

Digital Loa and Faith You Can Taste: Hoodoo in the American Imagination

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Abstract

Utilizing popular culture mediums and artifacts, this dissertation examines the ways in which the American imaginary plasticizes the faith of Hoodoo and continually strips it of its religious, historic, and cultural impacts. Rather than being acknowledged as a religion, Hoodoo is presented in cultural mediums as something inherently consumable, commercial, and capable of endless, identical reproductions. The artifacts produced around this plastic representation are contemporary reproductions of racist, colonial, and paternalistic historic narratives that have damaging effects both on the religion and Black bodies. The dissertation argues that larger American culture perpetually reproduces these representations to profit from covert racism and religious paternalism while simultaneously erasing its history of Black culture and American colonialism.

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I would like to tell ya'll some stories. This dissertation is born out of my status as a storyteller, a devourer of pop culture, and a trickster; I am here to tell you stories about the Hoodoo I have seen, the things my hands have touched, and reshape the tales you have already heard. Popular culture is full of representations of what it thinks hoodoo is and it produces objects, tastes, and visions to reflect those ideas. This dissertation is the changing of the plates in the pop-cultural feast that the American Imaginary has prepared. It is the start of my attempt to flip the whole table. This dissertation is the beginning.

There are many people who I would like to thank for their help and support in this story telling. I would like to thank my family, who always supported, funded, and encouraged my scholarship. Thank you Michael L. Boson and Sarah Lee Boson. Thank you Nicole Boson. "Take a look, she's got a book." The gratitude extends outward to my supportive partner, Megan who has served as a constant editor, sounding board, and witness to this labour of sleepless nights and worn down fingertips. I could not have walked this path without you. I am also indebted to Dr. Elizabeth Thorpe, who has given me years of poignant and vital advice for all things academic; this ranges from how to look for doctoral programs to serving on many a practice committee. A special thanks is offered to Dr. Nancy Espinoza for her insight, advice, support, and suggestions. To Dr. Alesha Doan, who all but adopted me into her program, and selflessly offered her time, resources, and wit. While the above mentions are brief, they in no way reflect the gratitude I have for each of them. Each

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Finally, I would like to thank the practitioners and others that I was fortunate to encounter in the hot streets of New Orleans. This dissertation carries some of your tales. Thank you all for showing me new sides to the city, to the practice, and to the larger pop-cultural imagination.

While this dissertation is distinctly a product of the academy, I consider it a story for a wider audience. I am writing for the lone practitioner who may live thousands of miles from the presumed epicenter of New Orleans, but also shoulders its weight of representation. I write for the everyday consumer of hoodoo, so that they may be able to actually see what they are eating. I write for my parents, so that they may know they did not just throw money, hope, and cell phone minutes into a Kansas-shaped hole. I write for the larger community, both inside and outside of the academy; may we all see that representation matters, and take the narratives I offer here not as instructions as how to better misrepresent hoodoo, but as tales of survival and movement. May the work I do here begin a larger conversation that changes the way we consume representations of the faith.

With all that being said, allow me to tell ya'll some stories.

Hoodoo Is, hoodoo Ain't: An Introduction

"This is a bad land for gods."¹

For the last three years, people from all aspects of my life have laid hoodoo at my feet; friends, strangers, and advisors have filled my inbox with sensationalist articles about black magic sacrifices, or voodoo strippers. The stories are always a heady mix of violence, racism and overt sexual titillation. For example, last month I was sent the history of Adolpho de Jesus Constanzo and his "bizarre voodoo cult"². In 1989, he supposedly killed up to 100 people during black magic rituals in his secret voodoo lair. The police described it as "hidden torture chamber"³ full of blood and "homosexual pornography."⁴ This story was followed by a news clipping describing Pat Robertson's 2010 comment⁵ where he claimed that all Haitians worshiped the devil and blamed Voodoo for that years devastating earthquake in Haiti. The same day, I stumbled across the story of Anna Pierre, who lost her opportunity to be the mayor of North Miami because her political "opponents had left dolls with needs in front of her home, in an attempt to perform a voodoo hex against her."⁶ As sensational and attention grabbing these three vignettes are, they are the smallest drops in the bucket that is the representations of hoodoo in

¹ Gaimen, 1

² Ghost, 1

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ Pat Robertson

⁶ How Dreadful

American culture. Each of these three stories were presented in mainstream news sources; they do not even begin to represent all of the popular culture references, including jokes, movies, and urban legends, that do not make national news. It is with these tales, and countless other stories in mind, that I began my dissertation research.

In the summer of 2013, I headed to New Orleans for more of these stories. While I spent previous trips to the area in the comfort of sweet tea and family, or the frenzied crush of Mardi Gras, the goal of this particular trip was to arm myself with a camera and recorder, and to sop up every bit of hoodoo that simmered in the French Quarter and floated about the city. The hoodoo I came for was not the religious faith of *Hoodoo*, which has its own specific loa⁷, worship practices, and rituals, but the junk that is made supposedly in its image. I came to buy voodoo dolls, t-shirts, and post cards. I flew down to talk to and dance with tourists and hoodoo shop clerks. I strolled down Bourbon Street to savor every odd taste that had the name of the faith splashed across it. While pop culture misrepresentations of the faith are ever present, in every imaginable medium, New Orleans served as the physical epicenter of hoodoo and a fitting site to begin my narrative.

I spent five days in the city as a tourist and collector. While there, I had the opportunity to go on “Voodoo tours”, where guides would regale me with tales of a lithe Marie Laveau and her seductive dances with serpents and dark gods. I was also directed to multiple bars and clubs that had *bewitching* cocktails that bore her name.

⁷ the loa (also spelled lwa) are the gods, ancestors, and spirits of the faith that communicate with and are worshiped by practitioners.

I walked into shops, with open eyes and a moderately ready wallet⁸, ready to buy magical soaps, oils and dolls. In every shop, and across from every dimly lit plaza, I was informed that I was extremely fortunate. According to every guide, I was witnessing *real Hoodoo* and that I could carry it home with me for a nominal fee. Everywhere I turned, I could touch hoodoo with my fingertips, stretch it across my body in clothing, and swallow it whole in delicious food. All for the sake of research.

The City of New Orleans is a strange place to visit when studying *Hoodoo* and the American Imagination. On one hand, it is the epicenter of hoodoo tourism, an industry that combines a national desires for Creole cuisine, and jazz music with a form of Old South “loss and nostalgia”⁹ that romanticizes supposed hoodoo rituals and rites. The city has built a commercial and tourism empire over the bones of Marie Laveau and the supposed black magic practices that were performed in the squares. The business of tourism and historical/religious exploitation rubs up against the everyday practitioners of *Hoodoo* who live and work in the city, occasionally in the hoodoo shops along Bourbon Street. Their relationship to *Hoodoo* is no more sensationalized than a Southern Baptist in their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. At the collision point between everyday practitioners and the hoodoo based pop-culture exists my research.

My dissertation is a study in fascination, appropriation, and damage. The cultural marketplace of items and ideas has handled the faith and practice of Hoodoo roughly. Instead of being viewed as a legitimate religion, it is perceived as a system of magic rife with effeminate witch doctors, pin cushioned voodoo dolls, and

⁸ Buying trips are tricky engagements on the salary of a graduate student

⁹ Thomas, 750

miscellaneous artifacts that can be bought and sold. While this form of rampant commodification is common in every faith in the American landscape¹⁰, in many cases, the artifacts and objects made about the faith usually come from within that religious discourse¹¹. In the case of *Hoodoo*, the American Imaginary¹² associates *Hoodoo* with very specific narratives that divorce it from any religious moorings and turn it into a thing that is strictly marketable and consumable. Movies, television shows, video games, and even food produces return time and time again to a hokey combination of blood sacrifices, stab-able dolls, and painted witch doctors in order to peddle their wares. This dissertation examines the cultural artifacts that the American Imagination has created around the faith, and the racist creation/consumption cycles that they engage in. Rather than academically justifying the religious import of the faith¹³, my work deconstructs the empire of misrepresentation surrounding the faith of *Hoodoo* and troubles the racist and irreligious narratives that build these images. By deconstructing the damaging artifacts that are built around the *Hoodoo*, I seek to destabilize their foothold in the consciousness of the popular culture. *Hoodoo*, unlike what the American Imaginary would have the world believe, is not the frenzied glut of animal sacrifice and evil spirit worship. It is not conjure, “the practice of altering the fated progression of

¹⁰ The American system of capitalism has never been a respecter of church houses

¹¹ Colleen McDannell’s *Material Christianity* (1995) is an excellent example of scholarship on the material and commodification culture that has sprung up around Christianity.

¹² The American Imaginary is the collection of popular culture narratives, artifacts, and performances that are largely disseminated by the hegemonic discourse.

¹³ There are several scholars who already engage in that meaningful work. For texts that situate Hoodoo within the historical and religious discourses of American culture, see Curtis Evan’s, *The Burden of Black Religion* (2008), Yvonne Chireau’s *Black Magic* (2006), Jeffrey Anderson’s *Conjure in African American Society* (2005) and Katrina Hazzard-Donald’s *Mojo Workin’: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2012).

events to suit one's desires"¹⁴, which functions simultaneously inside and outside of the faith. It is definitely not what your televisions tells you.

There are two major veins of scholarship in regards to *Hoodoo*. The first, and more odious, is the body of work written by scholars with a tenuous relationship to the faith. The works *American Vodou* (1999) by Rod Davis and Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola* (2001) fall into this category. Regarding Davis, he refers to *Hoodoo* as "petty hexing"¹⁵ and labels all syncretic, Black faith systems practiced in the North American landscape as voodoo. He asserts that there is little knowledge about "voodoo" in the United States¹⁶ and that it is a largely disappearing, almost dead faith.¹⁷ This assertion displays his lack of academic or cultural research. Exhibiting this evident lack of scholarly or cultural grounding¹⁸, his exploration of "voodoo" is rife with racialized essentialism¹⁹ and privileged presumptions of racial authority and power²⁰. Much of the same can be said for Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola*. McCarthy has been accused of faking her research and taking ceremonies out of their religious context. She essentializes both the faith and the practitioners she is working with, attempts in parts of her narrative to "go native",

¹⁴ I borrow my definition of conjure from Nalo Hopkinson's and the Editor's Note from *Mojo: Conjure Stories* (2003). vii.

¹⁵ 9

¹⁶ Davis xi

¹⁷ "What is voodoo?" it became increasingly obvious there was a more encompassing question: *What happened to it?*" (Davis xi)

¹⁸ Davis relies on the old academic tactics of non-naming "important" and "central" figures in the faith.

¹⁹ For example, "The interior was dusty and dark, as was Solano himself." 19

²⁰ For example "Solano opened it, admitting an older, heavyset Black woman in a blue flower print dress. She seemed perturbed, and I lingered to see why. Ignoring me, she told Solano she was having trouble collecting money owed her and wanted some herbs. Solano rebuked her or not coming around earlier. She said she had, and they were quibbling about it when I broke in, introduced myself to the woman, and tried my questions on her." 19

and damages the serious ethnographic work she is attempting. Hers is scholarship that should be examined with caution.

