmacological proof.

Rather than backing down, Davis responded by publishing *Passage of Darkness* in 1989. At first blush, the book appears to be a much more conventional anthropological treatment of the topic. Within the book, Davis amplifies the essential argument that he presented in *Serpent and the Rainbow*, claiming that tetrodotoxin, derived from pufferfish, was at the root of the zombie phenomenon. To support this hypothesis, Davis presents a long list of documented cases in which people experienced coma or cataplexy following ingestion of tetrodotoxin, only to fully recover a few hours later. Davis essentially makes a circumstantial case that tetrodotoxin could induce an apparent death, such that someone would be buried, only to later be taken from the grave as a zombie. Unfortunately, as Davis notes, in documented cases where tetrodotoxin victims survived, they recovered fully and certainly did not become zombies. Therefore, Davis must also propose a cultural explanation, namely, that one can only become a zombie if one

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developed this material into a number of bestselling New Age books, most especially *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). For years, Castaneda's texts were taught in university classes and upheld as exemplary of a new age of reflexive anthropology. Then, in 1976, the scholar Richard De Mille published an exposé in which he convincingly argued that Castaneda's books were faked, and that he had never studied with any Yaqui healers, let alone the fictional Don Juan. Richard De Mille, *Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1976). For some in the academy, it was a source of considerable embarrassment to discover that their *cause de celebre* was a fraud. In hindsight, what is most compelling is just how *transparently* fraudulent Castaneda's text is, revealing the overabundant willingness of even scholars to embrace texts that feed back to them their own fantasies of primitiveness and "the Native." This connects neatly with a possible critique of Davis's text—namely, that it is as much an indictment of its audience as it is of its writer.

believes that one can become a zombie. In other words, the person must be suggestible, so that after being poisoned and then revived, he or she must be willing to believe that he or she is now a zombie, and act accordingly. Moreover, Davis notes that tetrodotoxin poisoning typically only lasts for a few hours at most—meaning that, for it to be the cause of zombification, the person would have to be immediately buried, and exhumed in very short order. Unfortunately for Davis, this does not in any way cohere with Haitian cultural practices: in fact, burial does not take place for several days at a minimum, and then only after the body has been elaborately prepared and feted. Moreover, this compressed time frame does not in any way match with the zombie lore, such as it is. Davis's book, in fact, is full of such elisions, where an idea initially presented as "highly suggestive" is taken as bona fide evidence of the phenomenon mere pages later.[71]

One of the most transparent of such elisions is the chapter called "The 'Antidote,'" in which Davis details various ceremonies he witnessed, in which a supposed antidote for the zombie poison was produced. Davis undertakes an elaborate botanical exploration of each of the ingredients before finally admitting that none of them are chemically active, and certainly would not function as antagonists for tetrodotoxin. Then, remarkably, Davis writes that the mere fact that people *believe* there is an antidote may well indicate that, somewhere in Haiti, someone *does* know how to make a chemically active antidote for the poison, but Davis simply wasn't able to witness it—transparently confusing scientific evidence with wishful thinking.

Ultimately, his "scientific" book *Passage of Darkness* does little to quell the criticisms of his work, and leaves unchallenged—in fact, further supports—the most sensational, colonialist, and exoticizing aspects of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. As Inglis observes,

> A typical Davis passage . . . gives the impression that zombification simply and unproblematically exists, and that such a claim is not a claim

[71] Inglis, "The Zombie from Myth to Reality," 365.

> but an unmediated fact. This leads to a central contradiction: despite repeatedly claiming that the making of a zombi is a rare event, comments like "undoubtedly *in many instances* the victim does die either from the poison itself or by suffocation in the coffin" rather than being successfully raised from the earth, give the strong impression that zombifications happen all the time in this part of the world.[72]

Davis's defense of his work, namely that negative laboratory results could not disprove the reality of his hypothesis, is in many respects the same defense that Seabrook and numerous other racist chroniclers of Haitian Vodou long relied upon—namely, that as a libidinal screen, Haitian Vodou exists in an imaginative space that does not depend upon, or even supersedes the need for, empirical observation. It is what you wish and desire it to be. For Davis, as for many before him, Vodou was a space of unbridled colonialist fantasies of adventures that defied the boundaries between life and death. Over and over, Davis reveals his insistent vision of Haiti as a *terra incognita*, from his characterization of Haitians as "piratelike," always emerging from shadows—to simpletons, to sorcerers—even his peculiar overreliance on the adjective "violently" when he means "very." As I have already suggested, Craven's film does not betray Davis's vision—as Davis argued publicly and at length—but rather perfects it, casting Davis as the conquering and adventuring colonist that he dreamed himself to be.

Part III
Zombie Apocalypse(s) and a Case for Anachronism

The idea of a "zombie apocalypse" has gained an astonishing amount of traction in recent years. The *New York Times* published the phrase "zombie apocalypse" a *total* of two times prior

[72] Ibid.

to 2006; but in contrast, in 2012 alone, it published the phrase twenty times.[73] While the notion of a zombie apocalypse may seem to lack racial connotations—perhaps even pointing toward a post-racial world—closer inspection reveals that many obsessions with the idea of a zombie apocalypse are profoundly rooted in racism, classism, and crypto-fascism. In this section, I examine the racial implications of this future-*in-extremis*. The concluding section suggests possible benefits that can be derived from engaging in the highly anachronistic act of reading white accounts of the Haitian Revolution through the lens of zombie apocalypse.

Of course, the term "apocalypse" is freighted with a considerable amount of religious weight—not least of all because the word's original meaning is "revelation." Much of the philosophical discussion of zombies and the zombie apocalypse revolves around exploring conventional, particularly Christian, understandings of apocalypse, versus the apocalypse that zombies would institute. The Bible, of course, is full of the undead, whether Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones that arise to praise God, or the dead who get up from their graves at the death of Jesus, when the veil between the natural and supernatural is temporarily rent. In biblical texts, many of the undead are what might be termed sanctified, such as Lazarus or Jesus: they are the holy dead. However, this is not the same as saying that they do not, in their resurrected form, still inspire discomfort, even (holy) terror. As Pippin writes, the Cosmic Christ of John's Apocalypse can be described (if somewhat glibly) as

> the king of the living dead, a revenant, at times a vampire, at other times a zombie roaming the future, gathering his zombie army from the dead for the final earthly battle. . . The king of the undead can make us all,

[73] Michael Cieply, "A Risk for Films That Move at a Zombie's Pace," *New York Times*, March 18, 2013, accessed August 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/19/movies/zombie-and-other-genre-films-often-require-years-to-make.html?_r=0.

> including our earth, like him, our subjectivity and uniqueness erased and reconstructed.[74]

Of course, this reconstructed identity is—at least in the idealized vision of John, Paul, and the Gospel writers—a good thing. It is a product of the uniquely compositional power of the Christ, which, as Spinoza espoused, enriches both beings even as it obliterates their original identities.[75] This can be contrasted with the nontheistic, nihilistic erasure that occurs in the zombie apocalypse, which robs the essence of the weaker organism in an act of Spinozan decomposition, leaving it in a state of entropy, lacking even the energy to constitute itself.

The Bible also contains horrifying images of the undead which are decidedly not sanctified. For example,

> This is the plague which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. On that day people will be stricken by the Lord with great panic. They will seize each other by the hand and attack one another.[76]

In fact, horrific apocalyptic visions are a considerable preoccupation for the writers of the Hebrew sacred texts that constitute the Christian Old Testament.[77] The Jewish and Christian traditions that are at the core of Western civilization have, for millennia, been perhaps more obsessed with end-times scenarios than any other religions on earth, a preoccupation that has profoundly colored modern Western culture, even secular thinking. This obsession insists that a

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[74] Pippin, "Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock," 40.1.

[75] K. Silem Mohammed, "Zombies, Rest and Motion: Spinoza and the Speed of Undeath."

[76] Zechariah 14:12-13 (NIV).

[77] For more on this topic, see Michael J. Gilmour, "The Living Word Among the Living Dead: Hunting for Zombies in the Pages of the Bible," in *Zombies are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead*, eds. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 87-99.

conclusion, an end, is always within sight; it barely occurs to us that things may just simply go on.

I would argue that the zombie apocalypse is an outgrowth of this *need* for both conclusion and resolution. As a nihilistic eschatology, it is predicated on the failing of religious eschatons to provide a satisfying narrative about the likely conclusion of things. Whereas religious narratives propose a conclusion to history that ushers in a new narrative, zombies are *only* post-historical. Lacking the necessary will or subjectivity to grow, change, or engage in any act of natality, zombies "inhabit impossible spaces, living on without *telos* or *arche*, purpose or history."[78] However, while conventional religious explanations may explain the need for an alternative narrative (or narratives, more like), they fail to provide a satisfying explanation as to why it must be a *zombie* apocalypse. Nor do these conventional explanations address the extensive, current appeal of the phenomenon. Why now?

Max Brooks, the bestselling author of zombie books, is only one of many to cite 9/11 and the subsequent move towards global and permanent warfare as a major inspiration for visions of zombie apocalypse.[79] With the advent of the "war on terror"— technically a war against *no one* and with no clear delineations of time or space—the American state has increasingly shifted the use of its power towards the pursuit and punishment of crimes against itself. Concurrently, pursuing Bush's vision of an armed citizenry defending the "homeland," the state has increasing shed the responsibility of guaranteeing the safety of its citizenry—both from themselves, as well as from outside forces. Alternately competing for, and being welcomed as replacement of, this

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[78] Pagano, "The Space of Apocalypse in Zombie Cinema," 84.

[79] Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Max Brooks Is Not Kidding About the Zombie Apocalypse"; Becki A. Graham, "Post 9/11 Anxieties: Unpredictability and Complacency in the Age of New Terrorism in *Dawn of the Dead* (2004)," in *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie*, eds. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 124-138.

vital role of the State, armed citizens and militias have arisen in record numbers.[80] In this anarchic atmosphere, it is not surprising that the zombie has become a representation *par excellence* of "terror"— unindividualized individuals, allegorically racialized or minoricized, simultaneously envisioned as both uncanny outsider and sleeper agent.[81] Like "terror," and its monstrocized, invented perpetrator "the terrorist," the zombie both is and is not your neighbor.

It is here that the idea of the zombie apocalypse—which first seems to be a surprisingly capacious, crowd-sourced vision of the end times, open to cynics, hypochondriacs, and atheists of all stripes and creeds—begins to reveal itself as having rather shockingly racist and xenophobic currents.[82] In Mark Derry's article "Dead Man Walking: What Do Zombies Mean?",

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[80] Cf. Christopher Zealand, "The National Strategy for Zombie Containment: Myth Meets Activism in Post-9/11 America," in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 231-248. I should mention that I am drawing conclusions which are opposite those of Zealand's: I see this as the road to fascism, whereas Zealand is pro-militia and works as a research lawyer for the NRA.

[81] The recent development of rhetoric about sleeper agents strikes me as being largely indistinguishable from the trope of the "race traitor" which I have explored earlier.

[82] Elizabeth McAlister adopts a radically different view of the role of race in American zombie films. Focusing on the fact that many of the protagonists of American zombie films have been black, and that zombies themselves are most often phenotypically white—even unnaturally white—McAlister explores whether zombie films might actually offer positive images of blacks as salvific to the white race. She writes, "Bakke identifies the emergence of a new category of whites in these films: 'zombies, vampires, the virus-infected and other sorts of hyperwhites — that is, whites over-endowed with traditionally white characteristics (cultural as well as racial)— have, since the late 1990s, swarmed the big screen' . . . It is the hyperwhiteness, and the death they both embody and spread, that is destroying human civilization. And it is this hyperwhite apocalypse that the black male messiah is called upon to destroy. Bakke points out that Neville in *Legend* is actually a black man inherently immune to the virus, immune to whiteness, and that 'In making (the black man) into the civilizing agent the filmmakers turn an old story about colonization, savagery, and skin color on its head. In these films, the black male messiah must save humanity from the affliction of whiteness.'" Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 480-1. McAlister goes on to raise the possibility, though, that rather than offering images that celebrate black characters *qua* black characters, "these black male heroes in white-

he explores how, in the resurgent racism of Obama's America, zombie narratives have come to have a surprising appeal for racists, survivalists, preppers, and white supremacists, who see in such stories echoes of how they envision their "heroic" struggles against racial minorities.[83] As Derry says,

> Stockpiling MREs and heavy weaponry, the survivalist fringe can't wait to live in the America of *I Am Legend*. When our unwieldy, duct-tape democracy collapses into anarchy, we'll revert to the sociopathic utopia of the Western frontier, a happily uncomplicated time when every man—every white man, at least—was a law unto himself, free from governmental meddling and moral ambiguities.[84]

In support of his argument, Derry cites the online postings of survivalists and white supremacists. Many report that they love zombie stories—despite what they identify as "technical inaccuracies"—because they read them as typological allegories of the very thing they

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produced films [offer] a new way for white culture to 'eat the other' in bell hooks' terms, where whites 'spice up' white culture by consuming racial difference." Ibid., 481. Later, drawing on Spike Lee's idea of the "super duper magical negro"—a concept discussed in Chapter Two—McAlister argues, "It is possible to read the black messiah as an exaggeration of the Magical Negro, insofar as in zombie films, blackness is figured as a personified antidote to the problem of whiteness; and black individuals are the planet's remediator, rectifier, and redeemer" (481). Even still, McAlister sees hope in the fact that, in many of the zombie apocalypse films to feature black protagonists, the film's narrative concludes with an image of the future as a place of racial mixing, offering the possibility that zombies may accomplish what hundreds of years of social struggle have not, fracturing society's rigid racial boundaries. Despite McAlister's fascinating reading of films like *I Am Legend* and *28 Days Later*, I do not find that her reading, as a template, offers helpful insights into films like *Night of the Living Dead*, for example, in which the black protagonist doesn't manage ultimately to save anyone—not even himself—and in the process suffers indignities, including his eventual murder, that seem directly tied to the perceived inferiority of his race. The pre-zombie world of *Night of the Living Dead* is a white man's world, and one of the first acts of the post-zombie world of *Night of the Living Dead* is to reassert this fact with Ben's murder. Moreover, McAlister's analysis seems to be based on an unusual blip in zombie films. In reality, the vast majority of them have protagonists that are emphatically white.

[83] Mark Derry, "Dead Man Walking: What Do Zombies Mean?", *True/Slant*, March 17, 2010, accessed August 1, 2013, http://trueslant.com/markdery/2010/03/17/dead-man-walking-what-do-zombies-mean/.

[84] Ibid.

are preparing for, namely, the barbarian invasions of immigrants, terrorists, minorities—essentially non-whites writ large. Drawing on his readings of the crypto-fascist survivalist website SurvivalBlog.com, run by Jim Rawles, Derry writes,

> By "zombies," a.k.a. the "golden horde" in SurvivalBlog parlance, Rawles and his fellow travelers mean "the anticipated large mixed horde of refugees and looters that will pour out of the metropolitan regions." The "horde" trope has a familiar ring, especially when coupled with the suggestive adjective "golden," with its echoes of Yellow Peril. We've heard it before, in colonial whispers of rebellious coolies, out on the edge of empire, and in *The Turner Diaries*' revulsion at the mongrel metropolis, that polymorphous horror of miscegenation—the "mixed horde"—and moral relativism. . .[85]

Derry goes on to quote the following representative post from a thread about zombies on the white supremacist website *Stormfront.org*.

> For White Nationalists it's easy to translate Non-Whites into the role of the Zombies as they're certainly blood sucking leeches who are overrunning and ruining our countries and who in some cases are literally trying to prey on us and eat us (remember that case a little while ago where that Black guy in East Texas killed and ate his White girlfriend? I'll bet she didn't foresee him turning into a Zombie and eating her.)[86]

Fascinatingly, the poster cites a "real life" zombie story to support his views of blacks. Astonishingly, as in the case of Vivencia Bellegarde, discussed at length in the chapter "Black Revenge" (Chapter 2), once one adjusts for language, there is little meaningful difference between popular media representations of such stories and the ways they are discussed by white supremacists.

In the Discovery Channel show *Zombie Preppers* (originally aired on December 18, 2012), a number of zombie preppers are profiled—many of whom, at least thanks to the

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

Discovery Channel's editing, appear quite serious about their zombie anxieties.[87] By "zombie preppers," the show means real people who are *really* preparing, with utmost seriousness, for a zombie apocalypse. Although none are overtly racist, all of the subjects featured on the show are white, and speak openly about their interest in "real life" zombie stories like that of "the Miami Zombie." For many of them, the dominant narrative appears to be that of disease: that is, they are convinced that zombification is the result of a virus, bacteria, or biochemical agent—possibly developed by the government, and presently being tested, with news reports as ample support of this hypothesis. Within the show, voodoo is discussed as one possible source of zombies, and in particular the pharmacological knowledge possessed by voodoo practitioners. All of the subjects express a willingness to shoot zombies, who are described by at least one of the subjects as "the diseased." Although race is never discussed in the show, the intimation that zombies are, for the subjects, an allegory of racial minorities crackles beneath the surface throughout. In other words, as with the overtly white supremacist examples above, zombies as "degraded" or "diseased" people are the perfect stand-in for black and brown people, who are "less than" whites.[88]

Among zombie preppers—such as Zombie Squad and the Kansas Anti-Zombie Militia—and survivalists more broadly, there is an emphasis on the idea of the "homeland" and the

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[87] *Zombie Preppers*, aired on Discovery Channel, December 18, 2012. Available online: "Zombie Preppers full episode," YouTube Video, posted by "Undead Melody," May 21, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1V5CopO16U.

[88] Aalya Ahmad, "Gray Is the New Black: Race, Class, and Zombies," in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 130-46; Annalee Newitz, *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, rev. ed. (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001).

defense of the homeland.[89] The notion of the "homeland," of course, has been evoked by virtually all totalitarian, fascist, authoritarian—or simply failing—regimes throughout the twentieth century as a euphemism for racial purity and hegemonic control of capital and resources. The irony of this, in the case of zombie preppers and white supremacists—the irony, in fact, of all such movements—is that the base galvanized by such arguments must, almost by necessity, be itself a disenfranchised minority of poor whites whose participation in hegemonic power is almost never more than symbolic or, in Sartre's terminology, magical.[90]

Racial Revolution as Zombie Apocalypse

In this final section, I advocate for the anachronistic exercise of reading white contemporary accounts of the Haitian Revolution through the lens of the zombie apocalypse genre. Although this comparison may, at first glance, appear silly—perhaps even offensive—I find that it generates a number of valuable insights. Most importantly, it offers an opportunity to consider how white Revolutionary accounts—while written to seem transparently authentic, and

[89] Given this discourse, it may anachronistically be possible to go so far as to describe *The Birth of a Nation*, the first feature length film, as also the first zombie apocalypse film. Filmed to explicitly serve the purpose of being anti-black propaganda, with the KKK as the triumphant heroes, blacks in the film are represented as sub-human, decompositional forces that seek to symbolically and literally devour the white characters. It is only through the power of the white man—mercifully militarized, rushing into the gap left by an ineffective government—that the black "zombies" of *Birth* can be repulsed. Suggesting the perennial appeal of this kind of racialized fear narrative, we should not be surprised that *The Birth of a Nation* was the zombie blockbuster of its day, setting new records and even being the first film to be officially shown at the White House.

[90] When Sartre speaks of magical action or "magical thinking," he means ritual, symbolic, or superstitious actions one undertakes to make one feel as though one is manipulating events over which one has no actual control. This strategy bestows the illusion of control, when in fact there is only exigency. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen & Co., 1962).

evoke feelings of sympathy from the audience—were in fact highly formalized and constructed texts that drew on the grammar of Gothic narratives. Moreover, setting these canons in conversation presents a unique opportunity to examine ways in which late-eighteenth century French, English, and American fears of the racial Other remain morbidly similar to those of present-day Americans as expressed through zombie films. In addition, the ambivalence circulating around questions of freedom, individuality, legal personhood, and citizenship—as well as whether it is appropriate to view violence as palliative—remain as current and unsettled for present-day Americans as they were for the Napoleonic French, Georgian English, and post-Revolutionary Americans. While we imagine that we are very different from our forebears in respect to these questions, particularly those around race—and in certain meaningful ways, we undoubtedly *are*—our fantasies nonetheless reveal that we are less radically transformed than we believe ourselves to be.

Anti-Revolutionary white accounts of the Haitian Revolution remain some of the most understudied historical documents of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Atlantic world. While my comparative approach to them is undeniably idiosyncratic and anachronistic, I hope that it may bring some increased interest to them, as well as opening up new ways of thinking about them. In particular, setting them in the seemingly absurdist context of zombie films has an alienating effect, helping to deprive them of some of their dangerous power to portray their writers as sympathetic figures. As Popkin highlights, there are serious ethical concerns raised in the reading of these texts. Noting that, throughout the nineteenth century, they were used to support racist claims about the savagery and inferiority of blacks, he writes,

> Given that these survivor memoirs from the Haitian Revolution cannot be read as their authors intended—that is, as testimony to the cruelties inflicted on members of a civilized white race by barbarian members of a rival racial group—we must ask whether there [are] legitimate reasons for

> reading them at all, let alone republishing them. Does recognition of the legitimacy of revolt against slavery and white rule justify leaving these records of private experience in the obscurity to which they have long been confined?[91]

Naturally, I side with Popkin in believing that these are invaluable historical documents, and that "we cannot afford to discard testimony simply because we do not share the values of the people who provide it."[92] Therefore, analyzing these texts in ways that highlight their highly constructed nature—focusing on their use of the Gothic and their similarity to the latter-day zombie apocalypse genre—provides us with the critical distance that is necessary to engage in this exercise.

Equally, I am drawn to pursuing this comparison because of what it tells us about our current age. Throughout the last half of this chapter, I have argued that zombie stories are often used to tell stories about fears of outsiders, particularly minorities. In this configuration, zombies are indistinguishable from the barbarian horde. Pairing zombie films analytically with these anti-Revolutionary texts reveals how, despite a significant passage of time, many of these same racist beliefs still transfix us, and that we even continue to rely on many of the same narrative tropes—in particular a heavy reliance on the Gothic mode—to communicate them.[93]

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[91] Jeremy D. Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 31.

[92] Ibid.

[93] For contemporary, or nearly contemporary, sources describing the Haitian Revolution, I am relying on a handful of primary and secondary texts. Certainly one of the accounts of the Haitian Revolution most read in its own day was that of the British politician and pro-slavery campaigner Bryan Edwards. Bryan Edwards, *An historical survey of the French colony in the island of St. Domingo : comprehending a short account of its ancient government, political state, population, productions, and exports : a narrative of the calamities which have desolated the country ever since the year 1789, with some reflections on their causes and probable consequences : and a detail of the military transaction of the British army in that island to the end of 1794* (London: John Stockdale, Piccadilly, 1797). Jeremy Popkin's *Facing Racial*

Although he does not identify it as a Gothic impulse, per se, Popkin writes on essentially the same phenomenon when he muses,

> In these cases, we are thrown back on our sense of plausibility. Did the planation owner Le Clerc actually find his deluxe edition of the abbé Raynal's antislavery polemic, the *History of the Two Indies*, intact in the ruins of his home, open to the page predicting a black revolt? The theatrical symbolism of this scene may strike us as too perfect to be entirely convincing. . .[94]

While Popkin uses the term "theatrical," I am inclined to use the anachronistic term *cinematic*.

Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection is also an exceptional source for primary accounts of the Haitian Revolution, in particular French accounts. Mary Hassal's *Secret History, or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*, published in 1808, purports to be a collected series of letters written by an American young woman, Mary Hassal, to her uncle, the former U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr. Mary Hassal, *Secret history, or, The horrors of St. Domingo: In a Series of Letters, Written by a Lady at Cape Français to Colonel Burr, late Vice-President of the United States* (Philadelphia: Bradford & Inskeep; R. Carr, Printer, 1808). The veracity of the provenance is questionable, but for the purposes of our analysis, it matters little, as I am principally interested in how the Haitian Revolution was *imagined* by contemporary whites, whether they had personally experienced it or not. *The Haitian Journal of Lieutenant Howard, York Hussars, 1796-1798* is certainly one of the most unique documents from this time because it recounts the firsthand experiences of a participant in one of the more unusual and oft-forgotten aspects of the Haitian Revolution, namely, that about two years of it took place under tenuous English control. Roger Norman Buckley, ed., *The Haitian Journal of Lieutenant Howard, York Hussards, 1796-1798* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985). During this time, in its endless war with France, England made a grab for several of the former's American colonies—in some cases with greater success than others. St. Domingue was *not* one of those successes. However, Lt. Howard's descriptions of the Revolution, though presented in a dramatically stripped-down form, rely on many of the same tropes as those used by more florid commentators. Finally, for a larger historical context, I am deeply indebted to Geggus and Fiering's edited volume *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, and in particular to Laurent Dubois's essay within it, entitled "Avenging America: The Politics of Violence in the Haitian Revolution." Laurent Dubois, "Avenging America: The Politics of Violence in the Haitian Revolution," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 111-24. Given that every analysis of these texts up till now, to my knowledge, has neglected to look at how they resemble the zombie apocalypse, I feel a certain liberty to focus principally on that from here on out. The reader wishing to look at how these texts are *not* like zombie stories will find no lack of sources.

[94] Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 20.

One of the most notable parallels is that almost all of these commentators evoke a setting in which the apocalypse has at least partially, if not completely, already taken place. They describe themselves as shambling through a world that has already passed into a post-historical place of entropy, death, and moral panic. This setting, of *en medias res* post-apocalypse, will feel familiar to viewers of such zombie films as *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, and the TV show *The Walking Dead*. Mary Hassel writes upon her arriving in Cape Français in 1802,

> On landing, we found the town a heap of ruins. A more terrible picture of desolation cannot be imagined. Passing through streets choaked with rubbish, we reached with difficulty a house which had escaped the general fate. The people live in tents, or make a kind of shelter, by laying a few boards across the half-consumed beams; for the buildings being here of hewn stone, with walls three feet thick, only the roofs and floors have been destroyed.[95]

Similarly, Lt. Howard writes, upon his arrival at Mole St. Nicholas in 1798,

> At the bottom of the Bay is the Town, called New Town, built almost entirely of wood so that it once to catch Fire the whole Place must be inevitably consumed to Ashes. . . . formerly the Streets were also planted a double Row of Trees, but since the War, the greatest part of them have been destroyed & even the Canells [canals] are let run to ruin tho' of such absolute necessity.[96]

In both cases, the effect is to produce a sense of a place that has already passed beyond all redemption—a surprising use of foreshadowing in texts that appear, at least on the surface, to be unplanned chronicles. The French chronicler Le Clerc (not Napoleon's brother-in-law), writing in the style of a *philosophe*, is even more upfront in his post-apocalyptic evaluation. He writes, following the raid on Cap Français, of which Hassal saw the aftereffects,

> Our ruin was complete. One person hardly recognized the site of his own plantation, the other the plantation of a friend he sought in vain. What the

[95] Hassal, *Secret history*, 2-3.

[96] *Journal of Lt. Howard*, 36.

> fire had spared, hands even more destructive than the flames had reduced to dust. We felt as though we were walking on the ruins of the world.[97]

In his concluding Haitian entry, Howard again returns to apocalyptic images that echo those of Le Clerc.

> Not a dwelling in which formerly reigned Riches, plenty & Happiness but what has been a scen[e] of Murder, rapine & Destruction, & that of the most horrid Nature.
>
> Nothing certainly could be so shocking as to see so many beautiful Habitations burnt to the ground; the Trees that formerly embelished them torn up by the Roots; the enclosures thrown down; the Mills & other Establishments burnt & destroyed; the Magazines torn to pieces [sic] & every-thing scattered over the whole Country so that the whole Plain appeared like one great Ruin. As these horric [sic] Scenes had been Acted, at least the most considerable part of them, nearly six years before we arrived in the Country, the whole Plain was overgrown with Herbs and noxious weeds so that not the trace of a Road was to be seen except that which led from Pt. aû Prince [sic] to the Croix de Bouqet, & here and there a Path by which the Brigands decended [sic] from the Mountains to see what they could Plunder.[98]

What I find particularly fascinating, if not surprising, is that all of these texts make liberal use of Gothic tropes popularized during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which today persist, among other places, in zombie apocalypse films. The destroyed edifices, the poisoned bodies of water, the sense that one is in the "ruins of the world"—even Howard's later evocation of a "destroying Angel," all of these were already as cliché for their contemporary audiences as they still are to present-day audiences.[99]

Interestingly, both the Haitian Revolution and present-day zombies are associated with that most dangerous of natural phenomena, contagion. Blacks fleeing the Haitian Revolution were greeted as though they were potential disease vectors—granted, an anachronistic concept

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[97] Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 30.

[98] *Journal of Lt. Howard*, 129-130.

[99] Ibid.

for the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Say then, instead, that they were seen as potentially transporting the *miasma* of racial revolution, and the regions to which they were transported as slaves—or transported themselves as free blacks—were often afraid of what foment they might bring with them. Some areas, notably New Orleans, tried to set limits on their numbers. In other regions, like Philadelphia, they were the topic of extensive gossip and handwringing.[100] After transfer to Jamaica, Lt. Howard was even interviewed by a British secret committee on colonial safety about his knowledge regarding the Saint Dominguan exiles and refugees living in Jamaica—about which he confessed to knowing very little.[101] Like these potential Haitian Revolutionary secret agents, modern-day zombies are seen as dangerous to be around. Through close contact, particularly through bites or through contact with bodily fluids, the zombie condition or "virus" is highly contagious. Like revoluntionary agents, each zombie carries within it the seed of social collapse, through its capacity to be endlessly contagious—an act that costs it nothing and potentially benefits it exponentially.

One conceit of modern-day zombie stories—that pushing nature too far may in fact create zombies—has disturbing resonances in eighteenth century accounts of the Haitian Revolution.[102]

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[100] See Sections 3 ("Reverberations") and 4 ("Representations of the Revolution") in Geggus and Fiering's *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, particularly: Jeremy D. Popkin, "The French Revolution's Other Island," 199-222; Ada Ferrer, "Speaking of Haiti: Slavery, Revolution, and Freedom in Cuban Slave Testimony," 223-247; Ashli White, "The Saint-Dominguan Refugees and American Distinctiveness in the Early Years of the Haitian Revolution," 248-260; Sue Peabody, "'Free upon higher ground': Saint-Domingue Slaves' Suits for Freedom in U.S. Courts, 1792-1830," 261-283; João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes, "Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Brazil, 1791-1850," 284-314; Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, "The Specter of Saint-Domingue: American and French Reactions to the Haitian Revolution," 317-338.

[101] *Journal of Lt. Howard*, 133.

[102] Sarah Juliet Lauro, "The Eco-Zombie: Environmental Critique in Zombie Fiction," in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 54-66; Greg Pollock, "Undead is the New Green:

By this, I mean that many contemporary accounts of the Haitian Revolution portray it more in terms of an ecological, rather than political or social, disaster. Revolutionary blacks were often described as subhuman, acting as though they were a ravaging part of nature, rather than acting, as humans, on profoundly human and rational decisions. Popkin notes that, in revolutionary accounts by whites, racial descriptors are almost omnipresent, and blacks are often described as barely human.[103] There is, throughout these accounts, an insistence on blaming whites because blacks are seen as incapable of having decided to revolt on their own.[104] I see this as a rather remarkable parallel to the zombie genre, in which humans who have power—which is, in effect, to say white humans—are blamed, in some nebulous way, for having been directly culpable (through ecological meddling, etc.) for the zombie epidemic.

In numerous texts, blacks are described as being like animals. For example, Edwards writes, "Upwards of one hundred thousand savage people, habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail themselves of the silence and obscurity of the night, and fall on the peaceful and unsuspicious planters, like so many famished tygers thirsting for human blood."[105] The guerilla tactics that Edwards describes here were discussed and criticized extensively by commentators,

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Zombies and Political Ecology," in *Zombies are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead*, eds. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 169-82.

[103] Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 16-17.

[104] Ibid., 18.

[105] Dubois, "Avenging America," 113.

who were accustomed to orderly, European ways of conducting war and felt that guerilla warfare was uncivilized or even subhuman.[106]

Along similar lines, and what most struck me, initially, as a point of resonance between white Revolutionary accounts and the zombie genre, is the pornographic emphasis on inhuman and indiscriminate violence. Both genres assume certain basic ideas about what war should look like, and in neither case do the events being described conform to that. Zombies are indiscriminate, killing and eating anyone who crosses their paths. Their aim is not political victory or concession to a set of demands, but absolute destruction: they cannot be reasoned with. Similarly, all of the first-hand accounts under discussion here emphasize the excessive and indiscriminate violence of black Revolutionary fighters, who aim to murder everyone white—including women and children—and who even desecrate the dead.

In an anonymous account of the first days of the revolution, the director of the Clément planation outside Cap Français, when he first realizes that a rebellion has commenced,

> Hearing the noise [the rebels] were making, I jumped out of my bed and shouted: "Who goes there?" A voice like thunder answered me: "It is death!" At the same time, I heard a considerable number of gunshots and the voice of a horde of blacks who filled the house with these terrible words: "Kill, kill."[107]

It is hard not to read this passage through the genre of the zombie apocalypse, with the murderous horde descending on the unsuspecting victim, with no directive other than

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[106] Buckley, *Journal of Lt. Howard*, xvii. This same complaint was lodged against Native Americans in the United States, who used guerilla warfare techniques in their struggles against white settler colonists. Ironically, these same techniques, adapted from Native Americans, were used extensively by American colonists to great profit in Revolutionary battles against the English.

[107] Anonymous account, "La Révolution de Saint-Domingue, contenant tout ce qui s'est passé dans la colonie française depuis le commencement de la Révolution jusqu'au départ de l'auteur pour la France, le 8 septembre 1792," in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 50.

annihilation. Along the same lines, Edwards describes the Revolution as an "exterminating war."[108] He goes on to write that the Revolution had produced "horrors of which imagination cannot adequately conceive nor pen describe," a "picture of human misery" that "no other country, no former age, has exhibited."[109] A pamphlet produced by the Saint-Domingue colonial government claimed that revolutionary blacks were using "the body of a white child impaled upon a stake" as their battle standard—an apparently invented fiction which was nonetheless copied extensively in European accounts and became a goad for white outrage.[110] These and numerous other images of the excessive violence of revolutionary blacks—of whites driven through with stakes, and their heads on pikes ringing revolutionary camps—provided rationale for an equal level of retaliatory violence.[111] Described in ways evocative of the concluding scenes of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, one contemporary report crowed that whites "[took] no prisoners, but killed everything black or yellow, leav[ing] the negroes dead upon the field."[112] Another said, "the corpses of black prisoners were hung from the trees and bushes along the roads that led to the positions of the whites."[113] In sum, any excess on the part of white counter-revolutionaries was licensed—even necessitated—by the inhuman savagery of blacks, in

[108] Dubois, "Avenging America," 115.

[109] Ibid., 113.

[110] Ibid., 111.

[111] Ibid., 116.

[112] Ibid., 115.

[113] Ibid., 116.

much the same way that zombies can and must be killed with impunity. There can be no reasoning or redemption, only (hopefully) eradication.[114]

Having presented the comparison between the zombie genre and white anti-Revolutionary accounts as a polemic, I admit that there are numerous ways that the comparison is imperfect. However, the one that I wish to discuss here, and which I suggest is the most important, is that while anti-Revolutionary texts *do*, in fact, describe revolutionary blacks in all of the ways I have said, they also include numerous cases in which blacks are praised for their intelligence, their strategic prowess—even their humanity in dozens of documented cases in which blacks saved whites from being murdered, even helping them to escape and survive. It would, I think, be slipshod to compare these to recent advents in the zombie genre that involve the ability of zombies to rationalize and even act salvifically (for example, *Warm Bodies*)—especially because these are, as yet, aberrations in the genre, whereas cases of blacks being described in praising ways are completely central to the genre of anti-revolutionary writing.

I would suggest that this is most productively viewed as revealing a profound ambiguity about blacks central to the entire project of Atlantic slavery. As Walter Johnson elucidates in his *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, American slavery was predicated on a kind of schizophrenic splitting that facilitated slave holders thinking of slaves as both humans (a necessity for them to engage in highly skilled labor) and subhuman (fractured

[114] This has obvious connections to the theme of Chapter Two, "Black Revenge," in which I argue that the psychic projection of aggression onto blacks by whites constructs them as an enemy against whom one must defend oneself and one's loved ones.

bodies, "hands," beasts of burden).[115] The same schizophrenic mindset made it possible for rebelling slaves to be seen both as bestial murderers and saviors, as zombies and people.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how zombies were introduced to the United States through the colonial encounter with Haiti, and became emblematic of America's perverse insistence that Haiti was intractably strange. Despite the fact that the American notion of the zombie is a far remove from the Haitian *zonbi*—and America's cultural memory is amnesiac on the subject of its occupation of Haiti—I have nonetheless highlighted the many ways that the use of the zombie in American popular culture remains a site for rumination over questions of racial otherness, foreign or minority threat, class warfare, and legal personhood. To answer, then, the key question of this chapter: Yes, in meaningful ways, zombies continue to be black.

One of the most dramatic manifestations of this can be found around uses of the concept of a zombie apocalypse, which for many provides a polite language for discussing their anxieties about the decline of white racial hegemony. By concluding with the anachronistic thought experiment of reading eighteenth-century documentation of the Haitian Revolution through the lens of the present-day zombie apocalypse genre, I hope to figuratively close the circle, showing how these obsessions are essentially as old as America itself and have, over the era of its existence, continued to manifest in arrestingly similar ways. This offers another opportunity to

[115] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

reflect on the need to adjust our narrative of unhalting progress towards racial harmony—a narrative which falls apart when faced with the reality that, although meaningful change has certainly occurred, we have a continuous desire to tell the same stories about racial difference and threat.

Chapter Five

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT:
On black reimaginings of voodoo

> Voodoo is magick's African face in the West. Radical, transformative, and visionary, voodoo is a unique weapon of the imagination.
> —Darius James, *Negrophobia*[1]

> . . . the dispossessed can manipulate stereotypes, turning them into weapons with which to destroy those who impose them.
> —Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*[2]

With a few noted exceptions, every text, work, or object discussed so far has principally been the creation of white artists, writers, and filmmakers. One must be quick to note, of course, the many black actors who have participated in the making of these films, a topic to which I will return momentarily. Importantly, though, even these black actors have been under the exclusive direction of white filmmakers, helping to make their vision a reality. By and large, I have aimed to explore how, in their use of voodoo and voodooed imagery or characters, these works have—intentionally or not—helped to maintain the status quo of American racial hierarchy, participating in the process of inventing and maintaining race which Fanon dubbed "sociogeny." At the same time, I've explored how they participate in a kind of venting of the collective subconscious or libido, giving coded expression to white racist anxieties about blacks.

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[1] Darius James, *Negrophobia* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992), 2.

[2] Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134.

However, it would be a serious oversight to treat this topic of voodoo in American popular culture without addressing how these same tropes—tailored by whites over the centuries to produce maximal racial devastation upon deployment—have also captured the imaginations of black artists and writers. In the course of this project, I became increasingly interested by works in which black artists—used broadly to mean writers, dancers, actors, filmmakers, and musicians—use voodoo images and tropes to communicate intentions *opposite* those of imagined voodoo. In these works, black artists utilize voodoo to flip the script, or reverse sail, creating race-affirming images out of the tropes of imagined voodoo. In fact, the use of voodooed imagery by black artists is hardly new. One of the earliest examples is Charles Chesnutt's collection of short stories, *The Conjure Woman*, published in 1899, in which he adopts the satirical strategy of using images of hoodoo to subvert standard racist tropes associated with black popular religiosity and antebellum agency.

However, I contend that not all flipped uses of voodoo are equally effective at achieving the race-affirming ends of their makers. In this chapter, I examine the complexities and ethics of black artists choosing to employ voodooed images, which in most cases were specifically engineered to denigrate, embarrass, and humiliate blacks. In some cases, as will be shown, these flipped uses are highly effective at achieving their makers' aims, especially in works that explicitly embrace aesthetics of creolity, hybridity, or sampling—in other words, approaching voodoo as something provisional and *ad hoc*, and therefore malleable, re-makeable.[3] Not surprisingly, these same works often lean heavily on the powers of humor, irony, and satire. In other cases, however, I will argue that these attempted flipped uses are so burdened or inundated

[3] David Mickics, "Postmodernism, Ethnicity, and Underground Revisionism in Ishmael Reed," *Postmodern Culture* 1, no. 3 (1991).

by their historic racist meanings that the images actually flip back, overwhelming the intentions of the artist and forcefully reasserting their racist messages.

When I speak of hybridity, creolity, and sampling, I am glossing a rhetorical strategy rooted in a purposeful embrace of the legacy of the African diaspora as a space of mingled cultures, races, ethnicities, and aesthetic modalities. Therefore, what I am really speaking of is an aesthetic of mingled aesthetics, a rhetorical move that celebrates the capacious mingling of visions constitutive of the African diaspora. By opening up this space—which celebrates the *im*pure, and accepts aesthetic vision as necessarily shifting, provisional, and changeable—these artists adopt a stance similar to what Winnubst productively calls "queer."[4] This same impulse may also be identified as "improvisational," as Fred Moten does when he places it at the center of African American cultural creativity.[5] In *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner captures the essence of this queered, creole aesthetic, given voice by the character Belize, as he offers his vision of an African diaspora heaven to a dying Roy Cohn.

> BELIZE: Mmmm. Big city. Overgrown with weeds, but flowering weeds. On every corner a wrecking crew and something new and crooked going up catty corner to that. Windows missing in every edifice like broken teeth, fierce gusts of gritty wind, and a gray high sky full of ravens.
>
> ROY COHN: Isaiah.
>
> BELIZE: Prophet birds, Roy. Piles of trash, but lapidary like rubies and obsidian, and diamond-colored cowspit streamers in the wind. And voting booths.
>
> ROY COHN: And a dragon atop a golden horde.
>
> BELIZE: And everyone in Balencia gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender

[4] Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

[5] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

> confusion. And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. Race, taste and history finally overcome. And you ain't there.[6]

Belize's text is obviously a queer text. It is all the more astonishing, then, to recognize the degree to which this queer vision is not marginal: rather, it reflects the shared vision of aesthetic hybridity embraced by so many of the black artists discussed in this chapter, whether straight or queer.[7] It is not surprising, then, that many of the works discussed in this chapter respond to racist characterizations of black sexuality as inherently perverse or queered (as a slander). Bucking the trend, these artists and writers embrace queerness and a queer aesthetic as things to be celebrated. The exemplary text for this is Darieck Scott's novel *Hex*, which, through the language of voodoo, hoodoo, and conjure, explores the queer sexuality of men of color as a source of spiritual revelation and power.

In addition to embracing a creolized or hybrid aesthetic, most of the works discussed in this chapter engage in experiments with genre. Almost all of the works of imagined voodoo discussed in previous chapters have been structured around highly conservative genres, most especially horror and the Gothic. As has been shown, these genres tend to be predicated on fears of an Other—usually a racial or ethnic, as well as a sexual, Other—depicted as retrograde, uncivilized, a relic of humanity's past. By contrast, most of the works in this chapter depart from the genre of horror—although they routinely engage in play or flirtation with horror—and instead embrace futurist conventions, often expressly drawing on the aesthetics of science fiction. An example is the voodoo android aesthetic of musician Janelle Monáe. It explicitly borrows from the Vodou-inflected films of Maya Deren, as well as African arts—but also from

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[6] This dialogue is from the HBO miniseries based on Kushner's 1993 play and for which he wrote the screenplay. *Angels in America*, directed by Mike Nichols (2003, HBO 2004), DVD.

[7] Kushner's text is also noteworthy for being one of the only texts by a white author that uses flipped voodooed imagery, rather than the standard racist tropes of imagined voodoo.

Victorian dandyism, steampunk, and the Harlem Renaissance—all welded together into a dystopian futurism that posits black arts as a salvific force. In this chapter, I often utilize the term "Afrofuturism" to describe the aesthetic of these works.[8] Difficult to define, Afrofuturism blends techniques drawn from science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, surrealism, and historical fiction. Luminaries of Afrofuturism include the science fiction and fantasy writers Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, as well as musicians George Clinton (of Parliament Funkadelic) and Sun Ra. However, it is such an open-ended term that it has also been applied to writers as far back as Charles Chesnutt and W.E.B. Du Bois. The term itself, Afrofuturism, can be somewhat misleading because Afrofuturists are not strictly and exclusively forward-looking. Afrofuturism is as much about speculative approaches to the past that facilitate new and productive ways of conceptualizing black subjectivity. Moreover, it is complicated by the fact that many people identified as Afrofuturists do not use the term themselves.

Whereas previous chapters have focused on racist works that almost exclusively use the term "voodoo"—and it is around the notion of "voodoo" that the entire construct of racist imagined voodoo has accreted—within the flipped works under discussion, an expanded list of terms is used to reference this same field. The many terms used in lieu of, or in conjunction with, "voodoo" include Vodou, hoodoo, conjure, fixing, and goophering. Many of these terms derive from an African American internal discourse about black folk magical and spiritual

[8] Mark Dery is usually credited with coining the term. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse on Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 1-10. For more on Afrofuturism: "Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of *Social Text*," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002); Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Books, 2013); Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman, eds., *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). Afrofuturism is also currently the theme of a major show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, entitled "The Shadows Took Shape" (Nov. 14, 2013 – Mar. 9, 2014).

traditions. By using these referents, these writers and artists adopt a rhetorical strategy which destabilizes and questions pat racist constructs, signaling through the name a more dramatic shift of meaning and intention in their repurposed usages.

Exploring some of the stickier questions about black agency in the production of racist imagery, I begin this chapter thinking about the role of black actors in the production of voodooed films, and then engaging in close readings of a handful of texts. These particular works were selected in part because they offer responses to the imagined voodoo themes of black revenge and hypersexuality raised in earlier chapters. They also represent a mix of well-known texts that others have already studied extensively (i.e. *The Conjure Woman*, *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Daughters of the Dust*), and texts that have received little scholarly attention (*Negrophobia, Eve's Bayou, Hex*). I will begin by examining two of the oldest examples of flipped uses, Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* and the canon of early-to-mid twentieth century blues music. After this, I will jump forward a number of decades and examine Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Darius James's *Negrophobia*, two texts that exemplify the hybridized and satirical ways that black artists use voodoo and hoodoo in their work. Then I will proceed to an examination of the films *Daughters of the Dust* and *Eve's Bayou*, along with Darieck Scott's novel *Hex*. I will conclude with an analysis of two of Jewell Parker Rhodes's Marie Laveau novels.

Black actors

Some of the earliest racist films, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), relied on white actors in blackface to produce their racist fantasies.[9] In fact, the first voodoo film, *White Zombie*,

[9] *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; Kino Internation, 2011), DVD.

used white actors to perform all of the black parts.[10] However, since blackface was phased out as a performative convention, voodooed films could no longer be produced without the participation, and tacit permission, of black actors portraying these black characters. This raises the important issue, then, of what kind of agency black performers exercise in performing roles that are typically categorized as portraying, creating, and maintaining racist stereotypes.

One could argue that blackface depictions possessed a kind of perfection never to be equaled subsequently. By this, I mean that they permitted white performers to engage in a kind of ritual, quasi-religious performance of their own libidinal obsessions, displaced through the donning of the blackface of a racial Other.[11] Through this mode of expression, white performers and their white directors, writers, and producers were able to engage in an ethnically closed performance of anxieties about otherness, including perverse obsessions with sexuality and violence. At the same time, one could equally make the argument that representations of these same stereotypes by actual black performers enables a different sort of perfection, in which white stereotypes about blacks are performed by *actual* blacks, thus indulging a need for racist stereotypes to have the appearance of verisimilitude or mimesis.

Regardless, it is certainly the case that black performers have been and remain integral players in the creation of voodooed imagery. In fact, there are numerous present-day actors who have established highly lucrative acting careers, largely by playing what Spike Lee famously referred to as "super-duper magical negroes." The "magical negro," as popularly defined, is a "type" of black character who has a profound spirituality, often along with actual supernatural

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[10] *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin (1932; VCI Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

[11] This could productively be linked to indigenous European traditions of masquering as "the wild man." Cf. Charles Fréger, *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage* (Stockport [UK]: Dewi Lewis Publishers, 2012).

powers, who provides some needed assistance to the white hero. As Bakke notes of the magical negro stereotype, "having been close to him [is] often enough to make a white man moral or imbue him with the necessary strength for righteous action."[12] I add to this the suggestion that the mystical negro "type" is legible to audiences precisely because of the long history of voodooed characters. In fact, the mystical negro type should rightly be viewed as another aspect of imagined voodoo stereotypes.

Obviously, when discussing the agency of actors portraying such roles, a cautious subtlety is necessary, and each should rightly be considered on a case-by-case basis, as it is not something that one wishes to paint in broad strokes. Taking that stance seriously, I will only talk here about Fredi Washington—who has already been discussed at length for her roles in the films *Emperor Jones*, *Imitation of Life*, and *The Love Wanga*—although I will point towards some generalizable speculations.[13] In two of these three films, Washington played a character

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[12] Gretchen Bakke, "Dead White Men: An Essay on the Changing Dynamics of Race in US Action Cinema," *Anthropological Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2010): 404. See also: Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibal, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 457-486; Audrey Colombe, "White Hollywood's New Black Boogeyman," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 45 (2002), accessed September 1, 2013, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc45.2002/colombe/blackmentxt.html; John Christopher Farley, "That Old Black Magic," *Time*, Nov. 27, 2000; Steven Hyden, et al., "Inventory: 13 Movies featuring magical black men," *AV Club*, March 4, 2007, accessed September 1, 2013, http://www.avclub.com/content/feature/inventory_13_movies_ featuring/1.

[13] *The Emperor Jones*, directed by Dudley Murphy (1933; Image Entertainment, 2003), DVD; *Imitation of Life*, directed by John M. Stahl (1934; Universal Studies, 2012), DVD; *The Love Wanga* [a.k.a. *Crimes of Voodoo*, *The Crime of Voodoo*, *Ouanga*, *Drums of the Jungle*], directed by George Terwilliger (1935; Something Weird Video, 2006); DVD. For more comprehensive discussions of the roles of black actors in constructing racial stereotypes: Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th Edition (New York: Continuum, 2001 [1973]); James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York, Vintage International: 2011); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representations in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

that fit the "tragic mulatto" type. Throughout her brief acting career, Washington was severely limited by the fact that 1930s Hollywood had few roles to offer a light-skinned black woman. Eventually, Washington quit acting altogether, and by the 1940s, limited her involvement in show business to working as the critic for *The People's Voice*, a left-leaning black periodical edited by her brother-in-law. In her column, Washington frequently called out black performers who performed roles that she felt did not advance the cause of racial upliftment, which she frequently referred to using the then-fashionable term "The New Negro."

In one column, Washington criticized the black comedian Tim Moore for performing routines that drew heavily on the conventions of minstrelsy. Moore wrote a pointed reply. He noted, "I have never seen you on the stage but once and that was *Singing the Blues* and I think they had a little dice shooting and murder. I did not see anything uplifting about the part of a colored woman you played in 'Imitation of Life,' who was ashamed of her own mother because she was dark." Washington's public reply, issued in her column in 1943, speaks directly to the concerns I am raising.

> I should like to point out to Tim that I do not take exception to this criticism of parts I've done in the theatre and on the screen which dates back ten or more years. But I should like to clarify for Tim and others who are confused on the issue. The fact is that ten years ago, we were a slumbering people standing still with no particular knowledge of the plight of our unfortunate brothers in far off lands or at home for that matter.
>
> . . . It is hardly necessary to try to point out the terrific world-wide changes that have taken place since that time. Unprecedented attention has been given the Negro since the war began because of the fact that we are theoretically free but actually part slave under a vicious system. . .
>
> . . . These and many more reasons, which certainly we must be acquainted with, are why, what we considered all right in the theatre or on the screen ten years ago, are not all right now. Today we are shedding red blood for democracy.[14]

[14] Fredi Washington, "Headlines/Footlights," *The People's Voice*, August 7, 1943, cited in Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in*

What I find especially fascinating about this response is that Washington does not even attempt to mount a defense of her previous work. In fact, with the advantage of considerable distance in time, I would submit that Washington's film work is far from being indefensible. Her portrayals of tragic mulattoes are, within the limited range of what was written, imbued with a considerable amount of pathos that—particularly in *The Love Wanga*—verges on the satirical. In this sense, Washington's performances open themselves to heterodox viewings that subvert the films' manifest intentions.

Washington's surrender on this issue suggests, on the one hand, a profound discomfort, honed over decades, with the limited options presented to her as an actress. On the other hand, it is difficult to not read Washington's response with a degree of cynicism. As a highly educated woman, schooled in black history and active in the NAACP, Washington's feigned ignorance that the struggle for black rights commenced only in the decade that she was writing—as though Du Bois or Garvey had never existed—falls rather flat. At heart, it suggests a tactic that may be in operation for many black actors who accept such roles, namely, a cleaving between one's professional life and one's personal commitments. Washington was ultimately unwilling to defend her previous work because it was precisely that, *work*—in particular, it was *what was available*. Nonetheless, she was unwilling to extend this critical bracketing to performers such as Moore, now that she was no longer in the position of depending upon such jobs to make a living. One could likewise theorize that, as for Washington, it is possible to engage in autobiographical exercises that allow one to strategically argue that one is always living in a new age, with different rules than previously. This has the quality of spiritual epiphany, like being

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American Theater and Film Before World War II (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 356-7. My discussion of this exchange is heavily indebted to Robinson's book.

"born again," which facilitates the rhetorical move of looking upon one's past actions with a remove, almost as though they were done by someone else entirely. Washington says, in effect, that she is not responsible for what she did in the past because she has been born again in the spirit of the New Negro—and what's more, so should you be. As such, Washington is not only born again, she is a proselyte.

If my reading of Washington is less than generous, it is spurred in large part by Washington's lack of irony about her own recent conversion experience, and how that situates her as a critic. Yet, if it is uncomfortably easy to be cynical of Washington's advice, it may be that this is a case where our distance in time actually disadvantages our perspective. After all, in the here and now, Washington appears to us as a woman who had retired from acting. Therefore her prescriptions read as uncompromising, even hypocritical, advice from a woman no longer in the position of having to draw her living from acting. It may be more helpful, rather, to recognize that Washington likely didn't know that she would rarely act again, and that this was as much advice she was offering to herself—advice to which she adhered so rigorously, in fact, that she was unable to work again, given her unwillingness to play a role any longer in the production of racist stereotypes.

Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*

Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* first appeared as a collection in 1899, but the stories in it had been written—and in some cases published—over the course of nearly fifteen years, with "The Goophered Grapevine" appearing first in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1887.[15] Chesnutt

[15] Charles Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," *Atlantic Monthly* 60, no. 358 (1887): 354-60.

was a southern émigré who decamped to New York City, where the Zeitgeist of *fin-de-siècle* black arts was rapidly gaining momentum and setting the stage for the Harlem Renaissance. While publication in *Atlantic Monthly* was a coup of epic proportions for Chesnutt—his stories ran next to Henry James—the stories published in the *Atlantic* were part of a genre of "Negro folktales" that Chesnutt desperately wished to leave behind. Chesnutt hoped to use the success of these stories to gain publication for longer, more modern work. However, at this stage in his career, his publisher, Walter Hines Page of Houghton Mifflin, expressed interest only in publishing an enlarged collection of Chesnutt's conjure stories. Despite his fatigue at writing about "full-blooded" blacks whose "chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity to their old master[s]," Chesnutt ultimately found himself leveraged into producing a collection of precisely this genre of tales.[16]

Chesnutt's stories cleave closely to the conventions of the "Negro folktale" genre, made most famous by Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus-Brer Rabbit stories.[17] In fact, Chesnutt even created his own version of Uncle Remus, called Uncle Julius in his stories. Each of the stories focused on interactions between Uncle Julius and a Northern couple, John and Annie, who moved to North Carolina and purchased a vineyard in hopes that the southern weather would improve Annie's poor health. Uncle Julius, formerly a slave to "Mars McAdoo" (Master McAdoo), is now an old man who continues to live in a shack on the abandoned plantation of his former owner. When John and Annie purchase the plantation, they hire Uncle Julius as their

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[16] Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 14. This description of Chesnutt's early career leading up to *The Conjure Woman* is heavily indebted to Brodhead's introduction to this authoritative edition.

[17] For example, Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings; The Folk-lore of the Old Plantation* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881).

driver and local informant. Each story follows approximately the same format, with Uncle Julius telling John and Annie a tale of misfortune from the time of slavery, a story which invariably involves enslaved blacks seeking the assistance of conjure to try to improve their lot. In multiple cases, Julius's tale turns out to be a shaggy dog story, with the initial inspiration only a diversion from the story's actual point (as, for example, with the rabbit foot in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny").

At one level, Chesnutt's conjure tales can be read as formal and aesthetic exercises. Although "monstrous" (Brodhead's word), Chesnutt's explorations of black Southern dialect helped to lay the groundwork for the dialect writing that is characteristic of many Harlem Renaissance writers—including Wright, Hurston, and Nugent—whose efforts to record and replicate black speech patterns were underpinned by an aesthetic philosophy that sought authentic black modes of expression. However, beneath the surface, what sets Chesnutt's stories apart as unique departures from the "Negro folktale" genre is their obsession with social power—both between blacks, and between blacks and whites. As the reader learns to expect, each of Uncle Julius's stories is an attempt to manage and manipulate the actions of its white audience. Although Uncle Julius does not indicate any outright hostility towards John and Annie—in fact, he may even like them—Julius's life has been shaped by the many deprivations of power that he has had to endure. Born into slavery, and only recently freed by the events set in motion by the Civil War, Julius continues to experience limited social and economic power. However, within the world of the abandoned plantation and its immediate environs, Julius, at his advanced age, has begun to experiment with how to define his personhood in the absence of white masters. In reading between the lines, we see that he has been able to eke out a modest living from the land, including honey from a wild beehive that he is determined to conceal from John and Annie ("The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt"). Unfortunately, his financial reality obliges Uncle

Julius to work for John and Annie when they purchase the estate—entering again into a kind of quasi-ownership, in the sense that Julius effectively goes with the estate, accompanying the transfer of deed as part of the "property."

Within this arrangement, Julius is understandably cynical about the kinds of power available to black folks both under slavery and after it. In the stories that he tells, conjure serves as an extended metaphor, through which Julius explores black power and its limitations. As Brodhead notes, "conjure figures as a recourse, a form of power available to the powerless in mortally intolerable situations."[18] However, he adds, "Chesnutt is careful to note that if dominated people are not powerless, neither is their power limitless."[19] In fact, the conjure in Julius's tales notably, and inevitably, always go awry. In nearly every tale, the advantages gained by conjure—erotic partners, protection from abuse, or increased access to resources—are revealed to be temporary, conditional, with the beneficiary always worse off than he or she was to begin.

Within the world of Chesnutt's tales, conjure affords opportunities for the author to push beyond mere stereotypes of "black superstition," exploring realities of power dynamics between blacks under slavery. Accustomed to being treated as commercialized entities and owned bodies, the black characters in Uncle Julius's stories feel no compunction against commercializing their own relationships through the power of conjure. By seeking the assistance of Aunt Peggy or the other conjure men and women in the stories, the characters mystically buy and sell one another—as well as themselves—to receive assurances that they will be enriched,

[18] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 9.

[19] Ibid., 11.

enamored, or protected—or that the object of their hatred will be impoverished or otherwise stricken.

Interestingly, even whites use conjure in Chesnutt's stories, and generally with more success than blacks—as, for example, in "The Goophered Grapevine," when Mars McAdoo successfully prevents his slaves from eating his grapes by having them conjured with a powerful curse. For Chesnutt, then, throwing his voice as Uncle Julius, we can say that conjure provides a method of engaging in complex reflections on the profound and layered tragedies of slavery: how it not only enforced vertical predatory power relationships between whites and blacks, but also horizontal predatory power relationships between blacks as well.

Chesnutt's narrative brilliance embeds this pointed exploration of the social and symbolic violence of slavery within the framework of "light," humorous tales. Not unlike the technique adopted much later by James in *Negrophobia*, or Spike Lee in his film *Bamboozled* (2000), Chesnutt satirizes a racist genre, making his performance of the genre a litmus test of the reader's character.[20] If Chesnutt's conjure tales appear to be racist, Chesnutt seems to whisper from off-stage that it is because the reader herself has been conjured by the tales, blinded by the virtuoso performance to the strongly-worded critique hidden in plain view at its center.

Blues music

In Yvonne Chireau's book *Black Magic*, she notes that, "While the blues captured the black experience in song, they also served as a prime conduit for African American supernatural

[20] There is a lengthy discussion of James's *Negrophobia* later in this chapter. *Bamboozled*, directed by Spike Lee (2000; New Line Cinema, 2000), DVD.

beliefs. Conjure was a constant inspiration for blues composers."[21] I am particularly interested in how, in the context of blues, an art form born out of the crucible of American slavery, voodooed imagery provided a grammar for the exploration of questions of personhood, personal sovereignty, self-determination, and emotional or erotic need.

As Chireau notes, hoodoo and conjure references within blues music often figure prominently in songs that explore "loneliness, despair, and betrayal." Insightfully, she explains,

> . . . blues healing was primarily focused on the fixing of relationships that had gone awry, and the resolution of oppressive romantic entanglements. . . The blues and Conjure often converged in the strident declarations of men and women whose worlds revolved around their attempts to establish intimate bonds. Hoodoo was both a punishment and cure, the supernatural force that ignited the passions of desperate suitors or frustrated paramours. . . It was a surrogate for personal design, an invisible stand-in for the power and will that the blues poet lacked, lost, or wanted, especially in matters of the heart.[22]

As Chireau points out, when hoodoo is evoked in blues music, particularly that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is persistently as a device for the control of others—or of one's own fate. Notably, those two things are often not distinct, erotic fulfillment being a necessary precondition for self-actualization. Drawing inspiration from J. Lorand Matory's work on tropes of slavery in African diaspora religions, I wish to briefly explore how these voodooed images provide an indigenous African American vocabulary for blues poets to explore notions of the self in the context of abolition, Reconstruction, and the realities of black agency in Jim Crow America.

In his essay "Free to Be a Slave," J. Lorand Matory highlights how, in a surprising reversal of expectations, members of the African diaspora often utilize metaphors of slavery in

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[21] Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 145.

[22] Ibid., 147.

ways that characterize the slave as agentive and slavery as a morally virtuous way of structuring power relationships.[23] Adding to this the supposition that blues music can perhaps best be situated as an outgrowth of African diaspora sacred music, I would argue that blues music can be thought of as a site where diaspora sacred modalities of hoodoo and conjure intersect with efforts to redefine the meanings of slavery and selfhood within an American context.

As Chireau notes, much of blues music focuses on relationships—particularly broken ones—and more generally, erotic obsession. In these songs, hoodoo is often summoned explicitly as a tool for securing erotic control of one's lover or object of desire. Much as in Chesnutt's conjure stories, this use of hoodoo to control another is not characterized as an evil act, as we may expect. Rather, it is proposed as one viable existential option that adheres to the economic conventions that govern so many other daily interactions. Reflect, for example, on Lightnin' Hopkins singing that he will get a mojo hand to "fix [his] woman so she can't have no other man," or Screamin' Jay Hawkins howling, "I put a spell on you, 'cause you're mine!"[24] I submit that these may best be understood within a broader context of the history of American slavery—including the reality that the safest legal position for one's family or lover was at times to be one's legal property. Recall how, in Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, the characters continue to give their children names like Iona ("I own her") and Myown as a way of expressing the deep bond between parent and child.[25] Likewise, this allows for a rereading of the popular

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[23] J. Lorand Matory, "Free to Be a Slave: Slavery as Metaphor in the Afro-Atlantic Religions," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37 (2007): 398-425.

[24] Lighnin' Hopkins, "Mojo Hand," on *Mojo Hand* (released on Fire Records, 1960). Screamin' Jay Hawkins, "I Put a Spell on You," on *At Home with Screamin' Jay Hawkins* (Okeh/Epic, 1958).

[25] *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; Kino Video, 2000), DVD. There is a lengthy discussion of *Daughters of the Dust* later in this chapter.

folktale of blues legend Robert Johnson selling his soul to the Devil in exchange for superior musical skills.[26] If, for Johnson and his contemporary bluesmen, ownership was a controlling metaphor for understanding agency, then it may be that Johnson's commercial transaction with the Devil is not an act of spiritual and social debasement, but rather a sensible commercial transaction that short-circuits the possibility of a worse master laying claim to Johnson's talents. In the ritual logic illuminated by Matory, a powerful slave is one who has a powerful master.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the time, blues music of the early twentieth century does not limit such savvy commercialized spiritual and erotic activities to men. On the contrary, hoodoo women are often the most powerful figures in blues music—and, like Aunt Peggy of Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, they pull all the strings behind the scenes.[27] Along with numerous named and unnamed "hoodoo ladies," the "Seven Sisters" are often paid for help by the song's protagonists, while Papa Celestin's "Marie Laveau" offers a provocative portrayal of nineteenth century black female entrepreneurship.[28] Along similar lines, Memphis Minnie's "Hoodoo Lady" is a surprisingly frank narrative of a woman in control of her own erotic life, asking the eponymous hoodoo lady to "bring [her] man back home / but don't let him stay all night."[29] In another of her songs, "Haunted House Blues," Memphis Minnie utilizes an extended metaphor drawn from hoodoo of her lover as "haint" (ghost), expressing her discontent that her man is so

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[26] Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil's Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1998).

[27] For example, "Funny Paper" Smith, "Seven Sister's Blues," recorded July 10, 1931, Vocalion 1641, 79 rpm.

[28] Papa Celestin's New Orleans Band, "Marie Laveau," recorded c. 1954, reissued on *Marie Laveau*, GHB Records, 1994, CD.

[29] Memphis Minnie, "Hoodoo Lady," recorded February 18, 1936, Vocalion 3222; "Haunted House Blues," recorded November 12, 1936, Vocalion 3581.

inconsistent that he may as well be dead, and explains that she will use hoodoo remedies (such as a horseshoe over her door) to exorcize him from her life for good.

In seeming retaliation for women's erotic power, bluesmen frequently counter by seeking or advertising hoodoo powers of their own—although often unsuccessfully. Lightnin' Hopkins brags of his mojo hand in one song ("Mojo Hand"), but in "Black Cat Bone" he acknowledges that his woman has broken the power of his black cat bone charm, running around on him while he is powerless to do anything about it.[30] Likewise, Muddy Waters laments, "got my mojo workin' / but it just don't work on ya."[31] His solution: to get a "hand" (i.e. a hoodoo charm) in Louisiana, and thereby increase his erotic power. In another of his most famous tracks, Muddy Waters offers one of the most complete mergings of erotic and mystical power in all of hoodoo music, referring to himself as "the hoochie coochie man," punning on "hoochie coochie" as an ambivalent term signifying both hoodoo and vagina.[32]

What all of these songs share is a characterization of the erotic as an arena of mystical coercion that is homologous to the commercialized relationships between master and slave. Within this hoodooed erotic marketplace, however, anyone is potentially for sale. One may set out to buy another and end up bought oneself—like Screamin' Jay Hawkins who begins by declaring "you're mine," but by the end must correct the score to admit, "I don't care if you don't want me, *I'm yours* right now." However, none of these positions of ownership or of being owned are inherently scorned; on the contrary, they are eroticized as ideal arrangements for the fulfillment of sexual and emotional needs. In blues, the most powerful way to say that you need

[30] Lighnin' Hopkins, "Black Cat Bone," recorded c. 1950, RPM 388.

[31] Muddy Waters, "Got My Mojo Workin,'" released 1956, Chess 1652.

[32] Muddy Waters, "Hoochie Coochie Man," released 1954, Chess 1560.

someone is to use hoodoo tropes to proclaim that you wish to own them—or are, yourself, owned by them. The role of hoodoo in this discourse is not incidental or a mere cliché, but rather is integral to sanctifying what would otherwise be a base commercial transaction, transforming an erotic struggle into a high-stakes exchange played out on the spiritual plane, with the stakes being one's heart and soul, one's very being. This eroticized and spiritualized recharacterization of slavery and ownership highlights an internal African American discourse seeking to contextualize, understand, and reimagine selfhood and relationships within the context of American's evolving race dynamics. By using and spiritualizing these contested tropes, one can see blues poets flooding this semantic field with their own recharacterizations, repurposing for their own ends what, without their intervention, would remain uniformly and uncontestedly hideous images of human bondage.

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Darius James's *Negrophobia*

On numerous occasions throughout this work, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* has been mined for theoretical insights about how cultural phenomena—notably racist tropes—maintain themselves and spread. However, Reed's novel is a cultural phenomenon in its own right—a bestseller, nominated for a National Book Award, and named by literary critic Harold Bloom as one of the most important novels of the Western canon. In this section, I examine how Reed's uses of voodoo and hoodoo in *Mumbo Jumbo* reveal and endorse an aesthetic of creolity, sampling, and mixing.[33] For Reed, this aesthetic is central to his understanding of African

[33] In fact, this section could be written just as well as a reading of any number of Reed's novels, many of which use voodooed imagery and Reed's new religion of Neo-HooDoo—for example, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (New York: Random House, 1974) or *Flight to Canada* (New

America, the strength of which lies precisely in its internal heterogeneity and complexity.[34] In *Mumbo Jumbo*—and in complimentary works such as his collection of poetry called *Conjure*—Reed creates a new religion, his counter to the racist religion of imagined voodoo. While most scholars of Reed tend to focus on how Reed draws upon the pre-existing vocabulary of hoodoo and voodoo, I suggest that he is engaged in a more radical project, namely creating the structure for a new "church" (Reed's term) of Afrofuturism. Reed's new religion, which he calls Neo-HooDoo, is open-sourced, as complex and capacious as black America itself—yet open to adherents of all races. In *Laughing Fit to Kill*, Carpio offer the following description of "Neo-HooDoo aesthetics":

> a use of voodoo that intentionally dispenses with the notion of authenticity in favor of an open and fluid approach that enables [Reed] to use and mix different traditions available to him as a writer of the African diaspora. As he put it in his "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," a piece that, aside from expressing the fluidity of his practice also satirizes the very concept of a modernist manifesto, "Neo-HooDoo borrows from Ancient Egyptians . . . from Haiti, Africa, and South America. Neo-HooDoo comes in all styles and moods."[35]

In this section, I set Reed's work—and new religion of Neo-HooDoo—in conversation with Darius James's book *Negrophobia*. Although published more than twenty years later,

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York: Random House, 1976), which is discussed in a very similar context in Glenda Carpio's *Laughing Fit to Kill*. Nonetheless, I think that *Mumbo Jumbo* is the key text to explore in this work precisely because of its fame and cultural impact—not least of all being that it was credited by George Clinton with informing the Afrofuturist utopian mythos of his Parliament Funkadelic. Fortunately, there is enough overlap in the symbol set that Reed explores in all of these novels that Carpio's insights about *Flight to Canada*, for example, apply just as well to *Mumbo Jumbo*. For more on black utopianism, Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

[34] Reed and Darius James also discuss their shared views on this topic in the recent documentary *United States of Hoodoo*, directed by Oliver Hardt (2012; Kinonation, 2014), Amazon streaming video. I am especially grateful to Hardt for allowing me to view the film prior to its US release.