Divergent from works of this nature are explorations situating Hoodoo in the past and contemporary landscape of American religious life. Jeffrey Anderson's *Conjure in African American Society* provides a useful framework for shaping and presenting the faith system in a contemporary landscape, and fulfills the role of situating the faith within the national conversation as a legitimate system of belief. Anderson's text combines elements of the historic and modern in his work. He traces the work of conjurers from the past in brings them into the contemporary moment, detailing their pharmacological practices, as well as their cultural roles in the community. While he draws on many of the non-archival works that are absent from Chireau's work, he presents conjure more as a practice or system of magic than a religious system. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell's work *Afro-Caribbean Religions* explores the multifaceted performance of diasporic faith systems, and how they interact with their landscapes. While Murrell excludes Hoodoo, his chapters on Haitian Vodou are extremely helpful in finding ways to frame the religious system. His chapter, "Serving the Lwa", not only provides a clear definition of how the lwa, or loa²¹, work in Haitian society, but does so in accessible language for a readership that has little knowledge of non-western systems of beliefs nor how to define the religious hierarchies of these systems. His project provides a clear definition of several terms that are vital to the explaining this project. His definition of a vèvè as

²¹ Loa are the spirits/gods/deities of Hoodoo and other diasporic faith systems.

a personalized, active symbol, one that “forces a lwa to respond and appear”²² provides this project with a clear framework and representative system to build off of.

Albert Raboteau’s *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* and Milton Sernett’s *Bound for the Promised Land* provide a strong historical framework to examine how Hoodoo situates itself within the national conversation. While neither text explores any cultural artifacts or outputs associated with the faith, they situate Hoodoo within the Black historical context, and its impact on the larger, white culture. Raboteau positions Hoodoo in the realms of the in and otherworldly: both a system that distances slaves from the realities of their lives, but one that helped them to “experience their own personal value.”²³ He does, however, situate it in the temporal realm of slavery. Yvonne Chireau’s *Black Magic* also locates *Hoodoo* within a historical context. She describes *Hoodoo* within the practice of magic, and temporally places it between slavery and Reconstruction. She provides a historical perspective to the workings of Conjure in African American history and is extremely skillful in providing archival research that positions the practice of Conjure within the historical narrative as a tool that the Black body used to address the circumstances of bondage and social disenfranchisement. She presents the practice as an important element that dealt directly with the “an individuals’ most pressing and immediate conditions, such as physical well-being”²⁴. The work also explains how Conjure is a practice that is directly informed by the

²² Murrell 80

²³ Raboteau 551/1424.

²⁴ Chireau 25

lives of Black Americans, and that many Western constructs did not work within this worldview. Her refusal to situate Conjure along the morally constructed binary of good or evil does her scholarship a great service. It allows her to paint a clear picture of the practice that was created to deal specifically with Black reality.

The language surrounding *Hoodoo's* consumption and representation in the American Imaginary is nuanced and multilayered. The faith, its popular representations, and even the very imagined landscape in which it is positioned and embodied must be fully examined. My work will use the terms *Hoodoo*, hoodoo, and plastic hoodoo in various points within the chapters. While the spelling and often the rhetorical context surrounding words is strikingly similar, there is a very clear distinction in both their definitions and the intent and purpose with which I employ them in the work. When the term *Hoodoo*²⁵ is used in the text, it is to represent an African American religious faith and cultural practice that is deeply rooted in Black diasporic religions, shaped specifically by American slavery and post bellum culture, and racial politics. It is the religious system that is explored in the works by Jeffrey Anderson²⁶, Yvonne Chireau²⁷ and Katrina Hazzard-Donald²⁸. These writers provide useful frameworks for shaping and presenting the faith in both a historic and contemporary American landscape; their works explore the historic and cultural roles of Hoodoo as a tool utilized by Black bodies to combat the violent circumstances of American bondage and disenfranchisement. Chireau especially presents Hoodoo as a system that dealt directly with “an individual’s most pressing

²⁵ Represented always with a capital H, and always in italics.

²⁶ In *Conjure in African American Society*

²⁷ *Black Magic*

²⁸ *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System*

and immediate conditions, such as physical well-being.”²⁹ She positions Hoodoo inside an American, but outside of a Western, worldview as a system of faith, pharmacological practices, economic empowerment, and community building.

Hoodoo, as a faith practice, is a series of rituals, actions, and performances that have cultural, social, and racial capital to change the lives and situations of practitioners. These rituals can include conjure practices: the drawing of herbal baths, the use of charms, and the lighting of candles. All of these practices are used in conjunction with verbal or mental conversation with the loa. While the many of the actions rooted in the practice of Hoodoo can be separated from the purely religious motivations, both the faith and the practice are systems that have direct connections with the divine in ways that are not commercial or compulsory. Hoodoo as a practice is presented as a practice with political and immediate corporal benefits. Along this vein of scholarship, Michael Gomez asserts “Hoodoo, derived initially from West Central Africa, ultimately represents a convergence of African beliefs that took place for the most part in English speaking North America. In the process of convergence and resistance and, to be sure, acculturation, these systems of belief lost their coherence, so that the practice of Hoodoo became primarily associated with procedures designed to change an undesirable condition and not necessarily related to any particular set of deities or system of belief³⁰.” However, this rich and nuanced religious system is not the focus of the dissertation. There are multiple academic projects that currently examine the more religious

²⁹ Chireau 25

³⁰ 56

representations of the faith³¹, situate the practices of faith within commercial practices³², and place it in rhetorical concert with more widely recognized religions³³. What is largely absent from current academic discourses is an examination of popular culture discourses that interpret the faith to a wider American public.

*Hoodoo*³⁴ is the term used in the dissertation to describe the religious, cultural and spiritually helpful³⁵. The dissertation, however, focuses largely on hoodoo, with a lower case “h”, and confronts of the creation of and narrative surrounding pop cultural artifacts that pervade the American cultural landscape. There already exists a growing body of literature from the historical and sociological perspective of the religious faith³⁶, literature³⁷, and history³⁸. What is largely missing from this discourse³⁹ is an analysis of the pop cultural artifacts that help to shape American imaginings of hoodoo. Each of the objects erected around hoodoo is not constructed in a vacuum; rather, they are built on the old bones of a religion denied its place as religious practice because of the legacies of American slavery and racialized views of

³¹ These include Yvonne Chireau's *Black Magic*, and Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System*.

³² This includes Jeffery Anderson's *Conjure in African American Society* and Hazzard-Donald's work.

³³ These texts include Michael Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South (1998)* and Loudell Snow's *Walkin' Over Medicine: Traditional Health Practices in African American Life (1998)*.

³⁴ It will be utilized sparingly in the dissertation, as there exists a healthy body of work that looks directly at the faith, and because the dissertation focuses largely on hoodoo.

³⁵ In terms of *Hoodoo* being utilized as a decolonizing and centering religious practice that eases the lives of its practitioners.

³⁶ as evident in the work by Katrina Hazzard-Donald

³⁷ the work of Kameelah Martin: *Conjuring Moments and Other Such Hoodoo: African American Women and Spirit Work*. 2006.

³⁸ Yvonne Chireau and Jeffery Anderson.

³⁹ with exception to Brook Butler's 2011 dissertation, *The Other Magic Kingdom: New Orleans Voodoo and Tourism*, which focuses specifically on representations of voodoo tied to the geographic landscape of the French Quarter

Black religion. These artifacts and representations become what David Chidester calls “authentic fakes”⁴⁰ in his 2005 work *Authentic Fakes: Religion in American Popular Culture*. These religious objects are presumed to be more authentic; these material artifacts become “real” and authentic by proximity. In *Authentic Fakes*, Chidester argues “these religious fakes still do authentic religious work in and through the play of American popular culture.”⁴¹ While he is writing about an American brand of Christianity⁴², this dissertation engages the goods and objects erected around *Hoodoo*, and the real religious work that hoodoo, as an authentic fake system, does. hoodoo is an *authentically fake* system for multiple reasons. Again referencing Chidester, hoodoo is a popular culture practice that is built out of racist and colonial narratives. The objects in it, like voodoo dolls, are not real, religious artifacts. hoodoo also lacks any form of deity, set system of worship, or doctrine outside of horror movie conventions. However, the American Imaginary has built a kind of religious narrative around it; ideas of hell, Satan worship, and magical power gained from human sacrifice are attached to seemingly unrelated objects. But because these images have been consumed over such a long period, and through a wide range of cultural artifacts, the larger American culture views the representations it encounters as real.

The dissertation directly examines tangible and visible objects and the erasures and alterations they create in the larger cultural discourse. When American consumers observe the marketing of hoodoo, what they are viewing and consuming

⁴⁰ vii

⁴¹ Chidester, vii

⁴² and secular institutions that gain their own religious like followings, like Elvis or Coca-Cola

is representations of a set of cultural practices “from a safe distance, where it cannot touch the consumer/reader⁴³” but entice them to devour what they see and then regard what they have consumed as truth. Through an examination and deconstruction of a multitude of hoodoo objects, this work speaks to and against the discourses of power, colonialism and racism that create these representations and keep resurrecting them in the cultural discourse. This dissertation acknowledges the motives behind the artifacts, and the awareness held by the larger cultural discourse. My work seeks to challenge the colonial, racist, and pop cultural assumptions and representations of hoodoo that flood the cultural marketplace. When left unchallenged, these images, and the damage they enact against Black bodies and *Hoodoo*, are perpetuated and unquestioned; there can be no recognition⁴⁴ for the *Hoodoo* community, or for the consumers who are blithely unaware of the acts of representational violence they engage in. This dissertation functions as an introduction between those cultural locations; it disrupts the silence around the narratives of racism and domination inherent in hoodoo artifacts. I seek to begin a conversation that will eventually shift the American Imaginary away from the images and misrepresentations that it has held onto so tightly for so long.

The images, artifacts, and representations of hoodoo are malleable, molded into countless reproductions, many of which will be explored in this dissertation. While they are not tied to any specific genre, or imagined landscape, each and all of

⁴³ Sheller 136

⁴⁴ “Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white contact with the Other” (hooks. *Black Looks*. 28).

these manifestations are created, located within, and consumed by the American Imagination. The *American Imagination* is utilized in this work to describe the combination of discourses about racism, popular culture, commercialism and religion specific to North America, and the ways these discourses are shaped and disseminated through popular culture mediums like movies, the internet, and food items. I use the term because it bridges and specifically acknowledges an American brand of white supremacy⁴⁵ that depicts Black bodies and the practices associated with them as deviant, hypersexualized, and ultimately in need of civilizing and control by dominant bodies. The dissertation readily acknowledges that there is no singular, monolithic voice in terms of popular culture, and that multiple possible readings of hoodoo-based artifacts and images are possible. However, the idea of an American Imaginary is brought to bear in this work to address the consistent, violent and reductive representations that make up hoodoo and that cross multiple cultural genres; it is a helpful construct in defining the specific form of popular culture addressed in this dissertation, the consumption and controlling the Other, and the ways in which these images can be recognizable and readily consumed over a vast variety of mediums.

The vastness of the term *American Imaginary* allows for several interpretations of popular culture, mainly the approaches offered by bell hooks⁴⁶ and Fabio Parascoli⁴⁷. Beginning with Parascoli: in his 2008 *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*, he defines popular culture as “any form of cultural phenomenon, material

⁴⁵ bell hooks, “Culture to Culture”

⁴⁶ “Culture to Culture”

⁴⁷ *Bite Me*

item, practice, social relation, or even idea that is conceived, produced, distributed, and consumed within a market driven environment.⁴⁸ I utilize this extremely broad definition of popular culture, as hoodoo take multiple forms in the larger culture, ranging from things that can be physically consumed like doughnuts and hot sauces, to visual artifacts like movies, to the performance of acts, like staged possessions. I utilize the idea of an American Imaginary in this work to speak to the highly communicative and interlocking systems of representation that hoodoo takes in the cultural marketplace. The idea of a collective imaginary space must be broad in order to encompass not only the multiplicity of imagined landscapes that these artifacts can appear in, but also the variety of ways these images can be distributed, marketed and consumed. The broad definition of popular culture also allows me to examine the unified system of values and beliefs⁴⁹. In every manifestation of hoodoo, regardless of its medium, there is a very specific set of values, beliefs, and presumptions attached to what those images mean. Even though the American Imaginary is a broad collaboration of multiple sites of culture and media, the same narratives are attached to hoodoo: It is always presented as sexualized and deviant, the voodoo doll can always serve as an easy signifier for Black deviance and evil magical practices, and white bodies can always ultimately control the magic practice.

⁴⁸ 4

⁴⁹ "We can interpret pop culture as an all-embracing signifying network that includes elements such as values, practices, ideas, and objects, whose meanings is determined by their reciprocal influence within the network as a whole and by negotiations taking place among its users." 10

The broad definition of popular culture also allows for the idea of pleasure and satisfaction, especially when ideas of religion come into play. In *Authentic Fakes*, David Chidester claims “popular culture is regarded as good if it feels good, if it provides pleasurable sensations along the tactile register of the body.”⁵⁰ The American Imaginary takes a great deal of pleasure from hoodoo-based artifacts, which explains their prevalence in multiple cultural forms. These artifacts are highly tactile, whether it is a voodoo doll that is crafted to be stabbed, a voodoo doll doughnut to be bitten after in half and devoured, or the seductive dance that is involved in a hoodoo possession act. The images associated with hoodoo are constructed to appeal both to the tactile senses of pleasure that come with the release of aggression or energy⁵¹ or the emotional pleasure that the American Imaginary receives from images of racial and cultural domination.

The vast degree of pleasure that the American Imaginary receives from its creation and consumption of hoodoo artifacts is steeped in narratives of white supremacy, the desire to construct a racialized and religious Other. I employ bell hook’s lens for popular culture, which she situates firmly within white supremacy⁵².

⁵⁰ The quote continues, “Tactility involves three things: the feelings of the flesh, the movements of the body, and the handling of objects by the body, especially the hands, in any sensory, perceptual, cultural, or religious environment. If we want to understand religion and popular culture, we need to pay close attention to these tactile engagements with the binding, burning, moving, and handling of the world that are simultaneously human, cultural, and religious.” 26

⁵¹ This sort of pleasure is concretely attached to works of violent literary hoodoo, like *Urban Voodoo*, which will be discussed at a later point in the dissertation.

⁵² “The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms. Hence, it is not African American culture formed in resistance to contemporary situations that surfaces, but nostalgic evocations of a ‘glorious’ past. And even though the focus is often on the ways that this past is ‘superior’ to the present, this cultural narrative relies on stereotypes of the ‘primitive,’ even as it eschews the term, to evoke a world where Black people were in harmony with nature and with one another. This narrative is linked to white western conceptions of the dark Other, not to a radical questioning of those representations” (26).

The images of hoodoo that are consumed by the American Imaginary are always produced by a racial gaze that creates and fosters images of primitive Black religious practices of magic, dolls, and demon worship. These images are in no way connected to *Hoodoo*, but serve as a convenient stand-in for reality. The larger popular culture readily returns to images of hypersexualized practitioners, pin cushioned dolls, and bloody sacrifice because they reinforce the narratives that paint Black cultural practices as primitive and in need of control. The consumption of these artifacts enacts a system of control that gives the American Imaginary the pleasure of tactile and visual interaction, while firmly reestablishing these artifacts and images as deviant.

When *Hoodoo* is transformed within the American Imaginary into hoodoo, something devoid of religious or spiritual significance, it becomes the representational combination of magic, popular culture, and horror tropes that are cobbled together by the larger consumer culture. The process that *Hoodoo* undergoes to become hoodoo is very similar to the systematic commercialism and blending of faith and profit that Chidester describes in *Authentic Fakes*. He writes,

As a prominent if not defining feature of American popular culture, consumerism has resulted in 'selling God,' transforming religious holy days into 'consumer rites', and even fostering 'religio-economic corporations' ...which merge business, family, and a Christian gospel of prosperity into a 'charismatic capitalism.'⁵³

⁵³ Chidester 31

When Chidester writes about the popular culture “selling God”⁵⁴, he speaks of the commercialization process that uproots the deity from its religious moorings and transplants it into plastic, consumable, and repeatable artifacts and forms. I define *plastic* here both in terms of mass production and disposability. hoodoo is rendered a fake object that can be constantly repeated. There is a marked difference, however, in how the Christian God is represented in popular culture and how hoodoo is imagined. The Christian God is presented as and understood to be a widely recognized figure with cultural and religious power. hoodoo is instead depicted as a system that has no religious moorings, and is instead a system of evil, deviance, and magic. There are neither any acknowledged holy days in the commercially promoted version of the faith, nor any positive representations between the historical or cultural manifestations of *Hoodoo* and any form of prosperity. What is consistent, however, is the idea of “charismatic capitalism”⁵⁵. In Christianity, it is a narrative that God wants the consumer to spend and to interact with objects seemingly built around the faith; in terms of hoodoo consumption, it is a narrative constructed by the American Imaginary that encourages consumers to heartily engage with and become invested in misrepresentations. With hoodoo artifacts, there is no god or God attached. Rather, what is being offered are temporary and enjoyable magical burst that can be used, disposed of, and recreated again. The system of hoodoo capitalism is a site where the gospels of religion and consumerism

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ "As a prominent if not defining feature of American popular culture, consumerism has resulted in 'selling God,' transforming religious holy days into 'consumer rites', and even fostering 'religion-economic corporations,' such as Amway, Herbalife, and Mary Kay Cosmetics, which merge business, family, and a Christian gospel of prosperity into a 'charismatic capitalism.'" (Chidester, 31)

merge. American Imaginary creates and solely profits off of any artifacts, totems or embodiments that it constructs around the faith; this cultural profit is unquestioned and maintained by the larger Imaginary through the process of divorcing any religious significance from the commodities it makes.

Simply put, hoodoo is the result of multiple collective narratives “conjured” up by the American Imaginary; it is the product of historic fears, beginning in slavery with the fear of revolt, intensifying along with Nadir era extralegal terrorism, and re-conjured up by the 1915 U.S Marine Corps invasion of Haiti. When the Marines returned, they brought back with them tales of Voodoo possession, zombies, and savage Black men sacrificing and possessing the bodies of white women. These tales were then spread through popular culture in movies like *White Zombie* (1932), and *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943). These fears mix with contemporary horror movie imaginings, and racist essentialism about Black religion and presumed deviance. There are a few stock images and narratives that are constantly recreated and recycled by the contemporary culture that depict hoodoo as a system rife with voodoo dolls, blood sacrifice, and seductive and dangerous witch doctors/practitioners. In almost every incidence⁵⁶, hoodoo is presented as evil. While the repertoire of hoodoo images is extremely limited⁵⁷, they are perpetually recreated, consumed, and re-conjured. Rarely is their variation in the images and depictions of hoodoo; deviant practitioners are always Black bodies⁵⁸,

⁵⁶ The exceptions to this idea are the mammy/“magical Negro” figures that are present in hoodoo narratives to aid and protect white protagonists from other evil practitioners.

⁵⁷ The voodoo doll, the witch doctor/ practitioners, and sacrifice victims are standard images utilized by the American Imaginary

⁵⁸ In most cases, they are female bodies, light skinned seductresses, or dark skinned, male-bodied witch doctors.

voodoo dolls are always in play as means of violence against white bodies, and possession is always a horrific, invasive event. The lack of variation in representation is the major reason that hoodoo is so firmly entrenched in the American Imaginary. The same narratives and images that existed in the Nadir era⁵⁹ surrounding hoodoo are still popular and in use in the contemporary moment. For this reason, they are transferable and readable in a variety of objects, from fondues to Blackened chicken dishes, and in movies and video games. Artifacts and images steeped in hoodoo are infinitely reproducible, easily accessible, and thoughtlessly consumable. While the American Imaginary easily situates the supposed magic practice in an imagined landscape erected around New Orleans⁶⁰, it is a floating practice that can be placed anywhere and within every setting. While the stereotypical images of hoodoo that are completely devoid of religious imagery and narratives are highly prevalent in the American imaginary, in the last 5 years⁶¹ there has been an increased usage of images and figures associated with *Hoodoo* in hoodoo artifacts. Movies, advertisements, and edible artifacts are beginning to utilize loa and vèvés in their depictions. In most cases, hoodoo is stripped of all of its religious attachments in favour of uncomplicated images about zombies, dolls, and witch doctors that are easily consumed by the American Imaginary.

This dissertation will explore the various ways that representations of hoodoo engage with the white supremacists fantasies. There exists a firmly

⁵⁹ This term indicates the years after Reconstruction until the late 1920's, when extralegal terrorism and violence against African Americans were horrifically commonplace. The violence includes lynching, sundown laws, the destruction of Black towns, businesses, homes, etc.

⁶⁰ And the tourism empire built on the bones of an imagined Marie Laveau

⁶¹ evident in *The Princess and the Frog*, the 2009 Disney film

established body of literature that attempts to separate hoodoo artifacts and narratives from their racist moorings. For example, Tanya Kryzwinksa declares that the film *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1998) was “far less blatantly racist than other voodoo films”⁶² even though it indulged in “an exploitation of otherness in the film which has a white hero who does battle with Black magic”⁶³. She asks in the text, “does that necessarily make it ‘racist?’”⁶⁴ when referencing the depiction of practitioners as evil, wild eyed, and wicked men who master voodoo in order to enslave unsuspecting victims, and the white hero’s role as both rational and able to master voodoo to defeat his Black enemies. A rather concise synopsis of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* is found in the Damian Duffy and John Jennings graphic novel, *The Hole: Consumer Culture, Volume 1* (2008). A comic cell depicts the movie, where the white hero stands victorious over the defeated voodoo practitioner. The white hero is holding the breast of a topless Black woman, who looks up adoringly at him. The vanquished practitioner yells, “No! My Penis- Destroyed! Yours-Triumphant!”⁶⁵ The white hero then goes on to call the topless woman his “mulatto minx”⁶⁶ and make references to sexual conquest. The Duffy and Jennings graphic novel is a satirical, but accurate depiction of the narratives of race and sexuality that the American Imaginary indulges in, in terms of hoodoo representation.