[35] Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 122.

James—a friend and protégé of Reed's—positions the works as a response to Reed's text. Although more nihilistic and absurdist than *Mumbo Jumbo*, James's novel, like Reed's, uses voodooed imagery and Neo-HooDoo to explore the fever-dream intersection between black culture and white fear.

Like so many of the works discussed in this chapter, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* toys with doubled and coded meanings, constructing a text that interrogates the reader as much as the reader interrogates it. The gumbo aesthetic of Reed's Afrofuturism could close itself to the uninitiated reader, appearing to be little more than "mumbo jumbo"—i.e., nonsense. However, for the initiated reader, Reed's novel opens with an alternative understanding of its "mumbo jumbo": from the Mandingo, meaning, "magician who makes the troubled spirits of ancestors go away."[36] In other words, for Reed's intended audience, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a Neo-HooDoo medicinal text, a mystical panacea that offers alleviation from the pain and trouble that is caused, in many African spiritual modalities, by ancestors who have not been propitiated properly. One could argue that enraged and forgotten black ancestors—especially those who suffered under slavery—are the object of the novel's "medicine," and it is precisely this "disease" that PaPa LaBas, the novel's protagonist, sets out to help his students (and anyone else who will listen) fix.

Set in New York City during the height of the Harlem Renaissance—and against the backdrop of the Marine occupation of Haiti—*Mumbo Jumbo* is, at times, structured like a screenplay, beginning with a pre-credits scene that hooks the reader (positioned as viewer), then a fade to black for the title and credits (copyright page), then diving back into the action of the text. Although the conceit of text-as-screenplay is abandoned for large chunks of the text, it

[36] Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 7.

nonetheless possesses a cinematic quality, leaping between several storylines, often leaving one just at the height of its action.

The protagonist, PaPa LaBas, is an adept of Neo-HooDoo, which he practices from his home and church, the Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral, located at 119 West 136th Street near the top of Harlem.[37] PaPa LaBas is the descendant of a long line of voodoo practitioners, dating back at least as far as his grandfather, who was the first in his line to live in the New World. As the codifier and proselyte of Neo-HooDoo, it is appropriate that Papa LaBas be named after Legba, the Vodou lwa who manages the gate between the physical and spiritual realms, and who must be propitiated at the beginning of all services. In New Orleans Voodoo, he is called Papa Labas—a pun on his name that captures the spirit's conflation with the Christian Devil ("là-bas" ["down there"] being a French euphemism for Hell).[38]

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[37] This was the home of the real black stage magician Black Herman, Benjamin Rucker, described in his autobiography as an exceedingly luxurious home. Purportedly, the house did have a voodoo temple room, here described by Haskins: "One room of the house was specially furnished. The walls were painted black and hung with African masks carved in frightening grimaces. It featured an altar decorated with voodoo symbols and a human skull surrounded by candles. Near the altar, African drums rigged to play themselves completed the atmosphere of black magic." Jim Haskins and Katherine Benson, *Conjure Times: Black Magicians in America* (New York: Walker & Company, 2001), 94-96.

[38] On *American Horror Story: Coven*, Lance Reddick played the voodoo spirit Papa Legba, who was described in the press release as the "voodoo Satan"—a description that matched the character on the show, in which he was the master of hell and oversaw the eternal torments of the damned. Tambay A. Obenson, "Lance Reddick Cast To Play Papa Legba In 'American Horror Story: Coven,'" *Shadow and Act* blog on *Indiewire*, Dec. 4, 2013, accessed January 5, 2014, http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/lance-reddick-cast-to-play-papa-legba-in-american-horror-story-coven. The connection between the Afro-Atlantic complex of spirits variously known as Eleggua/Esu/Legba and Satan/the Devil is wide-ranging and probably fairly old. In the American South, black magico-religious traditions combined this figure with the "devil in the crossroads," with whom for example the great Blues legend Robert Johnson struck a deal to be given the technology of the blues guitar. In Brasil, Exú and the closely-related group of spirits called Pompa Gira are often conflated with the Devil. In Nigeria, Christian missionaries chose in the nineteenth century to translate the word "Devil" into Yorùbá as "Esu," and Muslim Yorùbá on *hajj*, when performing the ritual of "Stoning the Devil," say that they are "Stoning Esu." This

Although brought to America as a slave, PaPa LaBas's grandfather was such a powerful practitioner of voodoo that he could not be successfully enslaved. We are told, "A cruel young planter purchased [PaPa LaBas's] grandfather and was found hanging shortly afterward. A succession of slavemasters met a similar fate: insanity, drunkenness, disease and retarded children. A drunken White man called him a foul name and did not live much longer afterward to give utterance to his squalid mind."[39] In this passage, which also introduces PaPa LaBas to the reader, voodoo is immediately situated as a salvific force that has the power to save New World blacks from humiliation and enslavement. Likewise, voodoo is fused with Jes Grew, the psychic plague/anti-plague at the novel's center. This merger is made explicit when, having just described the voodoo powers of his grandfather and father, the narrator says, "it is no surprise that PaPa LaBas carries Jes Grew in him like most other folk carry genes."[40] In other words, voodoo and Jes Grew are one and the same.

But what is Jes Grew? With the novel's series of epigraphs, Jes Grew is immediately situated in the context of being a new loa, a new voodoo spirit. The first quotation, from Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, reads, "Some *unknown natural phenomenon* occurs which cannot be explained, and a new local demigod is named."[41] Then, there are two more epigraphs, which build on the concept of a voodoo loa that, like a force of nature, self-creates. The next

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is naturally not to say that I agree with the characterization, but only to note how interesting it is that the producers of *AHS: Coven*, when they went to reach for an easy stereotype, either found or reproduced this established and rather antique way of demonizing Afro-Atlantic religiosity. The net result, of course, is to draw the equation that "black religiosity = Satanism." And when one is fighting against Satan himself, naturally then any means whatsoever are justified by the goal of reestablishing spiritual (here conflated with "racial") purity.

[39] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 23.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 11.

epigraph, a single uncredited sentence, explains that Ragtime music "jes' grew" (lit. "just grew"), meaning that it seemed to appear on its own, rather than being created. The series of epigraphs ends with a quotation from James Weldon Johnson, saying of a "jes grew" song, "the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody."[42] In other words, Jes Grew—at times synonymous with voodoo/Neo-HooDoo, at times a denizen of it—is a spiritual power that forces people to engage with it, but which is itself beyond the control of anyone.

Elsewhere, Jes Grew is defined in ways that make it both more immediately comprehensible and more arcane. On the one hand, Jes Grew continues to be identified as synonymous with black popular culture. During one of the book's critical scenes, PaPa LaBas's protégée Earline becomes possessed by the voodoo loa of love, Erzulie, and must be exorcized by Black Herman.[43] As part of the exorcism, a chorus of black women play music, singing along and dancing. The spirit Erzulie, still in the body of Earline, asks Black Herman, "What's that

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Black Herman is one of the only characters in *Mumbo Jumbo* who possesses equal or greater mystical power than PaPa LaBas. A friend of PaPa LaBas's in Reed's novel, Black Herman was a real person, a successful black stage magician who performed to sold-out houses throughout the Northeast and Midwest during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. Born Benjamin Rucker, Black Herman is one of the prototypes for Reed's character of PaPa LaBas—and, in fact, Black Herman's home in Harlem is appropriated by Reed as the home of PaPa LaBas. Black Herman appears to have been a personal friend of Marcus Garvey, and at one point performed a two-month engagement of sixty sold-out shows at the UNIA's Liberty Hall. Herman's genius was in his ability to merge European stagecraft of legerdemain with an African American hoodoo aesthetic. In addition to performing traditional illusions such as dividing a woman in half, Black Herman included in his act the creation and sale of healing herbal potions, the reading of dreams for the Numbers (black community-bound lotteries), and the foretelling of the future. For many of these more mystical forms of spiritual counseling, Black Herman saw clients privately in his Harlem home, which, like PaPa LaBas's Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral, he had transformed into an elaborately decorated voodoo temple. Notably, Black Herman is only one of many historical persons included in Reed's novel—others of whom include Madame C.J. Walker, A'lelia Walker, U.S. President Warren G. Harding, Marcus Garvey, and Charles Peralte—as well as numerous other slightly fictionalized cultural and literary figures recognizable to readers familiar with early twentieth century black America.

sound?" Black Herman replies, "It's a loa that Jes Grew here in America among our people. We call it Blues."[44] This description of Jes Grew matches with the episode of Jes Grew "infection" in New Orleans that opens *Mumbo Jumbo* (as the "pre-credits" scene). The infection causes white New Orleanians to dance, sing, and talk as though they are stereotypical black ragtime devotees.[45]

Elsewhere, however, Jes Grew is discussed as far more cosmic and abstract. The plot of the book revolves around Jes Grew acting more like a spirit or creature in search of sustenance, that sustenance being described as "its text." This "text" that Jes Grew is seeking is a literal book, the ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth that PaPa LaBas and Black Herman set out to find before the white supremacist Wallflower Order—led by the novel's antagonist, Hinkle Von Vampton—can destroy it. The text is ultimately described as a "Book of Labanotations"—in other words, an instruction manual for how to dance, which returns us again to Jes Grew's connection with music.[46] We learn of the Text's true nature during the novel's denouement, which takes the form of a myth of cosmogony told by PaPa LaBas. The myth is a story of the

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[44] Ibid., 128.

[45] Ibid., 3-6. For more on Jes Grew as infection, see Ruth Mayer, "Don't Touch! Africa Is a Virus," in *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images In the Times of Globalization* (Hanover: Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, 2002), 256-291.

[46] Labanotation is a kind of sheet music that records dance movements for study and reenactment. Developed by Rudolf Laban in the 1920s, Labanotation is even more arcane-looking to the untrained reader than is conventional sheet music. Labanotation instructional manuals often depict strangely contorted stick figures, frozen in various dance positions, with the appropriate Labanotations indicated along the axes of the stick figure's body. These awkwardly contorted stick-figure dancers look more than passingly similar to the stylized human figures that often accompany Egyptian hieroglyphs. Furthermore, Labanotation's highly abstracted geometric glyphs are like modernist hieroglyphs. I suggest that Reed's use of the term "Labanotation" in connection with ancient Egypt may be playing on these visual resonances. Ann Hutchinson-Guest, *Labanotations: The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement*, 4th Edition (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 2005 [1954]).

origin of the conflict between whites and blacks, told as the conflict between the ancient Egyptian deities Osiris and Set. Osiris, the true lord of the universe, teaches humanity a series of magically efficacious dances, which help regulate the actions of Nature. These dances are recorded by the god Thoth in his Book, and it is this text which, millennia later, Jes Grew is trying to find, since these dances are its anchor in the world.

Towards the very end of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Jes Grew is defined even more expansively as the source of life in the Universe. Reflecting some forty years later on Jes Grew's failed bid during the Harlem Renaissance, PaPa LaBas realizes,

> Jes Grew has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now. Jes Grew may even have caused the ball to explode. We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left. You see, life will never end; there is really no end to life, if anything goes it will be death. Jes Grew is life. . . We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this.[47]

This fusion between Jes Grew, black popular culture, and the origins of the Universe is made even more compelling for its connection with improvisation. Reed's characterization of improvisation could not be more pointed: it is not merely an aesthetic, but a strategy to cope with the staggering loss of cultural knowledge resulting from the Atlantic slave trade. As Black Herman says to PaPa LaBas, "That's our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own."[48] However, Black Herman refuses to accept that this cultural loss—and accompanying reliance on improvisation—is a disability. He continues, "I think we've done all right. The Blues, Ragtime, The Work that we do is just as good. . . Improvise some. Open up, PaPa.

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[47] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 204.

[48] Ibid., 130.

Stretch on out with It."[49] Even prior to Black Herman's rallying speech, PaPa LaBas affirms the same basic sentiment, saying to the spirit Erzulie, "Look, we may not have the legitimate Assons but we've been called and we can Work-It-On-Out too."[50]

If Neo-HooDoo is predicated upon improvisation, Reed nonetheless distinguishes it from conventional racist tropes of imagined voodoo that see the black body as an emotive body which, uniquely endowed with spiritual powers, responds to psychic impulses out of a deep well of intuition. On the contrary, as any jazz musician can attest, improvisation is not produced by naïve intuitions, but rather through carefully trained and honed skills, learned with years of practice. Only then do they become *like* a reflex, technical skill merged with aesthetic sensibility. Likewise, Neo-HooDoo is not merely a set of affective responses, but rather a technology of the body, in which PaPa LaBas trains his students. This technology provides its adepts with the ability to reclaim their power as legal and social persons, correcting historical

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[49] Ibid. Carpio notes that Reed's connection between improvisation and Neo-HooDoo exists not only within the pages of his books, but also *on* the pages of his books, through his experiments with prose style and the novelistic form. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 125: "Reed's formal experimentation—his imaginative interpretation of voodoo and his development of a hybrid aesthetic that includes other forms of signification—reflect voodoo's improvisational mode." A few pages earlier, Carpio insightfully explores how Reed's text, at a formal level, functions as its own "voodoo" (or, I suggest, Neo-HooDoo) ritual. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 123: "As a religion of the poor and uneducated (most devotees are illiterate), voodoo maintains its historical memory through rituals that include dance, music, incantations, oral stories, and, most prominently, *vévés*, or ground drawings. Reed interprets and improvises these aspects of voodoo practice, using elements from popular culture to create his own particularized version of a literary voodoo ritual. He borrows from the content and style of visual art form—especially comic strips, film, and photography—to create animated caricatures of slavery's zombies and the historical ideologies surrounding them."

[50] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 127. The Asson [*ason*] is the beaded gourd rattle that is the emblem of priesthood in Haitian Vodou and is used by priests to summon and control the *lwa* [loa, spirits]. The character of the Haitian Vodou sage, Benoit Battraville, later says nearly the same thing to Black Herman and PaPa LaBas during their secret meeting aboard one of Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line ships: "We do not work the way you do. You improvise here a great deal; we believe in the old mysteries." Ibid., 134.

wrongs and allowing them to perform as empowered historical actors, i.e. magicians, "mak[ing] the troubled spirits of ancestors go away." Thus, through the refashioning of denigrated imagined voodoo in *Neo*-HooDoo, devotees of Reed's new church convert "mumbo-jumbo," superstitious nonsense, into real power.[51] As Carpio notes, the strategy allows Reed to "inventively drawn on voodoo belief and practice to stage his own ritual of redress with respect to slavery."[52]

As a technology of the body, which takes the form of magically efficacious dance, Reed's Neo-HooDoo bears a striking resemblance to Katherine Dunham's dance technique.[53] Developed over the course of multiple decades, and perfected on Dunham's own dance company, Dunham's unique technique merged ballet's long lines, angles, and regimented training of the body with the African and African diaspora dances that Dunham studied as an anthropologist.[54] Dunham's dance is most obviously indebted to the ritual dances of Haitian

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[51] Elsewhere in his corpus, Reed has punned on this sense of mumbo-jumbo, and I believe we can rightly assume the pun is also implicit in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Cf. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 119, quoting Reed's *Flight to Canada*, "Why does the perfectly rational, in its own time, often sound like mumbo-jumbo?"

[52] Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 122.

[53] Reed's depiction of PaPa LaBas's magically efficacious dance instructions also owes a clear debt to the dance and movement classes that Sun Ra taught at Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BART/S)—which was also housed in Harlem. These classes aimed to teach black students how to use movement to reclaim and decolonize their bodies from Western white oppression.

[54] Kate Ramsey, "Melville Herskovits, Katherine Dunham, and the Politics of African Diasporic Dance Anthropology," in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture*, eds. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (Banff, Alberta, CA: Banff Centre Press, 2000), 196-216; Anthea Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003): 433-50; Joan Dayan, "Haiti's Troubled Past: Kathleen [*sic*] Dunham, modern dancer, and her enchanted island," *Transition* 67 (1995): 150-64; Elizabeth Chin, "Katherine Dunham's Dance as Public Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 4 (2010): 640-42; Michael

Vodou—especially their bent knees, low center of gravity, curvilinearity, and serpentine back undulations. In *Island Possessed*, Dunham's spiritual memoir of her early years in Haiti, she is frank about her initiation into Vodou, even as she equivocates her own status as a Vodou practitioner.[55] I would suggest, however, that it is productive to consider how Dunham channeled her spiritual impulses and insights into the creation of her idiosyncratic dance style, which in practice functioned for Dunham and her students as a technology of both the body and spirit—much like Reed's Neo-HooDoo. Liberated from the strict disciplinary rules of anthropology, in dance Dunham found a space to explore a pan-Africanist project that sought to redefine how black bodies functioned in relation to both space and history.

Although fully diasporic, it was, not surprisingly, in the Vodou dances of Haiti that Dunham most obviously rooted this new bodily technology. In *Island Possessed*, Dunham freely romanticizes Haiti as a bearer of sacred African powers and even as the remnant of the lost continent of Atlantis.[56] Figuratively plugging into both of these powers—historical and science fiction—Dunham's dance technique may rightly best be understood as existing within the same genre of Afrofuturism as Reed's novels and his Neo-HooDoo. Both Dunham or Reed are

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Wade Simpson, "Dancing in radical time," *Pasatiempo*, June 4-10, 2010, 20-1; Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

[55] In fact, if anything, Dunham is *too* frank about her own initiation, describing ritual details that most Vodou experts agree were intended to be kept secret. Dunham, aware of this tension, claims that no one ever specifically swore her to secrecy, which seems unlikely to be true, given that Haitian Vodou is obsessed with secretism. By secretism, I mean the open advertisement and flaunting of the existence of initiatory levels of hidden knowledge. For more on secretism, see Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[56] Interestingly, the lost continent of Atlantis has figured prominently in the works of numerous Afrofuturists, including Dunham, Reed, Darieck Scott, and Samuel R. Delaney. In almost every case, Atlantis is transformed from the purported source of Western culture to the source of black wisdom and spiritual power—which have been adulterated and robbed by the West and must now be reclaimed by black folks, for whom they are a rightful inheritance.

engaged in projects that hybridize existing elements of African diasporic and Western aesthetic traditions to create viable, forward-looking techniques, reconfiguring how blacks enter into relationships with history, power, space, and their own bodies.[57]

If Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is ultimately a work of Afrofuturist *optimism*—concluding with a prophetic glimpse of a future in which Jes Grew triumphs—James's *Negrophobia* is the dystopian reply of Afrofuturist cynicism.[58] Drawing its title from Fanon, James's text pursues through fiction what this dissertation pursues in non-fiction, exploring how white American Negrophobia, through voodooed imagery, has embedded in black flesh all of its most lurid fears and fantasies, its darkest *nostalgie de la boue*. In comparing James and Reed, we see that James engages with a more overt, and much darker, use of satire, stacking the most lurid images of blackness and of black religiosity end-to-end.[59] Written as the portrayal of imagined voodoo to end all portrayals of imagined voodoo, the text works as a litmus test of the reader's character, in a similar vein as Chesnutt's conjure tales. Because there is no obvious framing device, however, James's *Negrophobia* exists in two distinct parts: first as the written text itself, a work of imagined voodoo, and second text as an occluded text of winks and nudges, communicating (to

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[57] Dunham felt so strongly about the salvific power that her dance technique could have for black folks that she spent her life's savings and the end of her life creating and running a dance program for underprivileged youth in one of the most poverty-ravaged areas of St. Louis.

[58] There has been almost no scholarship on James's novel. See W. Lawrence Hogue, *The African American Male, Writing, and Difference: A Polycentric Approach to African American Literature, Criticism, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

[59] I will variously refer to *Negrophobia* as a novel, screenplay, and by the neutral terms "book" and "text." Although *Negrophobia* is written like a screenplay, James makes little effort to guarantee that its stream of dreamy visions is really filmable. At the same time, even though James calls the book "a novel" in its subtitle, it follows few of the conventions of the novelistic form. Arguably, that is exactly James's point, and the text is clearly meant to satirize the novel as a genre defined by white bourgeois *fin-de-siècle* concerns.

the initiated reader) the author's own outrage that this is a text which must, or even can, be written.

The book's anti-heroine is a white teenage girl, Bubbles Brazil. After her own fashion, Bubbles is as perfect a scion of her line as is PaPa LaBas of his—for just as he is descended from great practitioners of the black arts, Bubbles is descended from a great practitioner of the white *racist* arts: namely, her grandfather, "Big Bellies" Brazil, who performed popular minstrel shows in blackface during the time of the Harlem Renaissance.[60] It is from "Big Bellies" that Bubbles learned what she calls "the Coon Game," a perverse childhood sexual game in which she and her friends gave license to vile sexual practices—including coprophilia—by pretending to be "niggers."

It is also from her grandfather that Bubbles learned the lesson in American history and popular culture that serves as the thesis of James's novel.

> "Big Bellies" said blackface was the cornerstone of American independence. Without it, we might not have ever thrown that shipment of tea to the bottom of Boston Harbor and we'd still be a colony of Britain today. . . Laughing at niggers is our first great national passtime. "If we didn't laugh at niggers," "Big Bellies" said, "we wouldn't have known what to do with vaudeville or radio or movies or T.V. We wouldn't have known whose picture to put on the pancake box." Laughing at niggers is at the root of popular American entertainment.[61]

[60] This reiterates Darieck Scott's point that "a conscious white supremacist of the Aryan Nation variety is roughly equally the 'descendant' of this experience [of blackness] as a person who takes on a highly politicized conscious African American or black identity." Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[61] Darius James, *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable, A Novel* (New York: Citadel Underground, 1992), 154-155.

Going on to elaborate on the Coon Game, Bubbles strikes at the heart of the premise of this dissertation: that imagination made it possible for her to displace her own dark fantasies, while in the process rendering blacks monstrous.

> But in our minds, we weren't the culprits. How could we be? Those weren't *our* faces. Those weren't *our* bodies. We would never put our mouths *down there*! We were *white* and *well-bred*.
>
> It was those *black children* from the welfare projects! They did it! Those moon-headed, Kool-Aid-drinking, doo-doo-colored *Tar babies* in ragamuffin hand-me-downs!
>
> *They* smoked reefer! *They* stole the booze! It was *niggers!* Not us! *Niggers!* It was *niggers* poking their greasy, fried-chicken-pickin' fingers into our *wet, underaged pussies!* Not us! *Niggers!*[62]

The latitude of fiction permits James to put these proclamations in Bubbles's mouth, even as he is keenly aware that such insights are delusions, and only reconcilable as satire. If Bubbles truly understood the mechanism of her fantasies, they would lose their ability to work as psychic exorcism.

In fact, the entire text of *Negrophobia* could be said to be James throwing his voice. From the opening epigraph, he is clear that this will be a work of *white* fantasy, gesturing at this with a quotation from Louis Farrakhan.

> What you fear—and it's a deep guilt thing that white folks suffer—you are afraid that if we ever come to power, we will do to you and your fathers what you and your people have done to us. And I think you are *judging us by the state of your own mind*, and that is not necessarily the mind of black people.[63]

With this quotation, James sets the stage for the narrative of *Negrophobia*, which is a white fantasy of voodoo-tinged black revenge. In fact, James's text replicates all of the key arguments

[62] Ibid., 157.

[63] Ibid., unnumbered page preceding 1.

proposed in this text, which is to say that *Negrophobia* associates voodoo with black revenge, hypersexuality, and even zombies.

The story takes place almost entirely in Bubbles's mind, a teenager described as a white high school girl, a vehement racist, a sexpot, and a drug addict. In the text's opening episodes, Bubbles attends a day of school, during which she is routinely distracted by racist musings and fears, and is eventually jumped by a group of black girls. When she returns home, she is attacked by her black Maid, who has vowed revenge against Bubbles for touching her hoodoo spellbooks. The Maid slathers Bubbles with an hallucinogenic ointment, sexually assaulting Bubbles in the process.[64] At this point, the already surreal novel takes an even stranger turn, as Bubbles appears to hallucinate falling down a hole like *Alice in Wonderland*, and entering into a realm where all of her darkest racist fears and fantasies are made real. At the end, Bubbles appears to reemerge in reality—or what passes as reality for Bubbles—but has turned black.

James's text is voodooed on two levels. At the manifest level, *Negrophobia* is an extended vision of imagined voodoo, the vision itself provoked by an imagined voodoo ritual performed by the Maid on Bubbles. Within this imagined voodoo vision, Bubbles learns that all forms of black religiosity and spirituality are merely excuses to sexually violate and murder whites. This imagined voodoo nightmare culminates in New York City being destroyed by a black "FIVE-HUNDRED-FOOT-TALL CYBORG," called the "Negro of the future" by its controller, an alien Negromancer (borrowing Reed's word for a black magician) who manifests as a floating head of talking dreadlocks.[65] This, then, is the supreme white fear of Afrofuturism—namely, that rather than ushering in a post-racial utopia, Afrofuturism will

[64] The ointment itself is reminiscent of the "Flying Ointment" of medieval European witches.

[65] James, *Negrophobia*, 122-123.

convert America into a Boschian carnival of every vile thing that whites fear blacks are and want.

Considering the second way that James's novel is voodooed, if one sets aside its manifest content and instead thinks about what the text *does*, James's *Negrophobia* is a work of Neo-HooDoo for how it works on the reader. Operating like a Neo-HooDoo ritual, the text transforms the reader in the act of reading, disrupting American racist visions through a *reductio ad absurdum*. The text at times literally sickens the reader, manifesting the very real power of Neo-HooDoo as a technology of the *body*. In this sense, *Negrophobia* is a magical text, punning on the Maid's fake magical grimoires that exist in Bubbles fantasy as objects of ridicule. *Negrophobia* actually does what these fictive grimoires only claim they can do, acting directly on the body and mind in a magically efficacious way.

Rarely discussed in connection with one another, placing Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* in dialogue with James's *Negrophobia* helps to clarify and highlight the authors' shared visions of the transformative power of voodoo when rescued from its white stereotypes and transformed into Neo-HooDoo. As a tool for satire—as well as a technology of the body—Neo-HooDoo has the power to overturn the racist set of beliefs at the heart of imagined voodoo, successfully engaging in the risky venture of flipping imagined voodoo to function in the service of an Afrofuturist vision.

Daughters of the Dust

Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust* was the first feature-length, nationally released film directed by a black woman—an astonishing fact, given its completion one hundred

thirty years after abolition, and nearly thirty years after the Civil Rights movement. The product of ten years of research, screen tests, and fundraising, the film is widely regarded as a masterpiece. Even still, Dash reports that the film is treated with deep skepticism by Hollywood studios, which regularly consider hiring her as a director but insist she mustn't make "another" *Daughters of the Dust*.[66] During the process of securing funds to make *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash on numerous occasions ran afoul of the hubris of white Hollywood film executives, who insisted to her that they had a better understanding of what black audiences wanted to see than she did.[67]

Refusing such ploys to dictate the shape of her work, Dash was able to finance the project independently. The resulting film is a womanist work that destabilizes conventional ways of representing and viewing black women on film.[68] In particular, the film rejects the objectifying filmic convention of privileging the visual desires of an imagined white male viewer, instead insisting that the camera's priorities must be those of the women themselves. It directs "viewers' attention to blackwomen's sights, acts, comprehensions, feelings, and beliefs about themselves and other blackwomen. The women are always known as blackwomen by other blackwomen."[69]

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[66] Julie Dash, "Making Movies That Matter: A Conversation with Julie Dash," *Black Camera* 22, no. 1 (2007): 5.

[67] Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 8.

[68] This is Alice Walker's term for a feminist of color who is attentive to the marked differences in lived experience for women of color. Womanism also draws attention to the many ways in which mainstream feminism has often made women of color invisible. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[69] Angeletta K.M. Gourdine, "Fashioning the Body [as] Politic in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*," *African American Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 501. See also, Janell Hobson, "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1/2 (2002): 45-59.

One of the most powerful ways that the film accomplishes this is by taking aspects of women's lives—such as the braiding of hair, the preparation of food, the feeding of children, as well as the talk between women that takes place during these—and shifting them from periphery to center.[70] This radical recentering of domestic processes means that activities normally marginal to films instead *are* the film, prioritizing the perspective of the women themselves, for whom these activities constitute the bulk of their days. In this way, the viewer is forced to recalibrate her or his sense of both narrative convention and cinematic temporality, altering it from Hollywood conventions to bring it more in line with the temporality of the Peazant women, the family featured in the film.

Daughters of the Dust takes place over the course of one day in August of 1902, on Dawtah Island, one of the Carolina Sea Islands. All of the characters in the film, except for the mainland photographer Mr. Snead, who has come to document the day, are members of the Peazant family, who are Gullah.[71] They have gathered on the beach for a large celebration of

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[70] Joel R. Brouwer, "Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*," *African American Review* 29, no. 1 (1995): 5-16.

[71] The Gullah people (sometimes also called Geechee, or Gullah-Geechee) are Sea Island descendants of enslaved Africans. Isolated from the mainland, they established their own unique culture, religion, and English-based creole (called Gullah). Oral tradition long maintained—and historical research has more recently confirmed—that the Sea Islands, because of their isolation, continued to be recipients of illegally imported enslaved Africans well after the outlawing of the external slave trade in 1807. This continued importation of slaves directly from Africa to the Sea Islands (and from there to the Carolinas, Virginia, New Orleans, and elsewhere in the Americas) may well have fostered the development of such a unique black American culture. As Catherine Cucinella and Renée Curry reflect, "The Georgia Sea Islands of *Daughters of the Dust* demonstrate the consummate cusp: geographically situated peripheral to the South, the marked terrain of slavery, neither Africa nor mainland United States. The slaves and their descendants on the Sea Islands were always at a distance from Africa and from the mainland United States." Catherine Cucinella and Renée R. Curry, "Exiled at Home: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Many Post-Colonial Conditions," *MELUS* 26, no. 4 (2001): 199. Although considered endangered, many aspects of Gullah culture (such as cuisine and the religious ritual of Ring Shout) and language persist to the present day.

their family, their elders, and their ancestors. The next day, nearly the entire family will depart for the North, in search of greater opportunities outside of the island and the Jim Crow South.

However, they will be leaving behind their grandmother, Nana Peazant, the last living member of their family to have been enslaved. Her hands, in fact, are still stained from the poisonous indigo that she was forced to process for its dye.[72] Nana Peazant is also the family's spiritual leader, their connection to the "Old Africans" who invisibly crowd the lives of their descendants, protecting them and offering guidance. Dash has noted on numerous occasions that she modeled Nana's character after the griots of West Africa, the keepers and reciters of cultural, lineage memory.[73] As a spiritual leader, Nana directs her family in rituals as well as daily observances that draw from voodoo, hoodoo, remembered African customs, and black American Protestant Christianity. Although many feminist scholars have noted the importance of black religiosity in the film, Sara Clarke Kaplan suggests that "relatively little critical attention has been given to the complexity with which Dash deploys the religious traditions of the Black

[72] Dash is the first to admit that the stains of indigo would not literally have lasted so long. She describes it as an attempt to offer a new visual trope for the scars of slavery, one that would visually arrest the viewer in the act of viewing, while also defending the sanctity of Nana's body, unlike the tropes of whip marks and manacle scars that, owing to their pornographic quality, may continue to objectify the suffering of black bodies. Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 31. Julie Dash and Houston A. Baker Jr., "Not Without My *Daughters*: A conversation with Julie Dash and Houston A. Baker, Jr.," *Transition* 57 (1992): 164: ". . . it was important to me to show these indigo-handed people as a reminder, that these were the scars of slavery, this blueness. I need physically to show the scars in a different way, because film is like poetry. You want to say something that's been said before, but in a different way. To show someone with scars on their backs from a whipping, I think, will have absolutely no effect on anyone anymore, because we've seen it so many times."

[73] Jennifer A. Machiorlatti, "Revisiting Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*: Black Feminist Narrative and Diasporic Recollection," *South Atlantic Review* 70, no. 1 (2005): 97-116; Dash and Baker, "Not Without My *Daughters*," 151.

Diaspora in the film as a critical part of her black feminist project."[74] In particular, few have noted the significant exercise of Dash's religious and cultural imagination, which *created*—rather than found—a diaspora religiosity. Blended like the gumbo the Peazant women are preparing, Nana Peazant's religiosity bears more resemblance to Reed's Neo-HooDoo than to any particular historical diaspora religious tradition. As Kaplan observes,

> While Dash's extensive research and incorporation of spiritual practices developed in Gullah communities lends a historical and regional specificity to the narrative, she deploys a much broader range of African diasporic religious traditions. . . In so doing, Dash proffers a version of black diasporicity in which Baptist ring shouts and baptismal ceremonies are interwoven with Egyptian Gnosticism and the oral invocation and bodily manifestation of Yoruba spirits, reminding viewers of the complex set of spiritual, political, and philosophical beliefs and practices that link philosophy and religions of the Sea Islands to the related Afro-syncretic cosmologies of the Caribbean and Latin America, including *vodun*, *candomblé*, and *santería*.[75]

Particularly in their apotropaic practices like making bottle trees, wallpapering their homes with old newspapers, and keeping frizzled chickens, the Peazants' spirituality shows obvious marks of southern hoodoo and conjure practices. Likewise does Eula's method of placing a letter to her deceased mother under a glass of water next to her bed as a way to communicate with the dead in dreams. Their use of the ring shout, on the other hand, is a clear derivative of Gullah Baptist Christianity. Meanwhile, the care given to ancestral graves—including placing intentionally broken personal effects on them—reflects widespread African American cultural traditions in the

[74] Sara Clarke Kaplan, "Souls at the Crossroads, Africans on the Water: The Politics of Diaspora Melancholy," *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (2007): 511.

[75] Ibid., 515.

American South and highlights the influence of Kongo culture, as do the secret society practices of the Peazant men, and their use of the encircled cross (the Kongo cosmogram).[76]

Perhaps most interestingly, Dash annotated her published film script with indications of how the film's characters correspond to Yoruba orichas, mostly indicating this with spellings derived from Cuban Regla de Ocha or Lucumí (Santería): Nana Peazant is Obatala, Yellow Mary is Yemayá, her lover Trula is Oshun, Eli is Ogun, Eula is Oya Yansa, and the Unborn Child is Elegba. The orichas (or *òrìsà* in Yorùbá) have been carried throughout the Atlantic world by devotees who made the journey as enslaved people—and, particularly in Brasil, also sometimes as free people—but oricha devotion does not appear to have ever been transported to the Sea Islands.[77] With these annotations, Dash therefore suggests that the characters' ability to embody the archetypes of Yorùbá religion does not depend on their conscious knowledge of these forms.

Taken in the balance, this accumulation of circum-Atlantic black religious and cultural practices—including some, like Nana Peazant's concluding ritual, which Dash invents—point to what Dash means when she speaks of *Daughters of the Dust* as a work of speculative fiction.

> I think we need to do more than try to document history. I think we need to probe. We need to have the freedom to romanticize history, to say "what if," to use history in a speculative way and create speculative fiction. I think we need to feel free to do that.[78]

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[76] For more on Southern African American graveyard practices, see Gray Gundaker, *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998). For more on Kongo influences on African America, see Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

[77] This assertion can be made with reasonable confidence given that few Yorùbá people were taken to the Sea Islands, where the vast majority of enslaved people were from west central Africa, a cultural region roughly defined as Kongo.

[78] Dash and Baker, "Not Without My *Daughters*," 163.

It is productive to set this in conversation with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s insight about the role of speculation in African diaspora memory as well as art. He writes,

> Because of the experience of diaspora, the fragments that contain the traces of a coherent system of order must be reassembled. . . . To reassemble fragments, of course, is to engage in an act of speculation, to attempt to weave a fiction of origins and subgeneration. It is to render the implicit as explicit, and at times to imagine the whole from the part.[79]

Thus, to question whether or not the religiosity of *Daughters of the Dust* reflects an historical reality may ultimately be to miss the point. While many have written about *Daughters of the Dust* as a film that explores memory—both personal and diasporan—as well as history, it is important to see that, when the Peazant family are "remembering," they are doing so as an act of metacognition—remembering things that, in a literal sense, they could not possible remember. Instead, they are remembering in the more imaginative sense of composing a cultural practice from the resources available to them. Thus, Dash's project can be seen as a kind of Afrofuturism which, like Reed's, does not aim to faithfully reconstruct the past so much as offer the viewer a viable way of *imagining* the past that can be instrumental in self-constitution as a black subject. In Kaplan's words, "the myriad practices described under [Dash's] rubric of diasporic religions exemplify not just the prevalence of so-called African 'survivals' in the New World, but a 'strategic assertion of Africanness' intended to 'carve out [. . .] a 'home' in the midst of New World homelessness."[80] Borrowing terminology from Joseph Roach, Kaplan describes this as "'kinesthetic imagination,' an embodied practice that 'flourishes in the place where imagination

[79] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxiv, cited in Brouwer, "Repositioning," 6.

[80] Kaplan, "Souls at the Crossroads," 515.

and memory converge.'"[81] This notion of kinesthetic imagination resonates with my idea of Neo-HooDoo as a technology of the body.

What Nana Peazant most fears is that, in the course of their journey North, her family will shed their connection to the ancestors. In fact, the loss has not only already started, but some members of the family wish it would happen faster. Nana's granddaughter, Viola, who already lives on the mainland, expresses her embarrassment about the "heathen" ways of the old folks and "salt water Africans," describing Nana as "carrying a lot of old luggage."[82] She contrasts this with an image of abandon, her own "[falling] into the arms of the Lord," a rebirth that for her is spiritually and geographically inseparable from the mainland. For Viola, the mainland and Christianity are not simply a different place or belief, but the keys to a temporal shift that will permit the Peazant family to overcome its past indignities and embrace the opportunities of a new century. Viola's Bible lesson to the children includes the following revealing exchange.

MYOWN
(to Viola, fearfully)
What's out there, Auntie Viola?

VIOLA
(she's inspired)
Life, child, the beginning of a new life.

MYOWN
(to Viola)
Who's out there?

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[81] Ibid., 516.

[82] Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 129. Note that this dialogue is copied from Dash's published film script. However, it is a draft, not the final version. The dialogue that I cite is all in the film's finished version. However, in Dash's film script that I'm quoting, the dialogue has not yet been translated into Gullah, in which nearly all of the film's dialogue is spoken. Therefore, although the meaning is correct, it may differ slightly in phrasing and sound from what one will hear in the film.

VIOLA
Jesus Christ, baby, the Son of God.[83]

Haagar, Nana's granddaughter-in-law, feels even deeper outrage about the Peazant family's adherence to their old spiritual traditions.

> I'm an educated person . . . and I'm tired of Nana's old stories. Watching her make those root potions . . . and that Hoodoo she talks about. Washing up in the river with her clothes on, just like those old "Salt Water" folks used to do. My children ain't gonna be like those old Africans fresh off the boat. My God, I still remember them . . . Those old people, they pray to the sun, they pray to the moon, sometimes just to a big star! They ain't got no religion in them. No! This is a new world we're moving into, and I want my daughters to grow up to be decent "somebodies". . .[84]

Both Haagar and Viola share a belief in the self-evidence of the following series of analogies:

Ignorance	:	Enlightenment
"Old Ways" & Hoodoo	:	Christianity
Past	:	Present & Future
Dawtah Island & Ibo Landing	:	Mainland & North
Gullah	:	Black American, "Negro"

If we are tempted to characterize Viola and Haagar as therefore less sympathetic or "good" than those Peazant women who openly embrace the spiritual heritage of Nana, it is worth pausing to consider their marginal position as black women living in the South during one of the darkest hours of American apartheid. Moreover, they are in the position of being a marginalized minority twice over, not only black but also Gullah. Therefore, theirs is an understandable polemic, given that they are on the eve of their attempt to access American "opportunity"—a

[83] Ibid., 115-116.

[84] Ibid., 130-131.

shift that, if it is to succeed, appears to necessitate the acceptance of an either/or epistemology that evaluates their spatiality, temporality, and ethnic and cultural identities as outlined above. On the other hand, the irony is that their religious heritage presents another option. In fact, while Nana Peazant acknowledges the existence of these categories, she refuses to accept that they present an irreconcilable dilemma. In fact, her "Hoodoo" ritual (as Viola and Haagar see it)—which Dash calls "A Root Revival of Love"—acts precisely to collapse these distinctions through its manipulation of ritual space and time.[85]

Exploring the way that *Daughters of the Dust* uses ritual, Sheila Smith McCoy writes about what she dubs "limbo time," which exploits the subjunctive ("as if") powers of ritual space specifically to repair historical losses and ruptures.[86] She writes, "In Diaspora novels we constantly meet characters who lapse into the void of limbo time only to find that the experience links them with their African past. Through temporal intrusions of the past into the present, the intrusion of limbo time, these characters complete a spiritual pilgrimage that links them and their present time communities with the past."[87] In her estimation, *Daughters of the Dust* portrays the "salvage [of] a Diaspora community at the moment it threatens to forever lose its connection to its African past."

However, diaspora ritual does not only manipulate time; it also manipulates space. Drawing on the work of Joseph Murphy, Kaplan summarizes his evaluation of how diaspora religions ritually recreate the space of Africa.

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[85] Ibid., 158.

[86] For more on ritual and the subjunctive, see Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[87] Sheila Smith McCoy, "The Limbo Contest: Diaspora Temporality and its Reflection in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters of the Dust*," *Callaloo* 22, no. 1 (1999): 216.

> Joseph Murphy has argued that through ritual practice the inner sanctums of Afrosyncretic spiritual practice are reconstituted as the space and time of Africa. . ., ushering in "the time of the ancestors, who are contemporary in the bodies and minds of the people." In this sense, such ceremonies are productive of a new kind of historical geography, one that not only recognizes but creates a new Africa that is not a static point of origin but a "spiritual, cultural, and political signifier" of New World blackness.[88]

Nana's ritual not only opens the temporal and geographic spaces of the past and of Africa (as well as Ibo Landing), but binds them to the future of the family, which she accepts means the North and Christianity. Taking Viola's Bible, Nana Peazant places over it the "hand" (hoodoo amulet) that she has been making all day from scraps of fabric, herbs, dirt, and pieces of her mother's hair and her own hair. She then binds the hand to the Bible, literally binding her family's ancestral past to its Christian future—enacting a spacial and temporal collapse. In the script's stage directions, Dash has written, "And like those old Ibos, Nana Peazant calls upon the womb of time to help shatter the temporal restrictions of her own existence—to become a being who is beyond death, beyond aging, beyond time."[89] Thus, in the crucible of diaspora ritual space, Dash depicts the birth of an ancestor, fusing her eternal fate forever to that of her descendants, as they come forward to her to "kiss this hand full of me."[90] By accompanying them, she has stretched out her life, offering her permanent toil as the sacrifice necessary to prevent her family from losing its roots. As she says to Viola, who insists Nana must die and go to heaven, "No! I'm not going to be watching from heaven while there's soil still here for me for

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[88] Kaplan, "Souls at the Crossroads," 517, citing Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 186, 231.

[89] Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 160.

[90] Ibid., 159.

planting."[91] For Viola, this is unacceptable. "Old folks supposed to die!", she shouts in fear—punning on the ancestors as "old folks," whom she had hoped to finally escape. Although Viola experiences a change of heart, Haagar does not, calling the ritual "Hoodoo mess" and storming off, saying that Nana will "spoil everything! Old Used-To-Do-It-This-Way don't help none today!"[92] By doing so, Haagar refuses to accept the opportunity of grace that the ritual offers: namely, that she could have both the future *and* the past. Because she rejects this ritual compromise, Haagar's sacrifice is the greatest, leaving behind both her daughters as her "transit fee, paid to the old souls."[93] The old souls release her, at an unbearable cost.

From its first moments, Dash's film builds to this suspension of normal space and time, manipulating and refusing conventional cinematic temporality in smaller ways. The greatest achievement of this concluding "ritual for the camera" is that, as viewers, we are also drawn into the ritual action as spectral participants—in a sense, cast to masquerade for the ancestors, who, like us, are present although their bodies are unseen.[94] Therefore, if we do not refuse it as Haagar does, we are initiated into Nana's—Dash's—diasporic religion, a sister faith to Reed's Neo-HooDoo, which aims to plug us directly into a current of black ancestral power, offering us

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 161.

[93] Ibid., 164 (staging directions).

[94] *Eve's Bayou*, directed by Kasi Lemmons (1997; Lions Gate, 2003), DVD. I take the phrase "for the camera" from Maya Deren's experimental short film *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*. Deren was a pioneer of ritual films (that is, rituals created with the camera as a participant, as distinct from films of rituals), in which she often used voodoo tropes, drawn from her research in Haiti. Deren's "rituals in transfigured time" were engineered, like Dash's, to be potentialized through the act of engaged viewing. *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, directed by Maya Deren (1945; Mystic Fire Video, 2002), DVD [bundled with Deren's other short films as *Maya Deren: Experimental Films*].

the poignant (if subjunctive) possibility of a future in which the past—*as we wish it were*—is waiting for us to join it.

Eve's Bayou

One of director Kasi Lemmons's few feature-length films, and one of only two that she has also written, *Eve's Bayou* is the poetic tale of the trauma that befalls a Louisiana Creole family during the early 1960s.[95] When it was released in 1997 by Trimark Pictures (at that time known for straight-to-video B-movies), *Eve's Bayou* set records not only for being an independent success, but in particular for earning the label of "crossover success," a "black" film watched equally by white audiences.[96] The film's success with white audiences led to discussions about whether it could be identified as a black film at all, or whether it was "too good" to be labeled as such.[97] Delighting in the film's "mainstream" success—a Hollywood

[95] The other is her film adaptation of Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*, directed by Kasi Lemmons (2013; 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD.

[96] Josh Young and Albert Kim, "'Eve's' plum," *Entertainment Weekly* 422, March 13, 1998.

[97] Mia L. Mask, "*Eve's Bayou*: Too Good to Be a 'Black' Film?," *Cineaste* 23, no. 4 (1998). Mask insightfully observes, "Perhaps in an attempt to maintain the momentum of its crossover appeal, veteran film critics have been reluctant to celebrate *Eve's Bayou* as an 'African-American' film for fear racial affiliation might frighten off would-be viewers. Andrew Sarris, for example, remarked, 'To hail *Eve's Bayou* as the best African American film ever would be to understate its universal accessibility to anyone on this planet.' This statement of unwavering support is also contradictory, implying that ethnic art—in this case African-American cinema—cannot evoke the pathos or poignancy ascribed to mainstream (read: white) cultural products. By extension, the statement reinscribes the hegemony of whiteness as the locus of universal humanism. As Richard Dyer suggested in his seminal essay, and reiterated more recently in his book *White*, 'Black people can be reduced to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realized in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal or racial.' Implicit in this reviewer's assessment of *Bayou* is that it's too good to be stigmatized as a 'black' film. Yet

euphemism for having appeal to white audiences—Lemmons has described *Eve's Bayou* as an "African American story" in which race is "incredibly important and also incredibly incidental."[98] I suggest that this ambiguity is built into the core of *Eve's Bayou*, in particular with how Lemmons cleverly plays with stereotypes of imagined voodoo.