The Serpent and the Rainbow is an older representation of past and contemporary representations of racial domination and objectification of race as a

⁶² Kryzwinska168

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid*

⁶⁵ Duffy/Jennings, 38

⁶⁶ *ibid*

tool of social control. In these artifacts, there is most often a white protagonist who is able to quickly master hoodoo and use it to best the powerful but deviant Black practitioner. The bodies of Black women attached to these artifacts are highly sexualized and presented as trophies or sites of sexual conquest.

Even outside of narratives of sexual domination, the synergy between racial dominance and crass commercial appeal helps to foster images of hoodoo that indulge in what Sara Ahmed calls “stranger fetishism”⁶⁷. The bodies and images of practitioners and the faith are cut off from reality, and forcibly transformed into consumable fetish objects. These objects are then inserted into a consumer culture that has very specific audiences and scripts for interaction. hoodoo-based artifacts are consumed by largely by bodies that are white and middle class. I make this assertion through an analysis of marketing trends and target audiences for the variety of visible hoodoo artifacts. Whether it is in video games or in doughnut shops, artifacts based around hoodoo are projected in majority white spaces, and represented with traditional marketing strategies⁶⁸ that will appeal to their desired audience. The objects enter into social encounters with the American Imaginary and its consumers; these encounters “involve rules and procedures for ‘dealing with’ the bodies⁶⁹ that are read as strange.”⁷⁰ The American Imaginary has a very specific script when dealing with the spectre of hoodoo. As explored in this dissertation,

⁶⁷ “Stranger fetishism is a fetishism of figures: *it invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of determination.* We need to consider, then, what are the social relationships (involving both fantasy and materiality) that are concealed in stranger fetishism...” Ahmed, 5

⁶⁸ for example, the sexual tag lines of Voodoo Doughnuts

⁶⁹ and in this case, representations of hoodoo

⁷⁰ Ahmed, 6

hoodoo is always represented as deviant, consumable, and fake. The Black women and men attached to it are depicted as controllable, disposable, and manipulative.

While the idea of the American Imaginary encompasses a wide base definition of popular culture that engages with systems of racial domination and accounts for multiple representational platforms, the main purpose for the use of the term is to address what Chidester calls “the political economy of the sacred.”⁷¹ He defines that idea as “the ways in which the sacred is produced, circulated, engaged, and consumed in popular culture.”⁷² Chidester uses this approach to examine the ways that both widely recognized religions⁷³ and secular, but elevated, cultural artifacts⁷⁴ are represented as sacred and fair game for commercial consumption. This approach is not one that can be utilized for hoodoo because it is not given any religious or cultural significance by the American Imaginary. Chidester’s methods of examining religious and secular sites through a lens of consumerism provides a helpful lens to examine the creation/consumption cycles that those artifacts engage in. hoodoo based artifacts undergo a different process than the one described in *Authentic Fakes*; the objects are conjured up from the well of discourse around Black bodies and religious practices that has existed in the American discourse from antebellum plantations to the contemporary moment. They are then stripped of all religious signifiers⁷⁵ and saddled with hyper-sexualized and violent images that speak to American Imaginary’s investment in

⁷¹ 19

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ such as Christianity

⁷⁴ (like the cult of Elvis, or Coca-Cola)

⁷⁵ or in some cases, like the movie *Venom*, the religious images are kept, but depicted as evil and dangerous

narratives of white supremacy and cultural domination. After undergoing a process of pop culture acculturation, all of the religious markers of *Hoodoo*⁷⁶ are replaced with the same half-naked witch doctors, pin-studded voodoo dolls, and bloody sacrifice images mentioned above. The prevalence and the consistency of these misrepresentations become so familiar in the American Imaginary, that they then become their own kind of authenticity.

The American Imaginary is a wide-ranging network of popular culture, artifacts, and media representations. It is highly invested in presenting hoodoo as authentic and in need of control, consumption, and entertainment. In this network, hoodoo is presented as Other and deviant; there is no investment in separating Hoodoo from hoodoo, or for presenting a nuanced depiction of the faith. The American Imaginary is the site of the creation/consumption cycles that churns out new hoodoo cultural artifacts in order to interact with them, dispose of them, and then create them anew. All of the artifacts examined in this dissertation are forged, advertised, utilized and disposed of within this imaginary.

Theory and Method

This dissertation is steeped in an understanding of Quare and Performance theory; the mutual insistence on race, gender and sexuality based performativity, and embodiment is vital to my understanding of the ways that hoodoo is presented in the larger culture. I ground myself heavily in the definitions of Quareness offered by E. Patrick Johnson, Cathy Cohen, and Rinaldo Walcott. Johnson first defines quare

⁷⁶ Like the loa, or religious acts, like feeding ancestors, vèvè drawing, etc.

as a construct that is highly racialized and something that “always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*.”⁷⁷ By situating quareness specifically within the Black community, Johnson creates a discourse that examines orientation and queerness not just as a performance of sexuality, but as a system that examines the Black community that surrounds it, and the larger community that surrounds Blackness. Quareness, as presented by Johnson, is all about context of community. He further goes on to explain that the concept of quareness felt ‘closer to home’ the being identified as queer. He relates being called ‘queer’ in the context of James Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name*⁷⁸, where the term feels out of place, and when it is used toward or against him. Johnson acknowledges that he used to “answer to ‘queer,’ but when hailed by that naming, interpellated in that moment, I felt called ‘out of my name.’ I needed something with more ‘soul,’ more ‘bang,’ something closer to ‘home.’”⁷⁹ In addition to serving as a racialized identifier, Johnson situates quareness as something inherently flavoured by Blackness, a modifier that somehow feels at home in the Black community, even though it can be, and often is, delivered⁸⁰ as a slur. Much as the idea of ‘queerness’ being reclaimed by the LGBT community, Johnson here is reclaiming “Quare” from the Southern, rural, and at times homophobic discourse, and situating it as a term of self-identification, liberation, and acknowledgement that there can be, and is, an

⁷⁷ Johnson’s full definition of quare is: Quare *n* 1. meaning *queer*; also, opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*; -*adj* 2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women sexually and/or nonsexually, and appreciates Black culture and community.” 125

⁷⁸ “James Baldwin proclaims, I have ‘no name in the street’ or, worse still, ‘nobody *knows* my name.’ Johnson 125

⁷⁹ Johnson 125

⁸⁰ In the specific case of his grandmother saying “quare” to him, it was delivered with sadness, worry, and a small helping of homophobia.

intersection between Black bodies and queer ones. It is inseparable from a Blackness that defines itself in the face of the outside and often-violent discourses that seek to use their own definitions as reality.

Cohen's definition of quareness moves away from the politics of assimilation when it comes to Black, queer bodies⁸¹. Her quareness is politicized; she acknowledges that Black queer bodies stand in opposition to the traditional constructions around identity, respectability, and cultural access. Where Johnson situates Quareness specifically in Blackness, Cohen moves it past race and sexuality by saying, "for those of us who find ourselves on the margins, operating through multiple identities and thus not fully served or recognized through traditional single-identity based politics, theoretical conceptualizations of queerness hold great political promise."⁸² Quareness, here, examines the ways in which quareness challenges the "unspoken assumptions that inhibit the radical political potential"⁸³ of queerness. It takes into account that race and orientation are at times visible performances that interact with each other, and the stereotypes attached to each and both have different, and at times, dangerous potential attached to them. Cohen positions quareness as a concept that attacks the normative discussions of race and sexual identity, arguing against the privilege of assimilation associated with queerness.⁸⁴ The quareness offered by Cohen challenges the dominant discourse's

⁸¹ . See her chapter, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" in the Black Queer Studies Reader

⁸² Cohen 24

⁸³ Cohen 35

⁸⁴ In regards to the politics of privilege and assimilation as Cohen presents them, there are several layers to consider. First, there is the concept within queer politics that "queer activists [have] been structured around the dichotomy of straight versus everything else, assuming a monolithic experience of heterosexual privilege for all those identified publically with heterosexuality.' (37) This

assumptions around race, sexuality, and its potential for politicization; she takes into account that race and orientation are at times visible performances that interact with each other, and with the stereotypes they have attached to them. It is a theoretical construct that attacks the dominant discussions of race and sexual identity, and argues against racial and sexual assimilation.

Similar to Cohen, Rinaldo Walcott expands the idea of quareness from an identifier of a Black Queer body into something wide; he focuses upon the diasporic potential of quareness. Walcott links diasporic identity to global Black bodies. While Johnson and Cohen write about Black, queer bodies in a specifically American context, Walcott acknowledges that anti-Blackness, and systems of racist homophobia do not stop at North American borders. Especially given the global audience that entertains American ideas, cultural expressions, and commodities, it is important to observe that Black bodies, despite geographic positioning, are effected by American, and local systems of oppression, racism, and misrepresentation. Instead of limiting quareness to the geographic boundaries of the United States Walcott represents and speaks to diasporic Queer of Color bodies and the multiple systems of oppression they must interact with⁸⁵. In writing that “Black diaspora queers live in a borderless, large world of shared identification and imagined

assumption of blanket privilege speaks to the inattention paid to bodies of colour, ability, etc. in favour for the monolith. According to Cohen, queerness also adopts its own monolith, where all queer bodies face the exact same oppression and problematic interactions with the dominant discourse. Cohen uses quareness to focus explicitly on queer of color bodies, and their political possibilities. In her estimation quareness steps away from “a queer politics that demonizes all heterosexuals [that] discounts the relationships- especially those based on shared experiences of marginalization- that exists between gay sand straights, particularly in communities of colour.” (34)

⁸⁵ “The brief point that I want to make here is that Black diaspora queers have actually pushed the boundaries of transnational identification much further than we sometimes recognize. Black diaspora queers live in a borderless, large world of shared identification and imagined historical relations produced through a range of fluid cultural artifacts like film, music, clothing, gesture, and signs or symbols, not to mention sex and its dangerously pleasure fluid” (Walcott, 92).

historical relationships produced through a range of fluid cultural artifacts”⁸⁶, he positions quare bodies as fluid, rather than static objects that that operate in set geographic locations and generic bodies. For Walcott, the emphasis here is upon diasporic Blackness. He goes on to elaborate the importance of examining quareness as a diasporic construct rather than just a purely North American one. The lens though which diasporic queer bodies view each other is often one-directional. Black queer bodies in the diaspora view American Black queer bodies, but not often vice-versa; all representations, symbols, and theoretical constructs of quareness are often home-grown. “This sexual/textual economy of unequal exchange is important in how we conceptualize the limits of contemporary discourses of the diaspora and questions of community with the Black studies project.”⁸⁷ Quareness for Walcott emphasizes the diasporic potential for Queer of Color bodies to look across landscape to each other and recognize their positionality and possibility for mutual aid, and to look across community, and function outside of divisions between raced and queer communities. By focusing on diaspora, Walcott pushes Quareness further.