Eve's Bayou is told from the perspective of the eponymous character, Eve. Her adult voice occasionally breaks into the film as a narrator, framing her attempt to reconstruct the events of those months, when she was ten years old and her father (played by Samuel L. Jackson) was murdered—a catastrophe for which she accepts responsibility. In fact, in the opening moments of the film, Eve describes it as "the summer I killed my father"—a monologue superimposed over lush images of the fetid swamp that borders the family's home. Quickly, we learn that Eve's father, Louis, is "the best colored doctor in all of Louisiana"—and a serious womanizer, cheating on Eve's devoted mother with the married *femme fatale* Matty Mereaux, not to mention an untold number of his female patients. Neither a fool nor a pushover, Eve's mother Roz routinely fights with her husband—as much for his perpetual absence from their family as for the infidelity that causes it. Amidst the crumbling of the parents' marriage, their aunt receives a vision of an unknown child being struck and killed by a bus—and chaos descends when Roz decides to protect her children from the vision's grisly end by locking them in the house for the duration of the summer.

Despite such extreme protective measures, it is painfully clear that Roz not only fears for her children, but despairs at the lack of control she has over her husband's activities—a tragic

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the statement fails to challenge the categories of whiteness and blackness on which the critic's approbation of *Bayou*—and analytical authority—depend."

[98] Erika Muhammad, "Kasi Lemmons: The woman behind *Eve's Bayou*," *Ms* 8, no. 5 (1998): 74-5.

deficit that she seeks to balance by exercising absolute control over their children and household. The captivity inspires rebelliousness in the oldest daughter, Cisely, which comes to a head when she suffers an apparent nervous breakdown, and eventually confides to Eve that their father sexually assaulted her. Eve vows to take revenge by killing their father. Seeking out the help of the fortuneteller and voodoo (or "imagined voodoo"?) priestess Elzora, Eve places a death curse on her father, while hinting to Matty's husband, a professor at Xavier in New Orleans, that Matty is cheating on him with her father. Despite having a change of heart, and trying to prevent the curse from killing her father, Matty's husband guns down Eve's father in a fit of drunken rage.

In *Eve's Bayou*, imagined voodoo is set in tension with what I'll heuristically call "legitimate" voodoo. Several of the film's characters—particularly Mozelle, Elzora, and Eve herself—hide their legitimate voodoo practices in plain sight beneath the cover of either Christianity or imagined voodoo charlatanism. This legitimate voodoo is a morally neutral power, like electricity, capable of doing both good and bad in equal measure. Throughout the film, Lemmons braids together her explorations of the indeterminacy of memory with images of voodoo. In nearly every key moment in the film when the surety of memory breaks down, voodoo is set in motion. In some cases, voodoo helps to clarify memory, revealing through mystical vision what ordinary perspicacity cannot. Elsewhere, it fails to clarify, even deepening the mystery: playing with the age-old question of whether voodoo is real or not—whether it is imagined voodoo or legitimate voodoo—the film refuses to resolve the central question of whether and *by which means* (i.e. voodoo or gossip) Eve killed her father. More critically, voodoo can never tell Eve whether her father really molested Cisely, as the girl's memory (and fragile child psyche) are shattered beyond even mystical refashioning.

The opening monologue alerts us to the centrality of memory and its failings to the film's narrative. It begins with Eve speaking a sentence that will also be spoken at the end of the film: "Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain." This sentiment possesses a folk wisdom, but *Eve's Bayou* interrogates one of the central paradoxes of memory—namely, that the memories printed indelibly on the brain are often relatively minor, while the ones which bear the greatest impact on our lives are frequently the most elusive and indeterminate. They haunt us like the fractured, black and white visions that both Eve and Mozelle experience—visions that they sometimes interpret incorrectly, with grave consequences, their meaning resolving into clarity only with hindsight, and far too late.

In the same opening monologue, we are introduced to both the Batiste family and their home of Eve's Bayou. We are told that the town of Eve's Bayou is named after an "African slavewoman," Eve, who saved the life of cholera-stricken General Jean-Paul Batiste by using her "powerful medicine." The present-day Eve goes on to say, "In return for his life, [the General] freed [Eve] and gave her this piece of land by the bayou. Perhaps in gratitude, she bore him sixteen children. We are the descendants of Eve and Jean-Paul Batiste. I was named for her." One of the most arresting words in this narrative is *perhaps*, as it highlights the limit of the archive, the true motivations of the founders of the Creole Batistes beyond anyone's ability to know. While the concrete inheritance of the union between Jean-Paul and Eve is evident—in phenotypically light skin, the ability to speak Louisiana French, and the possession of relative wealth as calculated in land and houses, not to mention high social status—we cannot know for sure whether the first Eve was an eager, or even willing, participant in her union with the General. Just like her "powerful medicine"—a voodooed image that Lemmons inserts at this moment of indeterminacy—we can never know for sure the nature of Eve's "perhaps." As such,

the original Eve remains a cypher, despite her symbolic and perhaps literal haunting of the film through repeated, dreamlike shots of the bayou, which bears her name and with which she has, in a sense, merged. As the *second* Eve—the many-times-great-granddaughter of her namesake—the narrative suggests that the narrator has inherited the moral burden of her forebear, gifted-cursed with the power to decide who lives and who dies.

The subject of far less critical attention than *Daughters of the Dust*, *Eve's Bayou* has tended to be analyzed in terms of the film's attention to issues of memory, personal as well as collective.[99] In other cases, critics have adopted a more psychoanalytic approach, focusing on the story's themes of sexual maturation, incest, and the struggle between daughters and mothers for the love of fathers and husbands—the so-called "Electra complex."[100] Few, however, have considered how *Eve's Bayou* can be viewed as a Bildungsroman: the narrative quietly focuses on Eve's dawning awareness of her own mystical powers and her attempts to negotiate a balance between the two kinds of voodoo—those of Mozelle and Elzora—that the film presents as existential options.

Lemmons's characterization of Eve's Aunt Mozelle flirts with the archetype of the tragic mulatto, just as the film itself plays with themes of Creole exceptionalism.[101] However, for the attentive audience, the film ultimately rejects Creole exceptionalism by portraying, in exacting

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[99] Mary Ellison, "Echoes of Africa in *To Sleep with Anger* and *Eve's Bayou*," *African American Review* 39, no. 1/2 (2005): 213-229; Sandra M. Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past: Reading* Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust, *and* Eve's Bayou *as Histories* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).

[100] For example, D. Soyini Madison, "Oedipus Rex at *Eve's Bayou* Or the Little Black Girl Who Left Sigmund Freud in the Swamp," *Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 311-340.

[101] Creole exceptionalism, in this case, refers to the romanticization of black American Creoles (particularly Louisiana Creoles) as unique and star-crossed in a similar fashion as the tragic mulatto figure. For more on the tragic mulatto figure, I refer the reader to Chapter Three, "Hot Voodoo."

detail, the tragedies of a specific family, the Batistes—and in a way that refuses to generalize them as metaphors for the tragedies of a class of people. Likewise, Mozelle may appear to fit many of the stereotypes of the tragic mulatto, but ultimately eludes such easy classification: she is not tragic *because* she is mulatto—an important distinction—but rather because she refuses to tame her passions, a character flaw that she shares with her brother, Louis.[102] Likewise, both Louis and Mozelle share the quality of being healers—he a doctor, she a spiritual counselor—who ironically wound those closest to them.

Mozelle possesses a form of clairvoyance, which she calls "the sight." She uses this power for what she calls "the counseling," a kind of Spiritualist psychic advising. She begins her sessions with a Christian prayer: "Lord, lead us in the direction of righteousness. Advise us that we may become wiser in thy will. Amen." She is then able to see the future, accompanied always by visions of the bayou, suggesting that her power ultimately comes from her ancestress Eve, the *genius loci* of the land. Despite its Christian framing, Mozelle will perform voodoo magic for those clients desperate enough to ask. Her voodoo implements lie hidden in a box within a box, layers of concealment mirroring the concealment of the disguised "powerful

[102] I emphasize the need for an "attentive audience" because Lemmons's refusals of these stereotypes are sufficiently subtle that they could easily be missed. For example, in her review of the film, Mask writes, "Mozelle is depicted as . . . more sorrowful—and therefore [more] sympathetic—[than her brother.] Her sensitivity and spirituality, which manifest as the 'gift of sight,' ironically fail to prevent recurring tragedy in her own life, making Mozelle a melancholy albeit introspective woman whom the local voodoo priestess (Diahann Carroll) refers to as 'cursed.' Morgan, whom audiences will remember from lengthy stints on daytime soaps *All My Children*, *Loving*, and *Generations*, is perfectly natural in *Bayou* as the soulful essence of Creole culture." Mask's emphasis that Mozelle represents the "soulful essence of Creole culture" comes very close to calling her a tragic mulatto, an evaluation that Mask does not go on to trouble. Mask, "*Eve's Bayou*: Too Good to Be a 'Black' Film?"

magic" of her African ancestress within a Christian framework.[103] The following exchange occurs after Eve witnesses Mozelle preparing a voodoo cure for a client.

EVE
You told Daddy you didn't practice no voodoo!

MOZELLE
She was desperate.

EVE
Does it work?

MOZELLE
We'll see….

EVE
Well, what if it don't?

MOZELLE
I don't think she'll sue me!

Mozelle's wry appraisal of her voodoo suggests a kind of agnosticism about the ability of her magic to really shape events. Yet Mozelle has absolute faith in the accuracy of her visions—and in fact, an acceptance of their total accuracy appears to largely be the consensus within the Eve's Bayou community. As her own mother says, "She may be crazy, but those visions always come true!" Still, she seems unsure of whether voodoo really has the power to change anything. Her own visions seem only to offer a glimpse of the future, not an opportunity to change it. She notes on several occasions that her power has not allowed her to shape the course of her own destiny, or even see it clearly. When Eve asks her how to kill someone with voodoo, she replies angrily, "You can't kill people with voodoo! That's ridiculous!" However, as the dictum goes,

[103] Notably, these layers of concealment possess an historical accuracy, as the majority of Southern voodoo, hoodoo, and conjure practices are embedded within a Christian framework. Mozelle's instructions are in line with typical early twentieth century instructions for the creation of a "hand," including the use of typical ingredients like chamois, loadstone, John the Conquer root, devil's shoestring, and holy water.

"a witch who cannot kill cannot cure." Therefore, Mozelle's certainty that voodoo cannot kill raises questions about whether she really believes in the power of voodoo, or only turns to it as a last resort because she figures there is nothing to be lost.

By contrast, the fortuneteller and voodoo priestess Elzora lacks the respectability and faith that the community bestows upon Mozelle. In many ways, her self-presentation plays off of popular stereotypes of imagined voodoo, as her home and stall present a bricolage of diasporic religious symbols—such as Haitian Vodou prayer flags (*drapo*) and sacred drawings (*vèvè*)—freely mingled with Hollywood tropes of divining bones and murky glass jars. Embracing a showmanship that Mozelle refuses, Elzora performs her public divinations in whiteface, playing on the way that she, as a black woman, is signifying on white stereotypes of imagined voodoo. Nonetheless, to Mozelle's amazement, Elzora turns out to be the real deal, possessed of a profound mystical sight independent of the cat bones she uses merely as props. Unlike Mozelle, Elzora quite openly believes in, and trades in, the efficacy of voodoo. When Eve approaches her about killing someone using voodoo, Elzora confirms, through ritual questioning, that Eve is really certain that is what she wants—and once established, Elzora does not hesitate to act. Eve is later confused and dismayed when it turns out that Elzora's voodoo magic does not adhere to Mozelle's speculations of imagined voodoo practices—"you put some of their hair on a doll and stick pins in it or something"—a ritual that we watch Eve parodying at one point, shoving pins into a sock monkey. This leads to a heartbreaking exchange between Eve and Elzora, in which it becomes clear that Eve does not really want her father to die.

ELZORA
I didn't make you no voodoo doll! I made you a wax coffin.[104] I put his hair inside the mouth of the snake, buried it in the graveyard. He should be dead by now!

EVE
I thought I had to do something first, like, like stick pins in it or….

ELZORA
You did something! You brought me his hair. And you paid me twenty dollars.

EVE
But, I wanted it. I wanted to have it. I need it! Oh, God! Where did you bury it?

ELZORA
(beginning to cackle)
Down there, where all them Batistes are buried. But, I don't think you find it…. You said you wanted him dead. You said you were certain!

At this moment, we realize that what Eve really wanted was control over her father—just as her mother did. She did not want to kill her father; she wanted to feel that she had his life in her hands.

There are layers of indeterminacy here, not least of all that we cannot be certain that Elzora even performed the ritual that she describes. In a way, though, it doesn't matter: like her Aunt Mozelle's power—and like Elzora's, even—Eve's mystical power does not stem from ritual props, but rather from a talent that she has honed through years of apprenticing with her Aunt, quietly watching her counseling sessions and then copying her techniques. It is Eve's skill and willpower which are the true death curse, already set in motion through her promise to Cisely, her decision to go to Elzora, and to gossip to Matty's husband.

[104] The use of a wax or miniature coffin as part of a death curse is consistent with real hoodoo rituals. For example, Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317-417.

The concluding moments of the film show Eve and Cisely drowning their father's letter in the bayou—a literal reenactment of the breakdown of the historical archive. In two senses, the film's last image shows Eve and Cisely *in* the bayou: they stand on the thinnest sliver of dry land, surrounded by water, and are also reflected in the water. In these moments, we see that there are two images of both characters—one rooted in the real world, and one reflected, upside-down, in the ancestral, watery world of their ancestress. This is a visual cue to the audience that we should again reflect on how the dilemma of history enlivens and enriches Eve's present dilemma. Eve's moral burden is only half composed of her inherited capacity to determine who lives and who dies: the other, and more weighted, half is her inability to know for certain whether and how this power has been activated, a terrible flaw in her family's powerful but imperfect sight. By cementing this imperfect power in the time of slavery, Lemmons ties Eve's voodoo dilemma to the memorious burden of black America's long history of entwined power and powerlessness.[105] Viewed within this wider historical framework, Eve's inability to reckon the extent of her own power echoes larger questions about the agency of both enslaved and free black people in enacting life-altering decisions. While Lemmons does not overtly adopt the project of "flipping" imagined voodoo to the same degree as some of the other artists discussed in this chapter, my analysis highlights how Lemmons employs voodoo tropes to explore the indeterminate ways that memory and history both extend and limit the agency of her black characters. If Lemmons presents voodoo as an existential option, she also suggests that history

[105] Memorious literally means to have a vast memory. In the story "*Funes el memorioso*" ("Funes, the Memorious"), Borges describes a man who has such an extreme form of eidetic memory that he is burdened by every miniscule detail of everything that he has ever encountered. Borges describes Funes as "monumental as bronze, more ancient than Egypt, anterior to the prophecies and the pyramids." Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes, His Memory," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 131-37.

and voodoo share the "deep knowledge" quality of possessing their own trajectory once invoked.[106]

Darieck Scott's *Hex*

Darieck Scott, a professor of African American literature at University of California, Berkeley, has written two novels—and despite receiving numerous accolades, these texts have earned relatively little scholarly attention. In fact, his novel *Hex* (2007), the subject of this section, appears to have been mentioned only twice in a scholarly article, and each time only as part of a list.[107] The absence of *Hex* from recent discussions of Afrofuturism—as well as queer

[106] "Deep knowledge" can be glossed as divine power that is hot, unstable, transformative, and iconoclastic in nature. Andrew Apter explains that, in Yorùbá religion, all òrìsà possess deep knowledge, which can be ritually activated by "heating" the god through either proper or improper service—that is, by pleasing or displeasing the god. However, this heated state is undesirable during most occasions because it is unmanageable and dangerous. Therefore, a "cool" state is preferred except in times when swift action is needed. Andrew Apter, "On African origins: creolization and *connaissance* in Haitian Vodou," *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (2002): 233-260.

[107] Darieck Scott, *Hex: A Novel of Love Spells* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2007). Ramón Saldívar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *NARRATIVE* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1-18. Saldívar includes Scott's *Hex* in a list of works that share a merging and blending of conventionally separate literary genres, a quality typical of what he (knowingly) ironically calls the "postracial" American novel. He writes, "the mixing of genres includes not just the canonic paradigms of classical, neoclassical, romantic, realist, and modernist origin, but also their outcast, lowbrow, vernacular, not to say kitschy varieties of what has come to be known as genre fiction, including the fantasy, sci-fi, gothic, noir, and erotic speculative writings of the postwar era. Of numerous possible instances of this feature of contemporary minority fiction, Darieck Scott's *Hex: A Novel of Love Spells* (2007), Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* (2005), and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) (mixing historical fiction with sci-fi alternative history), and Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) (blending myth and fantasy with elements of the traditional bildungsroman), all raise as formal and thematic concerns the very nature of genre itself in relation to matters of racial identity." Ibid., 5. He goes on to add that the postracial novel typically engages in "the contradictory and oxymoronic blending of history and

African American literature—is a major gap in the scholarship.[108] Scott is a scholar of Afrofuturism, fantasy, sci-fi, queer literature—and, in particular, the fiction of Samuel Delany, an elder statesman of both Afrofuturism and queer black fiction.[109] In other words, Scott is not simply a writer of queer speculative Afrofuturism, but a connoisseur and devoted student of the

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the speculative genres." Ibid. While I agree that *Hex* is engaged quite specifically with the merging of the historical and the speculative, I disagree that this merging is either oxymoronic or contradictory. Rather, Scott's novel suggests that Afrofuturism cannot exist *except* as a considered and seamless integration of history and the speculative. For Scott, the speculative is not a surreal departure from history, but rather an act of interpreting and rendering meaningful the discontinuous pieces of what is known. Saldívar also mentions *Hex* in the same context in a footnote of another article: Ramón Saldívar, "Imagining Culture: The Transnational Imaginary in Postrace America," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 1-18. Saldívar was Scott's PhD advisor. Scott's first novel, *Traitor to the Race* (New York: Dutton, 1995) has received only slightly more attention. For example, GerShun Avilez, "Cartographies of Desire: Mapping Queer Space in the Fiction of Samuel Delany and Darieck Scott," *Callaloo* 34, no. 1 (2011): 126-142.

[108] My choice to use the word "queer" in this discussion has several complimentary reasons. Notably, it is a word that Scott privileges in his scholarship on black sexuality. Cf. Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*. In large part, though, it is dictated by the nature of Scott's novel, in which characters often do not fit neatly into the category of "gay." Although the main character, Langston, self-identifies as gay, other characters identify (or are identified by others) as having sexualities or sexual identities that might be called bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual, straight but questioning, straight but not narrow, ally, transgender, drag queen, asexual, intersexed, or hermaphroditic. I therefore opt for the use of the term queer to encompass all of these identities and more. Moreover, by using the term queer, I am exploring the resonances between Scott's intellectual project and the broader discussion I am having in this work about black sexuality, queerness, and connections that imagined voodoo, as a Gothic mode, draws between black sexuality, queerness, and the monstrous. As I will show, Scott's novel is responding to and emphatically rejecting these basic assumptions that denigrate black sexuality and particularly the sexuality of queer people of color.

[109] Delany's queer Afrofuturist fiction is the subject one chapter in Scott's scholarly work, *Extravagant Abjection*. Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). Scott also thanks Delany (as Chip Delany) in his "Acknowledgements" at the beginning of *Hex*, calling him "my idol." Scott, *Hex*, v. Delany also provided the promotional blurb for the book's front cover.

genre and its conventions, calling himself a "committed fantasist."[110] This fact alerts us to give careful consideration to how Scott cleverly explores the tensions between form, genre, and his subject matter, often playing against readers' expectations. In fact, one of the most notable ways that Scott does this is by suddenly "switching" genre in the course of the novel, transforming what appears to be a fantasy or horror novel into a work of science fiction. This formal play signals a meaningful adjustment, indicating Scott's refusal to talk about black and queer sexuality, as well as voodoo, with inflections of terror. *Hex*'s subtitle, *A Novel of Love Spells*, also alerts us that elements drawn from the "low-brow" genres of erotica and romance will be employed for the serious work of exploring major issues. These include personal and collective history, as well as social power and hierarchy—what the novel calls "the magnificent economy of all the enumerations of authority."[111] The novel also interrogates the intersecting and conflicting fields of meaning created by claiming the three discrete identities contained within the one label, "queer men of color." Departing from a "politics of respectability," the novel is in pursuit of a discourse that permits queer men of color to not cleave their sexual, bodily, and spiritual autobiographies. This is framed around an exploration of one of the novel's key questions, "What happens when you don't belong to the group that already doesn't belong anywhere else?"[112] Not surprisingly—given his deep commitment to the historical trajectory of speculative Afrofuturism—Scott's answer involves voodoo.

The principal narrative of *Hex* takes place in the early 2000s, commencing in Miami in the days following Fidel Castro's death, as the city erupts into an impromptu carnival to

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[110] Scott, *Hex*, vi.

[111] Ibid., 318.

[112] Ibid., 566.

celebrate his demise. Langston, Damian, and Azaril, all on vacation from San Francisco, are caught up in the atmosphere, throwing themselves into the bacchanal with several uninterrupted days of sex, drugs, drinking, and dancing in gay nightclubs. Only as they sober up does it become clear to Langston and Azaril that Damian is missing. After consulting with two of Damian's one-night stands, Reynaldo and Quentin, do they discover that Damian *literally* disappeared before Quentin's eyes, blinking out of existence following an explosion at an outdoor bandstand. For guidance, Langston consults with his aunt, the preternaturally gifted seer Reginia Wolfe, as well as the accidental witch Mrs. Roan Gillory, an aging socialite who has inexplicably and suddenly become possessed of godlike powers. Following the insights of these two women, the quartet—Damian, Azaril, Reynaldo, and Quentin—set off on a journey to recover their friend from interdimensional limbo, and save him from the machinations of the black magician (in both senses) Sunder Rex.

The physical places that the quartet visit—such as New York City and Providence, Rhode Island—are ultimately less important than the *times* they visit, as they investigate and finally become mystically subsumed within more than one hundred years of history in pursuit of Damian. In fact, the mystery of Damian's disappearance cannot be solved by finding a particular place, person, or thing: instead, the solution is locked inside of time, nearly a century of the history of Damian's family. This family history touches on many key aspects of black American history, such as the slave trade, struggles for economic enfranchisement, the Civil Rights movement, the Black Panthers, and their sabotage by the FBI's COINTELPRO program.[113] In

[113] COINTELPRO (short for Counter Intelligence Program) was a part of the FBI that existed from about 1956 until 1972. COINTELPRO targeted for observation and disruption any groups and individuals that the FBI deemed a threat to the political status quo. During the Civil Rights movement, COINTELPRO illegally spied upon leaders (including Martin Luther King, Jr.) and infiltrated nearly every black rights group, many of which it falsely claimed to be terrorist

keeping with the conventions of Afrofuturism, this family history is inextricably bound to the history of America and of African Americans as a people. One of the readerly pleasures of the novel is the revelation that almost all of the characters' fates or histories are deeply entwined—a discovery that goes far deeper than a simple narrative flourish on Scott's part.[114] Rather, it is a statement of philosophy: the novel's project is in part to show precisely how race, racism, black identity, and the Atlantic slave trade are central to American identity writ large. The connections between characters are not intended as exceptional coincidences, but exist to provoke the reader to consider how our own identities are deeply rooted in these cultural legacies and racial histories.

In keeping with the novel's interest in exploring the historical entanglements of black identity, it does not make reductive assumptions about what constitutes blackness. In fact, I have tended in this discussion to use the term "queer men *of color*" because many of the characters in the book do not easily or neatly fit into the categories of black or African American—thus displaying an interest in ethnic ambiguity, which Saldívar identifies as a hallmark of American "postracial" novels.[115] The novel purposely pushes back against the simple dichotomy of

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organizations. In many of these organizations—a notable example being the Black Panthers—COINTELPRO embedded *agents provocateurs* whose job was to incite members to violent or seditious activities that could then be prosecuted as crimes.

[114] Some examples of these connections: Damian is the descendant of Verity, who taught Mrs. Gillory's grandparents about hoodoo and other kinds of black American magic. Verity's son, Credence, who was the employee and secret (perhaps coerced) lover of Mrs. Gillory's grandfather is Damian's father. Sunder Rex used to be an *agent provocateur* in the Black Panthers for COINTELPRO, before teaching himself black magic in pursuit of the mystical power that he felt Credence possessed and which he now suspects has passed to Damian. Quentin, a drag performer with whom Damian had flirted, turns out to have been a secret agent working for Sunder, who has recruited him to his cause by promising that Damian's magic—in Sunder's control—could cure him of HIV.

[115] Saldívar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel," 5-6.

blackness being "what's supposed to be the opposite" of whiteness.[116] While Langston and Damian are both the children of African American parents, they were raised in Germany on military bases, not in the United States. Azaril is Arab-black American. Reynaldo is Cuban American.

For almost all of the male characters in the book, queerness or sexual ambiguity is an equally important facet of their identities, an axis of belonging that cuts through—and, in some cases, undercuts—their ability to identify as black men or men of color. The historical plotline of Credence's involvement in the Black Panthers highlights a discursive thread in black American culture that identifies blackness and queerness as mutually exclusive. Credence is forced to "butch up" in order to be accepted in the Panthers, and Sunder's outing of him as a "punk" or "sissy" spells not only his ouster from the Panthers but also his social death as a black man—a transformation outwardly symbolized by the "disguise" of women's clothing that he adopts to hide from the police.

However, in his flipped portrayal of hoodoo, voodoo, and allied black magical traditions—what his character Lin calls "The Actual Shit"—Scott refuses the Gothic convention of imagined voodoo that identifies black sexuality and queer sexuality as inherently perverse. Instead, the hoodoo that Scott presents as a viable existential option redeems the sexuality of queer men of color, mystically converting it from a converse, inverted, or involuted act into a generative force, making queer men uniquely—and in fact, superabundantly—possessed of spiritual power and insight. The title of the novel itself puns on this, holding in tension the senses of the word "hex" as either malediction or words of great power. By framing black magical traditions as, in Aunt Reginia's estimation, secular technologies which are free of moral

[116] Scott, *Hex*, 565.

or dogmatic judgments, they are presented in stark contrast to the Christianity of Langston's childhood, which taught him to fear and hate his sexual desires. Recalling Langston's childhood sexual explorations with his friend Dillon, Scott writes,

> The liaison was not without consequences for Langston. He had read the book of Leviticus and knew that God had decreed homosexuals should be killed, and this gave him pause. "The penalty is death for both parties," God saith, which was certainly awful, but it was the line, "They have brought it upon themselves," that troubled him the most. . .[117]

Instead, in Scott's voodoo, queer men are not monstrous, but holy. Notably, this inclination to view queer men as mystically powerful is deeply rooted in Afro-Atlantic religiosity. Afro-Brasilian Candomblé, Cuban Regla de Ocha, and Haitian Vodou all to varying degrees see queer and trans men as exemplary initiates and vehicles for spirit possession.[118] However, Scott makes a very crucial rhetorical shift. It is argued that these religions believe queer men are well suited to spiritual work because they are *inherently* or naturally passive—including as the penetrated, sexual partner. Conversely, Scott suggests that the link is cultural and historical, a result of queer men being forced through their ostracism and the forbidden nature of their love to develop a skewed orientation towards desire. Scott embeds this shift within one of the most important conversations that Langston has with his Aunt Reginia, during which she explains her cosmology to him. She says,

> On Earth, the movement of energy in living things is governed by genetic code, or by instinct, or learning. And by desire. So we might call these movements desire. . . It is not only the 'natural state' of the Cosmic All

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[117] Ibid., 325.

[118] J. Lorand Matory controversially argued that this is true for Yorùbá religion as well. J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Òyó Yorùbá Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

> but the very defining characteristic of the cosmos, the *thing* which makes all things, which *is* all things. So that's my spiel. The gospel of desire.[119]

When Langston asks her to explain why magical things have begun happening to him, she continues, "It's partly the gay thing, I think. And how that orients you towards desire, and makes you experience in a certain way the depths of desire unfulfilled."[120] By configuring queer sacred sexuality in this way, Scott pushes back against the desire to romanticize queerness—just like the tendency to romanticize blackness—as something genetically or naturally inclining one towards spiritual depth. Rather, Scott pragmatically suggests that such gifts are compensatory developments in response to deep and old psychic wounds, as a person who has lost sight may develop excellent hearing.

Hex also plays with, and pushes against, stereotypes about the sexuality and sexual identity of black women. Reginia is always called "Aunt," signifying on the racist use of the familiar "Aunt" or "Auntie" to identify all black women. Similarly, we learn that Reginia's formal title as a magical practitioner is "Mother," which she describes to Langston as being "a term of art."[121] On the one hand, this recalls the Mothers (church leaders) of Espiritismo (Spiritualism), the Spiritualist and Spiritual Baptist Church, and Shouter and Shango Baptists, a family of related African diaspora religious traditions that mingles elements of Christianity, Spiritualism, and African diaspora magical religiosity.[122] At the same time, as Duncan points

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[119] Scott, *Hex*, 427.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid., 441.

[122] Carol Duncan, *This Spot of Ground: Spiritual Baptists in Toronto* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008); Carol Duncan, "Aunt(y) Jemima in Spiritual Baptist Experience in Toronto: Spiritual Mother or Servile Woman?", *Small Axe* 9 (2000): 97-122; Michael Smith,

out, the term also cleaves closely to racist labeling of black women as "Mammies," as well as assumptions about the supposedly innate maternal qualities of black women's bodies. However, in her frank modernity and rejection of easy classifications of her magical "art," Reginia refuses any of these easy attempts to pigeonhole her sexuality. For example, she recounts to Langston the story of how she drove an attacker and would-be rapist literally insane by simply refusing to respond to him—an episode that refutes stereotypes of black bodies as excessively passionate and driven by emotions.

Even more radical in its play with gender as well as racial stereotypes, Lin, the person who teaches Verity Gapstone (Credence's mother, Damian's grandmother) how to use magic is an intersexed and racially ambiguous person. Initially Verity's maid and nurse before becoming her teacher, Lin is described in the following way.

> No one can prove to their satisfaction that Lin is a woman, though everyone . . . assumes her to be: apart from the beaten-down hot-combed kinks on her head, Lin lacks other indicia of sex, having no hint of breast or hip curve, and sporting a thin growth of hair over a thin upper lip. No one knows what race she is, either. Everyone assumes she's black, but imagination might easily make her or him Egyptian, Arab, or Indian.[123]

Pushing against stereotypes that traditionally place black magical traditions in the hands of hypersexed black men and women, Scott instead indicates that he sees these traditions as being more deeply and diversely *human* than the inheritance of any one particular group or sex.[124] Later, when Lin begins to "school Verity in what she calls The Actual Shit: magic," we learn

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Spirit World: Pattern in the Expressive Folk Culture of African-American New Orleans (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1992 [1984]).

[123] Scott, *Hex*, 467-468.

[124] This is also driven home by the fact that one of the most powerful magical practitioners in the book, Mrs. Gillory, is a white woman.

more about the purported origins of Lin's craft.[125] When Verity asks whether Lin is "a practitioner of hoodoo . . . [or a practitioner] of the Left-Hand Path of Conjure," Lin's answer surprises Verity.[126]

> Lin fixes Verity with an unpleasant look. "Egypt."
> "Egyptian magic?"
> Lin nods.
> "Ancient Egyptian? . . . But how do you know anything about spells from late antiquity?"
> ". . . What you think, you the only one heard of Egypt? I *know*," Lin says, and gives her forehead a vigorous tap. . .[127]

We must interpret this as Scott winking at the reader by playing with the invented history of so many magical practices and texts that influenced hoodoo and conjure traditions. Texts like *The Greater Key of Solomon*, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, and the *Sixth*, *Seventh and Eight Books of Moses* all include fabricated histories which claim them to have been written by biblical figures like Solomon and Moses and to derive from the ancient Levant and Egypt. These texts assume a dispersionist view of history, implicitly accepting that all great religious and magical traditions began in "great cultures" like ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, spreading from there to the rest of the world. Given both the falseness of these pseudo-historical narratives, as well as their problematic ethnocentrism, we can safely assume that Scott does not intend Lin's explanation to be a satisfying one. Rather, it serves two important functions. First, it dialogues with an important aspect of the history of African American magic—namely, its absorption of pseudo-antique European magical grimoires. Second, it suggests to the reader that the origins of Lin's

[125] Scott, *Hex*, 476.

[126] Ibid., 477.

[127] Ibid.

magic are intended by Scott to remain a cypher, "The Actual Shit" being far too complicated and historically ambiguous a thing to be so easily pinned down.

In concert with his magical vision of "The Actual Shit," Scott places at the center of the novel an invented diasporic religion which uses the Middle Passage as its central image. This religion is never given a name, although it is described "in a terrible book published in 1930 called *Voodoo in Paradise*" (an invented text) as being "a peculiar variant of 'Catholic voodoo'" and "quasi-Ethiopianist."[128] The practice of this religion is itself dislocated in time; we only ever see it practiced in the past, during the lives of Verity, Lin, and the elder Gillorys. And yet, through their mystical vision, the present-day characters are also able to participate in this religion and its most important liturgical event, called the Day of Return. An annual festival, the Day of Return takes place on the imaginary Caribbean island of Yaruma.[129] Yaruma is described by Scott as being a kind of meta-Caribbean island: "Little known, generally unmarked or even absent on maps," a history of colonialism, piracy, and slavery, its principal sources of income "food processing and the old standbys, rum, cotton, and sugar." The island is in the Leewards, between Antigua and Montserrat, which—crucially, given its religious emphasis on Africa and on Return—places it at the very cusp of the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean, facing towards Africa.

The diasporic religion of Yaruma, like Scott's "The Actual Shit," embraces creolization and the improvisational. Its clergy are both Babalawos (diviner-priests of the Yorùbá and Cuban

[128] Ibid., 490.

[129] Yaruma may be an intentional jumbling of the word "Yorùbá," in which case it is a word that Scott has invented to give a sense of deep history, replicating the way that many African names and words were transformed in the New World.

Santería) as well as Houngans (priests of Haitian Vodou).[130] Its devotees honor a bewildering array of saints and divinities, including "the Holy Virgin Mother," "Jesus the Risen and Moses the Lawgiver," "Allah and the Holy Spirit," "Yemanja and Olokun and Olorun, even . . . goddesses like Isis and Cybele, and some even a deity called the Dragon Mother Ashrar."[131] Within their polyphonous religious vision, the Middle Passage is placed centrally not only as an historical event that must be memorialized, but also as a referent for loss and longing writ large. Centered around the persistent vision of divided families, of absent fathers and mothers, and of orphans, the religious practice of Yaruma—like *Hex* itself—centers around memorializing, as well as seeking communication and connection with what the novel calls "The Missing,"

> . . . the incorrectly called "dead" who are not dead, but merely Missing. The Missing . . . tell Verity all about the condition of the world. They remind her that all across the planet, in every place and every thing, something is always missing. Everything in the world, everywhere, is an amputee.[132]

Playing on—and thus reclaiming—the stereotype of the black absent father, Scott places images of absent fathers throughout *Hex*, and one of the central mysteries of the text is the question of what happened to Damian's father, Credence Gapstone. The trope of the absent father even becomes embedded in a narrative of the erotic desires of queer men. Teenage Damian, who experiences his father as a spectral being, engages in sexual exploration with others because he "wishes, in a sense, to be the ghost that others lack. . ."[133] However, by leading the narrative to this place of Yaruma and to this religion focused on the Middle Passage and The Missing, Scott

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[130] Scott, *Hex*, 491.

[131] Ibid., 493.

[132] Ibid., 476.

[133] Ibid., 553.

transforms the contemporary trope of the absent black father into a form of diasporic longing with deeper connections to historical loss and violent rupture. And yet, as elsewhere, Scott opens the aperture of the lens even wider than this, from the history of black America to a broader, human narrative of loss and suffering, of the entire world as an amputee.

This permanent loss, this psychic amputation, is an experience that the celebrants on Yaruma seek to memorialize, and perhaps heal, through their ritual of the Day of Return. On the Day of Return, everyone gathers on the beach before sunrise, facing the Atlantic and Africa. They place miniature boats, floats, and vessels in the water to be carried out by the tide, disappearing over the horizon as the sun appears.[134] Scott describes the boats using a range of words that evoke the racial and ethnic diversity of Yaruma's population. He also includes multiple boats that recall the Middle Passage. One is described as "a large black model with a death's-head prow and ballooning black sails, with the red words SLAVE SHIP lettered in black headed nails on the side."[135] And another:

> . . . a disquieting model with great masts and sails, and small brown dolls suspended from wire attached to the masts, with manacles painted on their wrists and ankles—the dolls dangle as if frozen by the attention of their audience in postures of mid-jump, and as its maker tests the model by letting it bob for a moment on the slow gentle waves, the jumping figures bounce, performing a kind of grotesque ballet.[136]

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[134] Scott appears to base this ritual in part on services to the Haitian Vodou lwa of the ocean, Agwe, for whom boats (*bak*) piled with offerings are placed in the sea to sink down to his palace under the waves. Maya Deren's description of a service for Agwe is one of the most evocative and haunting passages in her book. Cf. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953). It is also depicted in her posthumous film of the same name. Cf. Maya Deren and Teiji Ito, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985).

[135] Scott, *Hex*, 494.

[136] Ibid.

These reenactments of the Middle Passage, however, are set in reverse, moving *back* toward Africa rather than away from it. As such, they seem to roll the tape of history backward, offering the possibility of repair. And in fact, the Day of *Return* seems premised on the possibility of an eschaton in which the violence done to The Missing is somehow remedied in the balance of history—a time when The Missing would be missing no longer. The Day of Return is a held-out promise, so momentous that it cannot be left to chance, but must perpetually be rehearsed, *as if* it could happen at any time.[137]

Here, as elsewhere in *Hex*, Scott situates queer people at the center of this moment of hierophany. Placing them at the Day of Return "in numbers that outstrip their proportion in the general population," these "abominations and nefarious sinners" are described as dressed in the most carnivalesque of drag, parodying the respectable, conservative fashions of the other attendees.[138] For many of the abominations, the carnivalesque of their clothing also signifies a carnivalesque approach to the Day of Return—for they hope not for return, but rather that the sea will carry them away to "countries abundant with handsome and virile lovers," where they will be accepted on their own terms. Theirs, then, is another kind of desire, not for historical correction but for a future that offers *better* than what history has offered up until now. *Hex* is deeply invested in both of these kinds of desire, suggesting that they are not contrary but complimentary, that one by needs must make space also for the other.

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[137] This is like the ritual formula in the Passover *Haggadah*, "*next year* in Jerusalem."

[138] Scott may be aware of the fact that queer and transgender people in Haiti—called by the contested term *masisi* (faggot)—regularly participate in Vodou pilgrimage festivals in numbers that greatly exceed their usual percentage in the population. In part, this is because these religious spaces tend to be safe spaces where they are relatively free from the threat of physical violence. In addition, it may be that, in the absence of a developed "gay scene," these serve as opportunities for *masisi* to congregate and socialize.

These hopeful desires are balanced, however, by the fact that the vast majority of the ships are bearing offerings intended for The Missing whose bodies are forever lost, to time or literally to the waves themselves (as with the miniature slaves leaping into the waters). Whether figuratively or literally, The Missing reside in the ocean itself, and it's there that the offerings will hopefully find them. Likewise, at the conclusion of *Hex*, the Day of Return remains postponed. Despite what they learn of history, all of the fathers remain missing. Damian is recovered, but his father cannot be, his body long ago dissolved inside the alien vessel that has fused with his being (and Verity's, as well). Instead, the novel ends with Langston learning The Actual Shit from Aunt Reginia. Scott's speculative Afrofuturism, then, concludes on a realistic note: it cannot take us all the way to the Day of Return. But it can offer the possibility of "a source of power," which the novels suggests is perhaps all "a man needs to shrug off Slave forever and become Master."[139]

Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* and *Voodoo Season*

While the material is virtually endless, I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief look at two novels by African American author Jewell Parker Rhodes. *Voodoo Dreams* and *Voodoo Season* are the first two books in a series about the life and descendants of Marie Laveau, the famed New Orleans Voodoo queen.[140] These books aim to present voodoo in a positive light, as a vital cultural inheritance for American blacks and a potential tool for healing.

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[139] Scott, *Hex*, 520.

[140] Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Rhodes, *Voodoo Season: A Marie Laveau Mystery* (New York: Atria Books, 2005). The other books in the series are *Yellow Moon* (New York: Atria Books, 2008); and *Hurricane* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2011).

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, or perhaps even an unrelated or only distantly related woman), 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. George Catlin, best known for his sketches of Native Americans of the American West, painted a portrait of Laveau, which was in turn copied by Frank Schneider. In Schneider's painting, Laveau is depicted as a light-skinned Creole woman of clearly mixed racial heritage: her hair is up in an elaborate wrap, and a delicately printed rose-colored shawl is draped across her shoulder. 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.[141]

Voodoo Dreams follows the life of Marie Laveau III, the granddaughter of the original Marie Laveau, as her grandmother raises her from girlhood in a remote swamp, leaving her

[141] 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. Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001); Ina Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946); Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1935).

ignorant of her inheritance as a voodoo queen. They later move to New Orleans, where Marie III marries Paris, a young sailor of Haitian extraction. She then betrays both her grandmother and husband by learning voodoo from the controlling and cruel Doctor John, a witch doctor who acted 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 Marie Levant, a present-day resident at New Orleans's Charity Hospital and a fictional, direct descendent of Marie Laveau. During the course of the book, Levant comes to realize and embrace her heritage, helping police solve an improbable series of murders—involving zombification and the revival of quadroon balls—in the process.[142] 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."[143] These are very much the qualities that voodoo represents for Rhodes. It is, perhaps most importantly, a form of living

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[142] 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.

[143] Rhodes, *Voodoo Season*, 277.

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—which is 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."[144] For the Laveau women, the power of voodoo is passed from mother to daughter; their connection to voodoo and ancestral powers is not only vital for themselves, but for the communities they lead in each generation. In Rhodes's voodoo, it is only Marie Laveau who 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. It is particularly concerning that Rhodes identifies voodoo as an artifact of the blood, as it is difficult to argue that voodoo is a serious religion if, at the same time, one claims that it is a genetic inheritance. This suggests that, like the classic racist view, voodoo is somehow a hereditary quirk, with appeal limited to a finite set of people possessing 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 trope of the magical negro.

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

[144] Ibid., 3.

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*) and relying on simplified, stereotyped behaviors of the spirits.[145] The gods do little more than flirt, writhe, swing machetes, and emote.

Rhodes also engages in considerable romanticizing of Creole exceptionalism, and likewise 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. Her fake Creole plays to racist stereotypes that creoles are not real languages, but simply degraded forms of proper Western languages. For centuries, these views of creoles have 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.[146]

In the end, then, the voodoo of Rhodes's Marie Laveau novels is a great deal like racist imagined voodoo. 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

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[145] *Regleman*, at the simplest level, is liturgical knowledge. In Haitian Vodou, *regleman* encompasses all of the endless details that one is required to know in order to properly serve the spirits. Taken most broadly, *regleman* is the content of the religion called Vodou.

[146] Michel DeGraff, "Linguists' Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Creole Exceptionalism," *Language in Society* 34, no. 4 (2005): 533-591.

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 to 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 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

This chapter has offered a glimpse at how a handful of black writers and filmmakers have responded to the racist stereotypes of imagined voodoo by remaking them "in their own image"—flipping racist images to convert them into images of black power. The strategies that they have employed are extremely diverse, but tend to lean towards certain shared techniques. In particular, I have highlighted how many have embraced an aesthetic of hybridity, creolity, and improvisation, adopting the view that voodoo, hoodoo, and related African diaspora traditions can and must be viewed as malleable, capable of being reconfigured in the service of a modern (or postmodern) black subjectivity. Irony and satire have also proven to be commonly employed tools in the service of defanging racist stereotypes and highlighting the absurdity that lies at their core. I have also noted how, again and again, black artists have employed an Afrofuturist aesthetic in their pursuit of a reimagined voodoo—seeking not only a viable future, but also a

meaningful and supportable way of understanding the past, vis-à-vis the black American experience. Finally, I have noted how the redemption of voodoo has also often been coupled with a redemption of black sexuality and, in particular, of queer sexuality. Imagined voodoo, as a Gothic mode, so often appears in contexts that seek to present visions of black sexuality as inherently queered and perverse. Not surprisingly, then, flipped voodoo often takes upon itself the unraveling of this discourse, redeeming sexuality, and particularly queer sexuality, of color.

However, imagined voodoo is a heavy and well-established set of signs, honed over centuries to secrete its racist messages wherever it goes. Trying to fundamentally alter its basic goals—from racist to black-affirming—is rather like trying to recycle an old set of a printer's cast metal sorts: one may, or may not, be able to make it say what one wants.[147] Regardless, I suggest that there is a moral imperative to *try* to change the established racist patterns of imagined voodoo. While I struggle to foresee a near future in which imagined voodoo ceases to be deployed in popular culture, works that trouble its taken-for-granted suppositions at least mount challenges to its hegemonic visions of race, gender, and power. I have placed this chapter at the end of the book because it feels like a space for the light to get in—after so many oppressive and soul-hurting images. Likewise, in the culture at large, these flipped uses of voodoo shed light on the failings of imagined voodoo, insisting that we have a right to demand more from our entertainment than the same recycled stereotypes, cynically rebranded for a new millennium of status quo.

[147] "Sorts" are the individual cast metal letters of movable type used in printing presses.

Conclusion:

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

I must be just fourteen, riding the bus home from school. My high school is unofficially segregated, both along social and academic lines. So although it is a third black, there are few classes in which black and white students are mixed, and likewise one could nearly draw a line down the middle of the lunchroom. The school bus is one of the few places where I regularly encounter black students, before they are dropped off in the northwest quadrant of town where the majority of their families live. I remember one of the girls because she generally goes out of her way to be nice to me, a rarity from any of the students in the school. Normally only my few close friends are reliably nice to me. I am a gawky, unathletic boy, the only one yet to not know that he is gay—for all of which I am teased mercilessly. I wish I could remember her name. She is also teased by the other students, in her case for her weight. She is very big, which also makes her look older than everyone else.

On the bus, she is often talking about the most recent service at the Jesus Love Temple, a Pentecostal-style black church that worships in the downtown building that used to be the town's only movie theater. In fact, at that time, the Jesus Love Temple is one of only a handful of downtown storefronts that is not vacant, the rest all victims of the eighties' mentality that abandoned downtowns (and urban planning) throughout the U.S., shifting everything into nondescript strip malls thrown up on the edges of towns. On my mother's side, I am a hereditary Methodist, scion of a family of autochthonous Methodists who helped to build the church in

which I was raised, after watching the first one—which they'd also helped build—burn down in a legendary fire that was central to the church's institutional memory. The United Methodists of my childhood—notably all white, distinct from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is all black—approach religion from a decidedly post-miraculous stance. Religion is about behaving oneself. Anything too ritualistic is met with entrenched skepticism and obvious discomfort. Communion—which by Methodist doctrine is purely symbolic—is performed only the first Sunday of every month, a service that is universally disliked for being ten minutes longer, and as a result is often poorly attended.

By comparison, the religious piety of Jesus Love Temple, as described by the girl on the bus, seems both strange and overmuch. Services last the entire day, and are stage-managed theatrical events. She talks a lot about folks getting saved, and she herself is habitually getting saved. Saved from what?, I wonder—and also, I am skeptical: If she just got saved the week before, why does she need to do it again? I do not yet have the knowledge to understand this ecstatic relationship with Christ, how the world is seen to present endless temptations, away from which one must turn again and again to Jesus. That we are like errant lovers He will always take back.