The dissertation employs Quare theory in order to more fully speak to and against the interlocking systems of racism, cultural misrepresentation, and manifestations of colonial and sexual violence that *Hoodoo* undergoes. Quareness is an idea, created by Black Queer bodies, that acknowledges these violent, intersectional systems, and creates a self-defined response to it. It is a theory that

⁸⁶ The quote continues, “like film, music, clothing, gesture, and signs or symbols, not to mention sex and its dangerously pleasurable fluids.” Walcott 92

⁸⁷ Walcott 97

steps outside of traditional and standard forms of representation⁸⁸ and creates language around and methods for resistance that are specific to multiply marginalized communities. Similar to the quare body, *Hoodoo* and the Black bodies attached to it are hyper sexualized, misrepresented, and forced to survive under systems of physical and rhetorical domination. I therefore use quareness as a lens through which to view the marginalization processes that *Hoodoo* undergoes when it becomes hoodoo.

In addition to Quareness, my work heavily borrows from performance theory; in this dissertation, I define performance both as a staged act with a defined audience and plot arc⁸⁹ and as an act that can be read in bodies, artifacts, objects. This dissertation interprets social constructions, like race, gender, sexual orientation and religious worship as performances and performative.⁹⁰ Considering performances specific to Blackness I turn to Nicole Fleetwood and her work, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. She writes, “the Black body enters the field of vision through a visual economy of flesh and trade.”⁹¹ She references the economic consumption of Blackness; African Americans have historically and contemporarily been used as commodity sites in America, whether it be physical subjugation through slavery or the industrial prison complex, or a more nuanced consumption, like NFL players who are temporarily financially compensated for destroying themselves and other men for the entertainment of a

⁸⁸ Specially here, queer theory

⁸⁹ this definition of performance is heavily utilized in the chapter on possession

⁹⁰ Performativity here is considered to be action given to flesh, and the full articulation of a text. Bial states, “performative’ as an utterance that does not make a statement- i.e. that does not express truly or falsely an already-existing condition- but in fact performs an action.” 145

⁹¹ Fleetwood, 127

national audience, and the profit for their team owners. The capital gains are always one sided, in favor of white supremacy. Even when the Black bodies Fleetwood examines are paid, it is still a one sided trade full of violence, and consumptive desire on the part of the larger culture. In this visual field, “the visible Black body is interpreted through the discourse of commodification and the simultaneous punishment of circum-Atlantic trades in the flesh and the structures of racialization that emerges through these practices.”⁹² Fleetwood references specifically the Black body in relationship to chattel slavery. She argues that the Black body continues to be viewed from the historic past of slavery in contemporary discourse. The result: Black persons being commodified, and their bodies fetishized and under constant surveillance, both in the historic past and into the present.

The Black body becomes a highly visible body once it enters the cultural field of vision because of the contemporary and historical associations with colonialism, racism, sexism, and subjugation. While in the public sphere, or even being discussed or thought of⁹³, the body of Color is an embodied, visible object. Dionne Brand asserts that the Black body specifically “is a space not simply owned by those who embody it, but constructed and occupied by other embodiments. Inhabiting it is a domestic hemispheric pastime, a transatlantic pastime, and international pastime. There is a playing around in it.”⁹⁴ Fleetwood, through the lens of Brand, positions the Black body as a thing owned, and the discourses surrounding it as things

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ The body of Color does not have to be present to become an object of spectacle. News stories, articles, and social commentary about bodies of Color are still steeped in the historical narratives of disenfranchisement. The body, regardless of its location, is still a viewed space.

⁹⁴ (2001, 38). Fleetwood 121

possessed by countless simultaneous sites that have their own stake and self-created claim to how the Black body looks in any given space, and how it performs. This means that regardless of location, the Black body is an object of spectacle, where the viewers have a particular investment in seeing the narrative act out according to their preconceived scripts.

This dissertation utilizes Quare and Performance theories as the foundation for my theoretical construct of the *performative crash site*. In essence, it is the theoretical location where performative constructs, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and religion all intersect. This is not a benign meeting, where the constructs take turns manifesting themselves on a person's body or within their actions; there is no polite, singular embodiment. The idea of a performative crash site means that these constructs all violently collide, and in their meeting become entangled. For the Queer of Color body, or countless other bodies for that matter, performative aspects of race cannot be separated from aspects of gender, or sexuality, or religion. Just like at a "real" car crash, if one needs to, one can identify separate constructs, but to do so, one must look among the other pieces. One can examine how the Queer of Color body performs race, but in order to fully articulate its performance, one also has to examine class, and gender, and sexual orientation. In this project, Queer of Color bodies are the crash sites where all of these performative constructs are thrust together and discussed.

One element that is central to the performative crash site is the idea of spectacle, audience, and intent. To continue with the metaphor of a car crash, there

is very often an audience for these sites of collision. Spectators are always eager to see how “bad” the crash is, and what the outcome of the wreckage will be. In terms of my research with hoodoo, the American Imagination is the party responsible for both the metaphoric vehicles and collision. The objects and images that make up hoodoo are the cars, each laden with stereotypical and colonial narratives regarding race, gender, religion, and the sexualization of the Black bodies attached to all of these embodiments. The collision is caused through the construction of pop cultural artifacts, like “voodoo sex manuals”. When these goods are inserted into the popular culture, there is a violent collision of cultural perceptions around race, sexuality, religion, and authenticity. The American Imaginary creates these crashes for its own entertainment and consumption. The goods and artifacts this dissertation examines are stacked with the perceptions and images constructed by the dominant culture; this does not mean, however, that hoodoo objects do not have racial, cultural, or historic ties to *Hoodoo*. When hoodoo appears in the pop cultural marketplace, it is always as an object of entertainment. By viewing the objects, goods, and images discussed in this dissertation as *performative crash sites*, I am able to insert them into larger theoretical conversations regarding race, religion, history, consumption, and spectacle.

While the dissertation combines multiple theoretical frameworks, I also employ narrative method in this dissertation. Narrative method allows for an examination of the multiple genres, foci, and landscapes—whether real or imagined—that are bound by narratives of racism, colonialism, and cultural consumption. The dissertation combines three separate approaches to this method

in order to fully encompass the broad range of representational possibilities inherent within the American Imaginary. I first borrow from Carol Mason,⁹⁵ who constructs a singular, apocalyptic narrative that “gives ideological coherence to the vast variety of individuals and institutions” that she studies.⁹⁶ She is able to deploy a single method that allows her to move seamlessly from a singular, personal interaction with an individual to a deconstructing the official narrative of a national institution. I utilize her approach, which focuses on the pro-life movement and its shared values, and redirect it to examine the multiple artifacts, landscapes, and representations of hoodoo that are bound by a central narrative of charismatic consumption and white supremacy. I utilize Mason’s understanding of narrative as its own form of temporality⁹⁷; in the dissertation, narrative does serve as a form of temporality that transcends medium, location, or landscape. As there is no one set imaginary⁹⁸, all of the artifacts explored in the dissertation are born of the same vein of cultural discourse. There is not one set community that is bound by profit and desire to consume the misrepresentations and commodification of hoodoo. By understanding that narratives function as their own temporality, I am able to expand and closely link the various, disparate artifacts that do different work but all tell the same stories.

My methodological approach that begins in the work done by Mason expands to include the analysis offered by Catherine Kohler Riesman in *Narrative*

⁹⁵ and her work, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*

⁹⁶ The quote ends “that describe themselves s pro-life.” 2

⁹⁷ “Without a sophisticated understanding of how narrative functions as an alternative temporality, it is difficult to see why and how Bozell’s pro-life writing and militant protest paved the way for the apocalyptic pro-life narratives that thrive today.” (7)

⁹⁸ as described earlier, rather there exists a collection of narratives that make up the American Imaginary

Analysis. Following her example, I use “narrative as the organizing principle for human action”⁹⁹ to bind together the multiple artifacts and representations of hoodoo in the American Imaginary and situate them into a single story. Instead of looking at each object as an isolated outcropping of culture and consumerism, I am able to situate them within their united temporality. Riessman’s methodological approach states “narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself.”¹⁰⁰ In viewing all of the artifacts the dissertation encounters as vignettes in a larger narrative, I am able to move within different mediums, landscapes, and representations and coherently link them within the American Imaginary.



Figure 1: Voodoo Blues Zombie



Figure 2: Watchtower Voodoo Dolls

To offer a concrete example, I encountered a “dancing zombie” statue in a *Voodoo Blues* storefront during a research expedition to New Orleans. The *Voodoo Blues* store is a tourism franchise that sells authentic hoodoo artifacts. It is one of many, as the vast majority of the signage I encountered in New Orleans promised the consumer true and authentic hoodoo charms, potions, and dolls. Next to the entrance, flanked by masks and beads, stood a plastic “voodoo zombie” figure that

⁹⁹ 1

¹⁰⁰ 1

would dance and gyrate to, alternately, “I Put a Spell on You”¹⁰¹ or “Superstitious”¹⁰². A “Do Not Touch!!!”¹⁰³ sign was pinned to its torso; a conversation with the store clerk informed me that this was more for my own safety than property protection. The zombie was “cursed” and put a “hex” on anyone who touched it. I was allowed to examine the figure, noting the blonde hair, the blue eye, and its “Made in China” stamp on the back. According to the clerk at *Voodoo Blues*, this “white”, imported, dancing zombie was an authentic hoodoo artifact capable of hexing the unruly and protecting the other hoodoo objects in the store. I include the two above pictures to emphasize both some of the multiple forms that hoodoo artifacts can take in the American Imaginary, and to point out their positionality in the same narrative. The dancing zombie, the voodoo dolls, and even the disapproving tourist¹⁰⁴ are all part same Imaginary. The zombie and the dolls are situated within the New Orleans tourism empire that offers up “authentic” hoodoo on every street corner. The tourists are encouraged to both disregard and seriously consider the objects before them by beads, kitsch narratives, and warnings of “hexes” to. The idea of “white zombies” can be traced back to antebellum narratives, found in the tales brought back by United States Marines from the 1915 invasion of Haiti, and seen as a contemporary staple in horror genres. In these tales, white colonist were tortured, subdued and zombified by Black Haitians, and forced into servitude. The threat to

¹⁰¹ by Screaming Jay Hawkins

¹⁰² by Stevie Wonder

¹⁰³ with three exclamation points

¹⁰⁴ disclosure: the tourist in the first image is my partner Megan. The picture is the result of an un-coached response to the zombie. I was taking pictures of the zombie when she returned from the bathroom and stopped in front of the door. This picture is a reaction to the artifact, combined with the historical, cultural, and religious background knowledge that accompanies being in a relationship with an academic.

white bodies of a loss of their agency combined with forced subservience to Black bodies made the white zombie a horrific figure. The keychain voodoo dolls offer the consumer a wide variety of highly portable blessings, curses, and cuteness. All of these objects are prominently displayed in a New Orleans shop on Bourbon Street: a site of tourism, history, and myth. This particular *Voodoo Blues* storefront is one of many in New Orleans, indicating its high profitability. Every step of this representational chain is highly commercially and culturally invested in displaying hoodoo as accessible¹⁰⁵, disposable, profitable, and real.