This day that I remember, as we are riding on the bus past a particular house, she points and says that the woman who lives in it is best to be avoided because she practices voodoo and devil worship. This is certainly far from being the first time that I have heard about voodoo, but it *is* the first time that anyone has been pointed out to me as a practitioner of voodoo. In the context of real life, I am not even sure what that means, but it is clearly a bad thing.

* * *

J is my best male friend in high school and shares my interest in magic—not the stage kind, the real kind. He is friends with an older boy, A, who will go on to be his class valedictorian and who, despite being a nerd, is afforded a begrudging respect even from the cooler kids because he is widely regarded as being blazingly smart. A has started a student group called The Philosophy Club. To me, it sounds deathly boring—which, as it turns out, is precisely the point, because J informs me that it is secretly a group for people interested in magic, mysticism, and the esoteric. In a school that worships all things sports and doesn't even have a college counselor, calling something The Philosophy Club guarantees that no uninvited stranger or school administrator will ever take the faintest interest in its goings-on. And it works. For a couple of years, until A graduates, a handful of us meet as The Philosophy Club to talk about everything from Qabala to yogic meditation.

To my initial surprise, the group's faculty sponsor is the school's disciplinarian. He is African American—in fact, one of the only black adults in the school. My limited life experience until that point has led me to believe that all black Americans are Christians of the Jesus Love Temple variety, so I am surprised to discover that he is a follower of a form of esotericism called variously The Summit Lighthouse and the Church Universal and Triumphant. They follow the teachings of Elizabeth Clare Prophet, a medium who channels messages from Ascended Masters in much the fashion that H.P. Blavatsky channeled the teachings of Theosophy.

This is, hands down, the most exotic kind of religiosity that I have ever encountered in the flesh, despite having read quite a bit about everything from Neo-Paganism to the angelic séances of Dr. John Dee, court astrologer to Elizabeth I. He becomes an ally for me, and I am

able to tell him things that I cannot yet tell my parents. If you don't count my friend M's hippy stoner mom—who always shares her pot with me and for that reason doesn't seem to quite count—he is the first adult to whom I ever confess that I am gay. He is splendidly relaxed about this confession, and tells me that he believes spirits don't have gender but must experience, over the course of many lifetimes, every configuration of sex, gender, and desire. I am so relieved that this man I admire doesn't think I'm flawed that I break down crying.

Sometimes he teaches us about what The Summit Lighthouse believes. He has beautiful pocket-sized lithographs, like my Catholic grandmother's saint cards, of many of the Ascended Masters that he follows, who have romantic names like El Morya and Saint Germain. The Ascended Masters are also called the Great White Brotherhood—a name that ostensibly refers to their spiritual purity. But also, in truth, they *are* all drawn as white; even the ones who *aren't* actually supposed to be white are colored as only sort of swarthy—the way that Jesus was occasionally painted in the slightly more liberal images I had seen relegated to church reading rooms. At some point, I don't remember when, he tells me that he refuses to listen to rock music because rock derives from jazz—which he also doesn't listen to because jazz rhythms derive from the jungle drums of voodoo, which is evil. He refuses to give voodoo an inch. All spiritual people who are moving towards the light must hold that line, because voodoo would drag them back down into the mire of the world's evil, into the clutches of death.

* * *

These are two of my earliest memories of imagined voodoo, in particular of the very real life that imagined voodoo has outside of the travelogues and horror shows and penny dreadfuls

that are the topic of most of this book. They highlight also one of the profoundest—and frankly saddest—lasting effects of imagined voodoo: in both of the above stories, it is a person of African descent who repudiates voodoo. And this, too, is part of the legacy of imagined voodoo—that it is not simply a product of white fantasy to be consumed by other whites, but that its racist representations of African-derived religiosity have penetrated deep into the cultural and religious imaginations of black America. In the same way that hypersexual portrayals of black bodies have caused many black Americans to adopt a politics of *over*-respectability, disavowing all public display of one's sexuality, racist portrayals of African religiosity have led many black Americans to disavow any connection to African spirituality. Or to even accept that African-derived spiritualties may, at least, constitute viable existential options—to be evaluated on their own terms, rather than dismissed outright as demonolatry. This legacy of outright disavowal is, arguably, the greatest and most tragic success of the system of racist control that has broadcast, since the Slave Trade, the message that African-derived religions are dangerous, evil, barbarous, to be avoided at all costs.

When, in 2008, I initiated in Jacmel, Haiti as a member of the Vodou clergy, I had the surreal experience of realizing that I had, in some profound way, become a thing of fiction. In my popular culture, the "voodoo priest" wasn't a real human, he was a sinister or perhaps laughable figure wearing a bone through his septum, bedecked in animal pelts and crudely-applied body paint. It was clear that there was a radical disconnect between the marginalized religious reality I had joined and the belief widely held about it, so much so that they had in effect fallen apart into two entirely separate things. Imagined voodoo was by now its own religion.

In that context, what would it mean for me to be a healer?

* * *

When I say that imagined voodoo has become its own religion, don't mistake that for rhetorical flourish. Over the years, I have encountered a startlingly diverse range of people who are interested in Vodou—or at least, think they are. In the past decade, a sizable minority of Neo-Pagans have become interested in incorporating aspects of Vodou into their religious practices and personal piety. While a small percentage of them do seek out—and an even smaller percentage *find*—a Haitian Vodou house, most turn to websites and how-to manuals that purport to instruct one in the ways of Vodou. While some of these sources do contain legitimate information about the religion, Vodou was never designed to be learned in this way, and more often than not, it results in people who assemble a voodoo practice out of half-understood information, glued together by their intact fantasies of the religion of imagined voodoo.

Because New Orleans is a city that, in the American popular imagination, has long been associated with voodoo, many such seekers find themselves gravitating there. What they find there are people, overwhelmingly white people (though not exclusively)—some native New Orleanians, mostly transplants—who are also captivated by the mythology of New Orleans as a voodoo city and practice idiosyncratic, largely self-styled versions of voodoo, which they are eager to share with just-comes. We might almost be tempted to call these *self*-imagined voodoos, except that this term risks downplaying the crucial fact that these practices are not invented whole cloth, but have meaning for their practitioners *precisely* because their "correctness" is confirmed by their set of inherited cultural assumptions about what voodoo is. In fact, this is all about closed circuits of reinforcement. People in New Orleans practice ersatz forms of voodoo

that draw on the vocabulary of imagined voodoo. Spiritual tourists come to New Orleans looking for what they believe voodoo to be. Because they find it, this confirms their fantasies; because they are looking for it, it confirms for New Orleanian purveyors of it that they are doing something meaningful and spiritually real.

At a very basic level, it is the law of supply and demand. And certainly, there is an element of pure capitalism operating here. I personally know of at least one very successful businessman who has made a fortune running New Age and witchcraft stores in Salem, Massachusetts, and recently relocated to New Orleans to start a business selling voodoo baubles in the French Quarter because he sensed a very real opportunity. However, I cannot allow this anecdote to rest alone on the page because it would suggest that everyone who practices voodoo in New Orleans does so cynically, which is emphatically not the case. Many people turn to New Orleans voodoo for all of the same reasons that they turn to Haitian Vodou—for healing, a sense of purpose, a moral compass, protection, succor, love—and they do so with utmost sincerity.

In fact, disrupting the stereotype that many might have of them, many are extremely well-read, both about the history of New Orleans and of voodoo. Many are even aware of the incompleteness of the historical record, but believe that through experimentation, spiritual vision, and guidance from the spirits, it is possible to recover lost spiritual knowledge. In the case of Sallie Ann Glassman's La Source Ancienne, for example—which is one of the largest and most organized New Orleans Voodoo societies—they have taken a twofold approach to recovering lost knowledge: their society is connected to a Haitian Vodou lineage, through which they learned many specifics of practice; second, in their rituals, they channel the spirits of ancestors who, at least in folklore, were important leaders of the New Orleans Voodoo community—Marie Laveau and Dr. John, in particular. Another large New Orleans Voodoo society, Priestess

Miriam Chamani's Voodoo Spiritual Temple, constitutes its tradition out of a backbone of Obeah learned from Miriam's Belizean husband, and from the Spiritualism Miriam practiced as a bishop in Chicago's Angel Angel All Nations Spiritual Church. However, most of Priestess Miriam's teachings appear to be largely of her own inspiration.

Into this complex field have begun to enter a new set of players, Haitian Vodou lineage heads who have been invited to form lasting bonds with groups of New Orleans practitioners who previously had no direct connection with Haiti. Notably, these include none other than the most famous Haitian Vodou priestess (*manbo*) in the world, Mama Lola, the subject of Karen McCarthy Brown's eponymous study. Mama Lola has initiated Brandi Kelley, the owner of the Voodoo Authentica store in the French Quarter, along with a number of Kelley's employees, and out of this, a community of practitioners has sprung up with the store as its base. For a number of years, Mama Lola and her daughter, Maggie (also a *manbo*), have made regular appearances as guests of honor at the Voodoo Fest that the Voodoo Authentica organizes every October 31 to capitalize on the spike of tourism in New Orleans around Halloween. However, despite the pedigree of their spiritual lineage, the store continues to mostly sell items that have more to do with voodoo than Vodou, as well as to perform a number of imagined voodoo services, such as zombie-themed weddings.

This raises a number of critical questions about the future of imagined voodoo and its relationship to both Haitian Vodou and to blackness more generally. First of all, what does the willingness of Vodou leaders like Mama Lola to participate in these communities mean about how they perceive their new initiates' decision to freely mingle Haitian Vodou with aspects of imagined voodoo? Is it to be seen as an endorsement, or simply good business? Taking their marked sincerity into account, how answerable are American voodoo adherents to the charge of

neo-colonialism, for adopting a free-wheeling approach to the sacred symbols of a minority whose oppression has been central to the global machine that gave them the privilege to make those kinds of choices in the first place? And how culpable are they for continuing to give life support to a complex of ideas—imagined voodoo—that reinforces harmful stereotypes about blacks? Perhaps one way to gloss this set of questions would be to ask, Is religious action an exceptional category that makes it less open to critique than everything else we do? Or, as I sometimes ask, a tad archly, Is religion obliged to be politically correct?

* * *

All of this is to say, imagined voodoo is here to stay. It is thoroughly entrenched in our popular culture, and informs—or gives voice to—the ways that both white people and people of color think about black bodies and black religiosity. As I have highlighted, it also impacts how people evaluate the overall moral valence of the cultural inheritance of the African diaspora—a monumental question with consequences almost too far-reaching to quantify. If I characterize Vodou and imagined voodoo as possessing entwined destinies, it is not because I mistake there to be any simplistic formula of "x = y" in which work recuperating one will instantly translate into a sea change in how the other is perceived. Rather, I am basing this argument of entwined destinies on the premise that our popular culture is overdetermined by the fact that all of the foundational ideas that we have for thinking about, and representing, race were invented to serve the uses of slavery. We try to do something new with them, but they routinely snap back into their old shapes.

Imagined voodoo—taken here in its most encompassing sense—is one of these foundational ideas, a kind of psychic automaton, a nightmare machine invented to give voice to everything that whites hated and feared about black people, even as it permitted the additional benefit that, in it, whites could thrill to a shadow play of their own displaced desires. This nightmare machine has not stopped working ever since; it is still doing what it was invented to do, transposing each successive generation's repulsions and jealousies into an ever-lengthening roster of execration.

Therefore, chipping away at the power of imagined voodoo goes far beyond the project of recuperating the reputation of Vodou—even though, for certain, it will be impossible to ever recuperate Vodou without having first addressed imagined voodoo. However, to take on imagined voodoo is more broadly to go after the deep complex or suprastructure of racism that undergirds every aspect of our culture. Imagined voodoo is especially well-suited to this task because it is one of the few places where this underbelly can readily be exposed, like an upthrust layer of primeval rock suddenly revealed in a heavy rain. With only minimal effort, scrutiny aimed at imagined voodoo uncovers this substrata of racial overdeterminization—themes of hypersexuality, revenge, ultraviolence, and dehumanization—that silently informs so many day-to-day interactions.

Let it be seen for what it is.

APPENDIX A:
The Haitian concept of the *zonbi*

The majority of non-Haitian chroniclers of Haitian beliefs in *zonbi* have tended to describe these traditions as indicative of Haiti's recalcitrant strangeness and anti-modernity. Fewer have bothered to clarify what exactly Haitians even mean by *zonbi*. Haiti—like much of Africa—has largely been characterized by outside observers as a country stuck in the past, where little ever changes, and present-day traditions are indicative of how things have been done unswervingly for centuries.

The word *zonbi* itself shares a common root with the West Central African Kongo word *nzambi*, which simply means spirit or soul. While there are no direct analogs to Haitian *zonbi* beliefs in present-day Africa, this certainly does not preclude the possibility that it is an antique tradition continued in Haiti, but not on the African continent. Robert Farris Thompson suggests that perhaps the Kongo practice of seizing the soul of an evil-doer to prevent them from doing further harm may have contributed heavily to Haitian *zonbi* beliefs—and could, perhaps, also explain how a version of the Kongo word came to describe the phenomenon.[1] The earliest literary reference to Haitian *zonbi* traditions seems to be in Moreau de Saint-Méry's eighteenth century description of the French colony of Saint Domingue.[2] His mention of malevolent ghosts is not far off from what twentieth-century Haitians would call a *zonbi astral*.

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[1] Robert Ferris Thompson, "Foreword," in Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), xiv.

[2] Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Déscription topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1797).

When Haitians speak of zonbi, it is typically of a *zonbi astral*, a human spirit taken from the cemetery by a sorcerer and sent to afflict the victim with spiritual, economic, social, and psychological problems.[3] Equally, *zonbi astral* can be ordered to provide their owner—whether the sorcerer or someone to whom the sorcerer has "sold" the zonbi—with prosperity and luck. In exchange for this kind of spiritual work, the zonbi must be periodically fed and heated up, spiritual rituals that serve to guarantee the continued vitality of the zonbi—and thus its ability to continue working—as well as the ability of the owner of the zonbi to control the spirit.

The notion of the *zonbi astral* is little known outside of Haiti, and when *zonbi* are referenced by non-Haitians, they are usually speaking of the belief that sorcerers have the power to resurrect a physical body (*kò kadav*) from the grave, forcing the resurrected to perform physical labor, whether in the field, the house, or the marketplace. These physical zonbi are suspended between life and death; deprived of will or of any memory of their physical lives, they nonetheless persist in a penumbral state as unpaid laborers. Haitian folklore offers elaborate descriptions of the process by which zonbi are removed from their graves and resurrected with an herbal potion, then forced to parade past their homes, a ritual act that is said to remove from them the last trace of memory of their former lives. However, as with all magical curses, there is

[3] Someone who has been afflicted by a *zonbi astral* may manifest symptoms that would be consistent with personality disorders that, within a Western psychological paradigm, would be diagnosed as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, multiple personality disorder, or perhaps even Tourette syndrome. With the exception of Tourette syndrome, which typically diminishes and even extinguishes over time, all of these other disorders are characterized as incurable, though the symptoms can (with varying degrees of success) be mitigated through pharmacological and therapeutic regimes. By contrast, within a Vodou epistemology, affliction by one or more *zonbi astral* calls for a kind of exorcism ritual, in which the zonbi are tricked or cajoled into leaving the body of the victim, typically to be returned directly to a cemetery, or else sent back to the sorcerer to afflict or kill him or her in retribution. Once the exorcism has been successfully undertaken, the victim is seen as cured, and requires no additional treatment. The success of such rituals at curing such "incurable" mental illnesses should, at the least, give pause. I believe one would be foolish to not say that it raises serious questions about our depth of understanding of such disorders, or the efficacy of the metaphors that we rely upon to describe and treat them.

a loophole: The zonbi can have his will and memory restored by the taste of salt, a splendidly freighted ingredient, symbolic of purity, savor, and sustenance, but also the bitterness of life. For this reason, zonbi masters take great pains to prevent their zonbi from coming into contact with salt. Naturally, folklore abounds with tales of zonbi tasting salt, coming to their senses, escaping from their slavery—although sometimes, not before first taking revenge on their former masters—and then returning home to stand testament to the reality of zonbi.

Over the decades of the twentieth century, non-Haitians have fallen over themselves to be the first to report that such physical zombies are "really" created by means of plant-derived poisons, formulas mastered by Haitian sorcerers. W.B. Seabrook and Zora Neale Hurston were probably the first to say as much in print, and Wade Davis—with his *Serpent and the Rainbow*—was certainly the most famous and controversial to make the claim.[4] For now, it is important to note that, while such claims have been made in the tone of revelation, beliefs that zombies are created by magical poisons have long been part of Haitian folk beliefs about physical zombies, just as the fear of being poisoned by a sorcerer or magically-in-the-know enemy has been. Frankly, the latter is a much more pressing fear, as people in Haiti have indeed been poisoned using plant-derived medicines—much as less exotic, but no less effective, poisons have been created using the canon of flora in the West—yet it is impossible to speak with certainty regarding the frequency of such occurrences. This is exacerbated by the fact that Haiti is rife with illness and short on doctors, so that people often fall ill with little warning and never receive a proper diagnosis, easily lending itself to beliefs that such sudden illnesses are the work of evil-doers.

[4] Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1938); Wade Davis, *Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

Beliefs in zonbi have frequently been emphasized by outside observers wishing to paint as exotic a picture of Vodou as possible. The idea of the blank-eyed resurrected dead, forced to toil forever in their mindless state, was an obvious choice, so reminiscent of other demi-dead monsters like Frankenstein, vampires, and mummies (themselves a British colonialist creation that fetishized and exoticized Egypt). However, unlike these Western monsters, which (who?) had little life outside of literature, the zombie was unique because Haitians "actually believed" that zombies were real. Needless to say, a statement this loaded requires some significant unpacking.

When one speaks of "belief" in a Haitian context, this is already a freighted term, since Vodou is not a confessional religion. Unlike in Christianity, which requires of *believers* that they make regular professions of articles of faith, within the context of Vodou, *practitioners* engage in normative practices, thereby demonstrating their adherence to the religion. One does not believe in the spirits, one witnesses their activities through the vehicle of possession and arrives at the conclusion that the spirits are—in one fashion or another—real. The ultimate proof of the existential reality of Vodou is that it works. The things that one seeks from the spirits are fulfilled. Practitioners who do not find their request fulfilled may seek to serve a different spirit, or may altogether convert to a different religion. In short, to ask whether Haitians *believe* in zombies, to some degree, imports a question from a foreign epistemology, one that is neither especially legible nor meaningful in a Vodou context.

Rather, if some, even many, Haitians express the sentiment that zonbi—of either the astral or physical sort—are real, it is typically vouched by specific narratives that demonstrate this ontological fact. These narratives—of people having personally experienced or seen zonbi, cared for those sickened by them, known of someone who was turned into one, etc.—come from

reliable oral sources, such as the life experiences of one's elders. These narratives—not unlike the *pawol gran moun* (aphorisms, lit. "sayings of the elderly")—derive their power not only from their basic believability and explanatory power, but also because their sources are trustworthy. As such, widespread belief in at least the possibility of zonbi is certainly not to be taken as evidence of the gullibility of Haitians. On the contrary, it is evidence of the functioning of the system of oral knowledge preservation and replication that has underpinned the vibrancy of Haitian culture for centuries. To question whether or not zonbi are true is, in a sense, to miss the point, while also calling into question the entire enterprise of the oral tradition that forms the backbone of Haitian peasant cultural life.

At a critical remove, it is also only fair to say that beliefs in zonbi are frankly no more fantastical than beliefs common in the United States, such as the belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus, in the efficacy of prayer, in the power of faith healing, in cryptozoological creatures such as the Bigfoot, or aliens. It is only with an exceptional degree of self-blindness and colonial vigor that one could argue that Vodou beliefs are inherently more bizarre or less likely to be true than the truth claims of any other religious system, all of which depend on the reality of a number of supernatural claims that currently reside outside the realm of what can be effectively tested along scientific lines. What I find absolutely key to emphasize, however, is that—at least within the context of Vodou—it would fundamentally miscomprehend the nature of the practice to infer, therefore, that such certainties are anti-rational. On the contrary, they are fundamentally rational, in the sense that they are predicated on a system of knowledge that—rather than testing hypotheses—relies on time-tested wisdom that is founded on the life experiences of generations of people who are assumed, collectively, to be far wiser about the world than any one person could ever hope to be.

Within this context, however, it would be a mistake to assume that beliefs about zonbi only aim to describe the world. They also clearly aim to recall it, enliven it, and explain it. Numerous scholars have pointed out, for example, the ways in which zonbi stories clearly serve as a form of telling the history of slavery.[5] Unlike conventional Western history, which sees history as rather like the path of an arrow, flying only in one direction, Haitian oral tradition has a far more capacious view of both history and time. In various forms, past events can still be happening all around us. In fact, we may be embodying them. Time is therefore more like a palimpsest than an arrow's arc. Zonbi, as the ultimate form of alienated, enslaved labor, recall past horrors. At the same time, the persistence of zonbi—always floating around the edges of the everyday possible—remind us that slavery is not something abolished once and for all, but which must be fought actively every day, as both evil-doers and would-be colonial powers are never far from robbing people of their freedom, dignity, and personal autonomy. Likewise, the zonbi is also a future conditional, one of many possible results should misfortune or lack of care lead oneself—or one's country—in that direction. History, therefore, is not simply something that happened in the past: it is alive, and could at any point become concurrent with the present or future.

This is not the same thing as saying that Haitians do not have a sense of time that is compatible with an American sense of time, but only that the way time functions is seen as ultimately being more flexible. Likewise, this capacious sense of time does not mean that

[5] Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 457-486; Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Bourguignon likewise adopts a functionalist approach to zonbi beliefs. Erika Bourguignon, "The Persistence of Folk Belief: Some Notes on Cannibalism and Zombis in Haiti," *The Journal of American Folklore* 72, no. 283 (1959): 36-46.

Haitian culture does not change. On the contrary, it is constantly evolving through innovation. In the case of the zonbi, for example, its uses in Haitian culture have certainly changed over time, a fact that is rarely captured in American discussions of Haitian zonbi beliefs. As noted, the idea of the *zonbi astral* appears to have been, in the eighteenth century, of potentially greater significance than the idea of a physical zonbi, or perhaps beliefs in physical zonbi did not even develop until much later. Still, into the early twentieth century, such beliefs appear to have been confined almost exclusively to the Haitian peasantry, while the idea of zonbi was expressly disavowed by the bourgeoisie and wealthy, who took pains to demonstrate their distance from Vodou beliefs and the peasantry who espoused them.

However, with the advent of the Noiriste movement—the Haitian name for Négritude—the bourgeois intelligentsia took a serious interest in the "folk" beliefs and religious practices (which is to say, Vodou) of the Haitian peasantry, who were seen as embodying a more authentic—non-French, non-American—expression of Haitian culture. For now, we will bracket the issue of how bourgeois intelligentsia often romanticize the peasantry and their "simple" ways of life as part of their nationalizing projects. This is rarely accompanied by serious reflection on the role that their economic and social privilege play in ghettoizing these same peasantry, locking them into outmoded ways of life as a matter of necessity rather than nostalgia or aesthetics.

Nonetheless, with this increased bourgeois, Indigeniste interest in Haitian peasant culture and Vodou, the zonbi received a renewed life in arts and letters. In her excellent article "Exploiting the Undead: the Usefulness of the Zombie in Haitian Literature," the literary scholar Kaiama Glover explores how, within the context of the Marxist, Indigeniste novel of the mid-twentieth century, the zonbi became a key figure, as a sort of anti-hero.

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