Riessman claims “the purpose is to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives. The methodological approach examines the informant’s story and analyzes how it is put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener or authenticity.”¹⁰⁶ My work expands this approach to narrative and story; where Riessman examines individuals, I approach the construct of the American Imaginary as an informant, and the multiple artifacts it creates as the stories it is telling. While Riessman claims that “the world does [sic] not tell stories, individuals do”,¹⁰⁷ my methodological approach examines the artifacts that the larger culture creates, and ask those questions. My work focuses on pervasive cultural conversation; to do this I examine many of the articles that the culture has produced, rather than interviewing everyone who handles and consumes objects market by the hoodoo marketplace.

¹⁰⁵ In terms of hoodoo being an artifact that can be easily purchased and owned

¹⁰⁶ 2

¹⁰⁷ 3

Riessman defines narrative as “talk organized around consequential events. A teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or ‘world’ and recapitulates what happened then to make a point often a moral one. ... Respondents narrativize particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society.¹⁰⁸” My methodological approach is highly invested in what she call the breach between the ideal and real. In hoodoo artifacts, there are multiple points of failure in the narrative. hoodoo is considered simultaneously real and fake, evil and utilitarian, savage and controllable. This is evident in horror movies, where the practice is nonsense until white heroes need to deploy it against a monster or witch doctor. It then becomes real and useful, until the monster is vanquished and the magic practice can be discarded. There also exists a breach between the real and the desired/deviant. The American Imaginary is not invested in *Hoodoo*, so it recreates and consumes countless hoodoo artifacts in the form it desires. These images and misrepresentations then become the real, which then justifies further deviation from accurate and realistic representations of *Hoodoo*. My dissertation project is an act of transcribing the narratives constructed by the American Imaginary.¹⁰⁹ My work examines the world that has been built on the little pieces of a narrative that has been created and misrepresented by the American Imaginary.

The last component of my methodological approach is directly informed by bell hooks’s “Culture to Culture: Ethnography and Cultural Studies as Critical

¹⁰⁸ 3

¹⁰⁹ She says, “By denying viewers (readers) information, they paradoxically provide us room to supply their own. We an invent an entire world analyzing the figures (dialogue) although we know very little about them.” 5

Intervention.”¹¹⁰ hooks notes in her studies of race that “white scholars writing about Black people assume positions of familiarity, as though they were not coming into being in a cultural context of white supremacy, as though it were in no way shaped and informed by that context.”¹¹¹ All of the hoodoo objects that exist in the consumer marketplace are built by and for a white supremacist culture that negates and marginalizes Black bodies and religious practices. This idea is evident in the ways that depictions of hoodoo reinforce stories of Black barbarity and express the need for colonial, cultural, or religious intervention by white protagonists. Objects like *Voodoo Doughnuts* encourage consumers to gleefully bite into Black face, bleeding doughnuts, games like *Voodoo Girl* detail the sexual and cultural conquest of exotic practitioners through a white character’s mastery of the practice, and horror movies situate hoodoo practitioners as threats to civilization and whiteness who need to be killed or pushed even further to the margins. In all of these representations, narratives of white supremacy are bolstered and Black practices and bodies are misrepresented and marginalized.

My research seeks to answer hooks’s fear of educating the colonizers to better colonize Black bodies.¹¹² There are multiple instances in hoodoo representations that show evidence of a great deal of *Hoodoo* research; this is the case in the movies *The Ritual*, *Venom*, and *The Princess and the Frog*, which each have religiously accurate representations of vèvés and loa. For these images, the creator went in search of *Hoodoo* and shaped it to fit their commercial and

¹¹⁰ in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*

¹¹¹ 149-50

¹¹² "Am I educating the colonizer/oppressor class so that they can better exert control?" 132

representational agendas. Rather than creating a collection of resources for the American Imaginary to interact with and further appropriate, my work turns that gaze back upon itself. By collecting and deconstructing the multiple texts in this dissertation, and situating them within a collective narrative, I offer back to the colonial gaze their own creations and problematize them.

Chapter Layout

The chapters of this dissertation track hoodoo artifacts throughout the American Imagination in its multiple forms. In Chapter 2: **“Who Do You Voodoo?”: Plastic Possession** examines the ways in which the American Imaginary has made the act of possession into a dramatic performance. When the larger culture witnesses acts of possession, these acts are always performed in a staged setting where all images, associations, and narratives tied to the act are created by the same Imaginary that is consuming it. The act is always presented as monstrous; *Hoodoo* possession is rarely, if ever, represented in a way that shows devotion. Instead, manifestations of *plastic possession*—that is, possession visuals informed by the American Imaginary’s associations between hoodoo, satanic worship, and blood sacrifice—are represented as authentic. The chapter examines possession as a performance ritual crafted by the larger discourse in video games, movies, and commercials. In all of these mediums, the consumer is able to either physically control the act of possession¹¹³ or encouraged to project their fantasies about controlling practitioners¹¹⁴ onto whatever they are viewing. A close reading of a Bud

¹¹³ As is the case in video games

¹¹⁴ and their presumed Black bodies

Light commercial leads into **Chapter 3: Faith You Can Taste: Edible Hoodoo**. The chapter is a close study of the ways in which hoodoo is literally consumed through food items. Portland's *Voodoo Doughnuts* provides the two major artifacts of study, the *Cock-n-Balls* and the *Voodoo Doll* doughnuts. These artifacts, and their overwhelmingly white consumers, lend themselves to a nuanced deconstruction of race, magic, sexualization, and what it truly means to "eat the other". bell hooks's work is central to this section's narrative, depicting the ways in which the larger American Imaginary seeks to create and craft images of the faith that it can chew, internalize, and then discard, all the while seeking to be transformed by the tasting in some small way. Pleasure, consumption, and cultural erasure are all explored within the context of food, hoodoo, and eating. Leaving objects of literal consumption, **Chapter 4: Binary in the Bookshelves: Hoodoo and Fiction** examines the most common source for images and representations of hoodoo in the American Imaginary: pulp fiction. The works *Urban Voodoo* (1995) and *Wicked Voodoo Sex* (2008) function as the primary artifact sites for this chapter, as they are both well selling and easily represent the binary that is highly visible when it comes to this type of literary offering. Works on hoodoo created by the American Imagination either focus on granting the consumer powers of sexual domination, or promise physical domination of and pain inflicted upon the consumer's enemies. These works function as lurid tell-all's and instructional guides that promise to teach the consumer how to harness deviant Blackness to empower their own desires for domination and conquest. The exploration of the sexualization and

domination fantasies built into the presentation of hoodoo is continued in **Chapter 5: White Witches and Voodoo Girls: Hoodoo and Racial Consumption**. This chapter deconstructs the ways that the bodies of practitioners are sexually and violently dominated in hoodoo artifacts. Using the film *The Skeleton Key* (2005) and the interactive porn game *Voodoo Girl* as texts, the chapter maps the overt narratives that represent hoodoo as a site that inherently encourages domination of Black bodies, and how they are explicit both in mainstream and specialty realms of representation.

“Who Do You Voodoo?” Plastic Possession

“The weakness is the flesh. The flesh. The flesh. The flesh. The coil. The frail. The weak.”

-*The Skeleton Key*

“When you believe in things that you don’t understand, then you suffer.”

-Stevie Wonder: *Superstition*

A concrete skull of the loa Ellegua¹¹⁵ sits on my desk; together we watch scenes of possession in movies and video games play out like hostile takeovers. These scenes are filled with devious *voodoo witch doctors* who gleefully assault unwilling bodies, by jumping inside their skins, or moving them about like poppets. The acts are always violent, often bloody, and presented as horrific and sacrilegious. These representations are everywhere: they appear as horror movie staples, add danger to video game plot lines, and represent “exotic” Blackness in television shows, commercials, and comic books. Each of these mediums, while full of hoodoo, possession, and evil worshipers, are devoid of any religious markers. Popular culture possessions include images of “voodoo dolls”, chicken bones, souls jumping from body to body, and theft of skin, blood and hair. What they lack is any mention of the loa, the actions building up to religious acts, and most important, any form of consent. The frequency and prevalence of stereotypical images of possession is indicative of the American Imaginary’s need to keep reproducing and consuming

¹¹⁵ Ellegua is the loa that watches the crossroads. He is the loa that opens the doors between the living and non-living worlds and his help is needed to direct ones path.

these images. To address this insatiable need, possession is subjected to the same plasticization process that the larger faith suffers.

The term *plastic* is a fitting adjective for the state of hoodoo in the American Imaginary, as it indicates an object that is at once cheap, easily reproducible, and an item that will literally never disappear. hoodoo, for all its cheapness, has staying power in the American Imaginary. In order for hoodoo to be transformed from an act of worship to a plastic, consumable artifact, several narratives must converge. All language and markers of the religion must be erased, and replaced with representations of evil, witchcraft, and devious Black bodies. With all representational ties to the faith removed from hoodoo, the practitioners that are attached to authentic representations of the faith are either misrepresented as evil crones, or deleted entirely. Many of the cultural transformations that the bodies of practitioners undertake will be explored in the fifth chapter, *White Witches*. This chapter focuses on the ways that the act of possession has been appropriated, shaped, and misrepresented in the American Imaginary. When it appears in movies, television shows, and video games, possession is presented as dangerous, sensational, and monstrous; possession scenes are filled with burning candles, bloody knives, and slaughtered animals. With the religion removed and the practitioners reconfigured, new images and artifacts must be built around possession to make it marketable, recognizable, and commercially profitable. Plastic.

The ideas of “fake” and “real” possession are ones that need to be deconstructed. I chose to use “real” instead of the term “authentic” because I do not

wish to enter into the discussion surrounding the perception of hoodoo as a fake faith, and possession as a fake act. Instead, “real” possession focuses upon the sacred markers¹¹⁶ of religious practice, including the drawing of vèvés, the invocation of Legba, and naming and calling of specific loa. This is not to say that “real” possession cannot be fakes. There perhaps are times when practitioner could try to go through the emotions and fake it best they can. In both cases, it is usually only the spirits and the devout that pay any notice.

As argued in the introduction, hoodoo is the result of the faith of *Hoodoo* being rendered into a palatable and consumable artifact by the American Imaginary. It is stripped of its religious moorings and representations, and transformed into a commercial product, and a narrative that justifies the negation of Black religion, and Black Bodies. While hoodoo is rooted in myriad forms of racist representation, plastic possession exists at the crash sites of visual culture, narratives of historic forgetting, and fear. This form of hoodoo is meant to be pleasurable in its consumption, plastic possession is a visual artifact used to covertly remind the cultural imagination of its old fears of Black bodies passing, gaining power, or worse. The fear and control built into the representations of plastic possession, birthed from the 1915 invasion narratives, are present in contemporary entertainment mediums to simultaneously help the cultural imagination remember and forget. In the imagined landscape of “post-racial” America, it is vital for popular

¹¹⁶ By legitimate markers, I mean actions, symbols, and persons directly tied to hoodoo. This can include the ritualized drawing of a vèvê with cornmeal, the presence and use of the proper drums, the appropriate invocation and offerings to Ellegua. All of these acts should be engaged by a knowledgeable practitioner for strictly religious, non-commercial reasons, for the act to be considered “legitimate” in this sense.

culture and entertainment mediums to minimize America's colonial and racist history to the point of disappearance, while simultaneously using those narratives to perpetuate a cultural economy that thrives off of the theft and negation of Black culture. That is the role of plastic possession; it functions as a visual medium that reminds the consumptive audience that Black bodies, and their religions, are dangerous backwards and hostile, evil, and horrific.

Religious Possession

As I write this chapter, I constantly look towards the concrete skull on my desk. It is a small artifact, a 5-inch cone of concrete with cowrie shell eyes and a mouth; while it is not shaped like an anatomical human head, the word skull is an accurate descriptor. It is more than a lump of rock and shell, it is a face offered to practitioners by the loa. Just as Ellegua watches over the crossroads, his gaze is an appropriate one to look over these words. The skull represents the crash sites between the authentically religious, the commercial, the performative, the unnamable, and the consumptive. It is an artifact in the sense that is an object created for a singular, religious purpose, but it is one purchased from a shop just off of Bourbon Street in New Orleans. The shop where the skull was purchased, *Voodoo Authentica*, sold it to me with the intention I would use it for religious work, in addition to a "cigar doll" and a candle. The skull is not really a skull, nor is it an effigy, a vèvè, nor a decoration. Although it came from a touristy area of a touristy town, it is meant for hard, religious labour; although it is decorative, it must be spoken to, considered, and fed. The concrete skull, its roles, and its places of origin

are both real and fake. These conflicting embodiments make it the ideal artifact to explore both religious and plastic possession.

An element of “real” religious possession that is missing from representations of pop culture possession¹¹⁷ is a reflection of the agency of the body being possessed. Pop-culture possession is related to plastic possession. It is the act devoid of its religious purpose and markers, and packaged for commercial consumption. Plastic and pop-culture possession emphasize symbols and actions that are easily recognizable by the popular culture, regardless of their veracity. The American Imaginary has constructed possession as an invasive and often violent act that no one would be willingly part of. In her work regarding Bori Possession, Masquelier positioned the spirits as demanding bodies that practitioners are occasionally fearful to submit to. When she claims, “no one, after all, likes to be possessed” (94) she seems to be writing from a construct that situates possession as a violent take over of consciousness rather than a welcome opening of the body and the consciousness¹. She described the spirits as demanding, and eager to ask things of practitioners. Masquelier describes Bori possession rites as opportunities for spirits to ask things of humans, and to do so in a way that is physically and emotionally demanding. When she claims that no one wants to be possessed, she is viewing possession as a one directional system of demanding. The idea of possession being invasive and unwanted predicates upon the notion that the loss of the body in this case equates to a loss of agency. In possession enacted by

¹¹⁷ Pop-Culture possession is the form of possession perpetuated and represented in popular culture.

practitioners, the act is far from unwanted; it is specifically asked for. Horses¹¹⁸ engage willingly in specific acts, and welcome the visitation of the loa into their bodies.

Representations of religious possession are not prevalent in popular culture, because they are hard to commodity. While they have to include purchasable objects¹¹⁹ they are not marketable events. In order for an event to be marketable, there has to be clearly defined boundaries and an order of service. Religious possessions do not follow that formula. In her ethnographic work exploring Vodou in New York, Karen McCarthy Brown describes these interactions as “possession performances” in religious and theatric terms. She claims

These possession-performances, which blend pro forma actions and attitudes with those responsive to the immediate situation, are the heart of the Vodou ceremony. The spirits talk with the faithful. They hug them, hold them, feed them, chastise them. Group and individual problems are aired through interaction with the spirits.¹²⁰

While it is obvious is the description that McCarthy Brown that the loa have easily identifiable interactions with the practitioners, they are not actions that are capable of being scripted. Religious possessions take on many different embodiments in various Diasporic faith systems¹²¹, but have identical characteristics regarding consent, intent, and the agency of the practitioner.

This form of spiritual interaction is firmly rooted far away from the constructed binary of good/evil spirits that is deeply entrenched in the American

¹¹⁸ Practitioners who open their bodies to be ridden

¹¹⁹ For example, for a hoodoo possession, you would need cornmeal to draw a vèvè, rum to feed the loa, and a bust of Ellegua to open the doorways.

¹²⁰ Brown 220-26

¹²¹ These faiths include Voodoo, Vodou, Candomblé, Santería, and Obeah.

imaginary. The American Imaginary situates possession as an act where a demonic spirit takes over the body of a victim, and wishes to do great harm to both the victim and the larger society¹²². In religious aspects of possession, the idea of a victimized body is far removed from the act. This is evident in the work done by Fremont Besmer in *Horses, Musicians and Gods: The Hausa Cult of Possession*; in his work, Besmer painstakingly details the levels of love, care and consent that go into Hausa possessions. The interactions are entirely voluntary on the parts of both the horse and practitioner, and are represented as careful acts of communion. In *A Skin for Dancing In*, Tanya Krzywinka examines Voodoo possession as a religious act that is far removed from the Hollywood mythos spun around demonic possession and bodily invasion. She states, “rather than a demonic intrusion into the mind and body, it is seen as a communion with an individual loa.”¹²³ Communion is an appropriate term here, as a religious possession is a highly intentional act on both sides of the performance. The practitioner/horse must to prepare their body, the ceremony, and the vèvè that make possession possible; they must have the offerings to Ellegua to open communication between the horse and the loa, and offerings for a specific loa. Both Ellegua and the called loa must be willing to come down and take part in the act. There is no such thing as accidental or unwilling religious possession. This form of spirit work is definite work that takes a great deal of intent by all participants.

¹²² There are numerous examples of this form of possession that are directly related to Diasporic faith systems such as hoodoo and Voodoo. This misrepresentation is present in *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004), *Venom* (2005), and *Exit Humanity* (2011), but are in films as early as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943).

¹²³ 161

Religious possession is an act that bridges the mundane lives of practitioners, with the sacred will of the loa. It is a space where the body of the practitioner is able to sit in the spirit and outside of a place of self-consciousness. It allows the body to engage in “abandoning earthly control, and entrusting all to the spiritual community.”¹²⁴ The act functions not only as a spiritual communion that unites a religious community and renews spiritual commitments, it also functions as a performed record of past communal actions and concerns. The idea of possession as a communal act that speaks to both the past and the contemporary moment is not one that is specifically tied to hoodoo possession. The Hausa engage in Bori spirit possession and view it as an event that serves multiple social, communal, and cultural purposes. In his work, *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything*, Masquelier explores this idea: “While bori often provides a lens through which to remember an idealized past, it also serves as an important arena in which to articulate the problems of contemporary life. Such capacity to simultaneously manage the forces of tradition and innovations is what enables bori to transform the experience of novel, ambiguous, or threatening realities into symbols of shared consciousness. In drawing particular attention to the imagined and agentive dimension of possession, one may describe bori as a force in constant flux, whose representations remain perpetually shifting, often contested, and rarely totally articulated.”¹²⁵ During the temporal space of the communion, the loa interact both with the horse being ridden and the larger religious community. In many cases, religious possessions are enacted to address some sort of community or personal crisis. The intersession of

¹²⁴ 48. Hazzard-Donald. *Mojo Workin*

¹²⁵ 10-11

the loa is meant to offer solutions and safety to those who call out. Using this religious act in this way is not specific just to the American context of hoodoo. It is also present in Vodou, Santería, and Bori possession “cults”. In each of these religious practices, the communion practices of possession reshape violent, damaging, or isolating narratives from outside of the religious community and reshape it into events that can be understood and absorbed by the community.

Some of the most apparent markers of religious possession are the ideas of agency and consent. When invoked, this representation of possession is not an accidental, invasive, or one-sided act. The loa being called is not a violent force pushing aside the unwilling consciousness of a victim; it has to be a willing participant in the action. The loa function as invited guest, and the body of the horse purposefully opened. There are instances where possession is presented as an unwelcome action. Masquelier asserts, “no one, after all, likes to be possessed,”¹²⁶ claiming that the bori spirits presented demands that the horses are unwilling to acquiesce to. There are also instances present in Rod Davis’ *American Vodou* which present hoodoo possession as an intrusive act. These texts, especially Davis’ work, approaches the faith he writes about in his work from a position of racialized and religious essentialism which infantilizes and exoticizes the Black bodies that worship.

Faith in Plastic

Plastic possession is the cultural artifact most frequently reproduced on the hoodoo production line. It is an act that can undergo several representational forms,

¹²⁶ 94

but with the addition of a few key elements, be easily recognizable to the American imaginary. Countless actions can fall in line behind this representational flagship as long as they are accompanied by "tribal" drum beats, voodoo dolls, or a body somehow robbed of its agency. Very similar to the larger body of hoodoo, plastic possession is dislodged from its religious moorings, and takes on whatever monstrous form is temporarily required of it. The characteristic that makes it a distinct factor in hoodoo is its visuality. Possession is described by popular culture as a flashy event. The scene is always laid with highly sensational images, props, and actors. A possession is not complete without dark, painted bodies in the background drumming and dancing wildly, snakes writhing menacingly in candlelight, and an evil practitioner with rolling eyes and jerking body. The highly performative nature of plastic possession serves as the template for all other commoditized artifacts to follow.

Consumed representations of possession contain all of the markers of plastic religious representation. In order for the act to be remodeled into representations that can be marketed and consumed, they must be pleasurable, repeatable, malleable, transparent, and profitable. The concept of hoodoo being rendered into a plastic religion is in conversation with David Chidester's work, *Authentic Fakes* in which he explores the relationship between religions and popular culture. One of the arguments that his work offers is that successful religions are able to utilize pop culture and commercialism to minister to ever changing populations. Using Christianity as an example, he claims the faith survives in an increasingly commercial world by adopting consumer culture and marketing itself accordingly.

He references Edward Ross who claims “plastic religion.... is able to survive profound social changes by transforming itself into something new.”¹²⁷ Chidester argues that faiths which turn from orthodoxy and towards the a more plasticized systems are able to survive in a contemporary culture that values the sound bite, the Vine clip¹²⁸, and the purchasable marker of piety.¹²⁹ Many of the religious systems that have applied a system of commodification and plasticization to their ministry and publicity are thriving in a commercial system. This is not just true of specific faiths. There is a large collection of religious icons, symbols and markers that have become free floating commercial pieces. The Christian Cross is a clear example. In the current moment, it enjoys a large deal of cultural representation ranging from jewelry, to jeggings.¹³⁰ hoodoo largely benefits from this system of representation; the city of New Orleans derives a large amount of its commercial and tourism profits from misrepresentations of the faith. The city spins out images to the Internet, which reach into every recess of American popular culture. hoodoo is highly visible, and highly profitable. While this cultural spotlight renders these religions somewhat visible and profitable, this attention comes with a heavy price. When religions allow their markers to be rendered into commercial relics, they relinquish a great deal of their power, and means to control the images or messages.

¹²⁷ Chidester, 52

¹²⁸ Vines are six second video clips. They have become a popular medium through which contemporary internet culture transmits stories, ideas, and micro-narratives.

¹²⁹ There is a great deal of evidence that support his assertions. One clear example can be seen in the Mega-Churches, such as Lakewood, in Houston Texas. The faith has built an empire off of commercialism, with few tangible ties to overt religiosity.

¹³⁰http://www.forever21.com/Product/Product.aspx?BR=plus&Category=faith_main&ProductID=2000050205&VariantID=

In addition to being highly accessible and malleable, Chidester offers the opposite side of the commodification coin. Religious commodities mass-produced by the American Imaginary are considered plastic because they are associated with “the cheap, the tawdry, and the ephemeral. In addition to being almost infinitely malleable plastic is almost immediately disposable.”¹³¹ These artifacts are temporary. Eventually, the fad of having crosses on clothing will pass; the cultural desire for Voodoo dolls ebbs and flows. When religious systems indulge in this form of commercialism in order to survive, there is a great deal of risk in losing control over a religious message, and having the seriousness of the artifacts be abandoned. When an artifact or religious representation is offered up to the cultural machine, the religion relinquishes any control of the message. This is because, as Colleen McDannel claims, “material culture is not static”¹³²; it is a constantly hungry mouth that is always yearning for new forms of representation of the same images. It is continuously affected by whims of the market, and the hunger of a consumptive public that desires old stories to be retold in new ways. This constant hunger causes religious systems to give up to the plasticization process, and let the demands of the larger culture shape the ways in which the larger faith is represented.

The dialogue put forth by McDannel and Chidester assumes that religions have the ability to decide their involvement within the plasticization process. This

¹³¹ Chidester, 53

¹³² Colleen McDanell asserts that “Material culture is not static; it is constantly changing as people invent, produce, market, gift, or dismantle it. A natural product like water, for example, is transformed into an artifact when Catholics in France bottle it and priests ship it to the devout across the United States. Christian T-shirts do not merely appear on teenagers' bodies. They must be conceptualized, manufactured, advertised, and sold. Changes in technology, fashion, and community composition alter the production and use of material culture”. 3

argument is supported by the involvement of numerous Christian organizations marketing themselves in ways that respond to public demand. It does not take into account the racialized implications of religions that are considered Non-Western, and the ways in which racialized representations are never in the hands of the marginalized. In the case of hoodoo and possession, practitioners are rarely active in choosing the forms of representation that are attached to the faith. Narratives surrounding possession have existed in the American consciousness from slavery, and were intensified after the 1915 invasion of Haiti¹³³. Marines brought back with them horror stories of zombification, the enslavement of white women, and savage, violent ritual sacrifices. These narratives have been shaped by an American discourse that constantly seeks to package possession and hoodoo in forms that are simultaneously recognizable but exotic, wild but controllable. The larger cultural gaze¹³⁴ eagerly creates and consumes these images of possession. Possession functions as the uncontrollable controlled. bell hooks explores the white gaze and the power it has over Black images in *Black Looks*. Created narratives about Black bodies, faiths, and religions must be primitive, controllable, and idealized representations. The imagined construction of Blackness allows the larger colonial and marketplace culture the privilege of ignoring the racist implications attached to the work they are constructing, or the fact that the representations they create are no where near authentic ones. It is marketed as a wild, uncontrollable act that the marketplace has found a way to boil down into something that is palatable and reproducible.

¹³³ The United States military intervened to oust Touissant Louverture

¹³⁴ read as colonial and white

Commercial forms of possession are never depicted as benevolent or harmless. In all cases they are displayed as evil acts engaged in by an evil Black practitioner, and in order for the story to end correctly, the villain must be severely punished. The punishment is not meted out because they practice and engage in plastic possession in whatever imagined landscape they are part of; rather their punishment is created out of their interaction with white bodies.

There are three poignant examples of severe punishment being doled out to Black bodies that put hoodoo in proximity to whiteness. In the video game, *Risen 2*, Chani, the “Voodoo queen” that teaches the nameless hero how to master “voodoo”, make a doll, and control the bodies of other white men, is sentenced to exile from her family, community, and safe haven. The world of *Risen 2* is situated in an imagined, psuedo-historical landscape that borrows heavily from colonial history. Exile from a community in this imagined landscape means that Chani is cut off from physical protection from wild animals, pirates, and the colonial armies that are actively seeking to kill her. She is also cut off from communal protection, her biological and cultural family, and most importantly, her ancestors. The form of “Voodoo” that the game creates is based largely some sort of connection with the ancestors. That is, until the white, nameless hero is taught how to engage in plastic possession; then all ties to the ancestors are severed, and the “hero” is just provided with a rootless source of magic and power he needs to control the bodies of others. But the exile of Chani, in this imagined landscape is significant because, even though she taught the nameless pirate plastic possession to save her community, she is punished, while he, the one who severed cultural trust, is rewarded for his theft.

The digital Chani, like the bust of Ellegua that sits on my desk, is an example of a *performative crash site*. The digital character is voiced by actress Charlotte Moore, who is white, but is presented as a scantily clad Black woman in game. Moore takes liberties constructing an *ethnic* accent that is supposedly meant to sound *Black* and situate the imaginary landscape somewhere in the Caribbean. As an actress, she engages in racist and colonialist narratives about what Black bodies are meant to sound like, especially in colonial settings. Her delving into racist narratives is coupled with the game designer's rendering of her body as lithe, half naked, and available to the nameless hero. The consumer of the video games does not question the racialized or gendered implications of the voice actress, game designers, or cultural research team that went into designing the hoodoo practices that Chani has supposedly mastered in game. Chani, as a digital creation, has no agency, self created narrative, or will. Yet, her imagined body is viewed as a *real* artifact when it comes to hoodoo in popular culture, because of the digital rendering of her racialized body, the landscape, and the hoodoo she supposedly practices. The consumer is encouraged to mindless consume Chani; because the on screen character is that of a Black woman, who sounds and performs the stereotypical trappings associated with hoodoo by the American Imagination, she is accepted and referenced as an unquestioned artifact that holds its own form of authenticity.

Even though the imagined landscape shifts from video games to movies, punishment is still attached to Black bodies that attempt to use possession against white bodies. In the tales from the crypt feature, *The Ritual* (2002), Caro is severely punished for using plastic possession against Wesley, and attempting to use it

against Alice. As her transgression is three fold: teaching the steps of possession to white bodies¹³⁵, including possessing and controlling the body of Wesley, zombifying Wesley, and attempting to also possess Alice, she is severely punished. Through her Voodoo based assaults, she is revealed not to be the grateful *mulatto* who is allowed to stay in the house through inherited patronage¹³⁶. Instead, she is presented as a treacherous seductress who has no qualms using sex or Voodoo magic to harm her colonial oppressors¹³⁷. She fails to free her family from the plantation rule of either Paul or Wesley; she is possessed/zombified by Alice's instant religious mastery. After her defeat, she is handed over to Superintendent Archibald, who intends to use her prone and possessed body for his sexual pleasure. The movie closes with two interconnected scenes: first, the legitimate wedding of Alice, and Wesley, and the rape of a possessed Caro, who is carried in a wedding dress by Superintendent Archibald to his bed. The last image of the film is him lowering his zipper.

As a character, Caro is another *performative crash site*. Kristen Wilson, the actress that plays her, must be complicit in portraying a character that is scripted to be devious, abusive, and willing to use hoodoo in evil ways to hurt those around her. Even if she has no religious attachment to the faith, she must also play a character that is raped because of her hoodoo usage. Wilson's agency as an actress playing a role and being paid for her work violently intersects with her portrayal of a

¹³⁵ She teaches Paul, the "evil" brother, how to possess Wesley so that he can sell the plantation home they own together.

¹³⁶ She is revealed to be Paul and Wesley's half-sister, through a forcible relationship the owner of the estate/plantation had with Caro's mother, a servant in the house.

¹³⁷ She uses Black magic to zombify Wesley and plotted against his family. The family owned the "big house" and Caro and her family were forced to work for them.

character that uses hoodoo to free her family from plantation labour but is ultimately zombified and perpetually raped for her attempts. Caro is the embodiment of what the American Imaginary wants to see in its hoodoo practitioners; she is beautiful, often naked in the film, and is punished severely for her usage of magic against white bodies. The character reinforces the ideas that the American Imaginary has about hoodoo, and the bodies of Black women that engage with it. Wilson, as an actress, must engage these racist narratives, but ultimately bow to them in order to have a part in the film, and a share of its profits.

All of the Black bodies that are associated with the plastic possession of Wesley and the attempted possession of Alice are punished. Two of the Black men who are present at the final possession are killed, Caro is cursed to a possessed lifetime of rape, and her family, who attend Wesley and Alice's wedding as smiling caricatures, will continue to be forced to work on the plantation. They are depicted in stereotypical fashion, smiling, docile, fat, Black bodies in maid uniforms that are deeply loyal to their good, true master and quite content to serve him.

Instead of rape and zombification, *The Skeleton Key* presents lynching as punishment for the practice of hoodoo. Cecil and Justify are "caught" trying to teach the children to "conjure up hoodoo" When discovered, their bodies are dragged outside, beaten, kicked, hung, and lynched. The film explicitly shows the lynching. And then they just move on like it's no big deal. Caroline goes on to complain about the mirrors again immediately afterwards.

In each of these three cases, practitioners that teach White bodies how to engage in hoodoo and plastic possession are severely punished, either with exile, or

rape, or lynching. These acts of extralegal terrorism in these imagined landscapes mirror historic acts of actual terrorism that are attached to Black bodies in America that attempted to use hoodoo and possession for means of social or religious liberation. The bodies of practitioners in historic and these imagined landscapes attached to hoodoo are completely disposable. They are murdered, or raped, and the story just continues. The white characters that are attached to plastic possession are either saved from it¹³⁸, or able to ignore it. It is important to note that popular culture representations of possession are highly invested in maintaining this narrative of violence and punishment against practitioners. These images are widely disseminated in movies, television shows, and video games. In non-digital, but equally commercial sites, like New Orleans for example, the ways in which possession and its representations are presented are markedly different.

As explored in the introduction, there are some spaces where practitioners control hoodoo and its representations, including plastic possession. The city of New Orleans claims a thriving economy based off of a marketplace selling representations of a specific brand of hoodoo called New Orleans Voodoo. There is a heady mix of capitalism, authentic religious work, and plastic commodification at work in the city.¹³⁹ It is impossible to walk a cobblestoned block in the tourist heart of the city without finding at least 20 references to possession and Voodoo. Countless shops advertise their authentic wares, and walking “Voodoo” tours

¹³⁸ as is the case with Wesley, Alice from *The Ritual* and Jim and the nameless hero from *Risen 2*

¹³⁹ This has been the case for the city of New Orleans since the days when the city was first dragging itself from the bayous. Long, in *Perceptions of New Orleans* notes that in the early days of the city, businessmen of various racial backgrounds made the practice of New Orleans Voodoo profitable. (Long, 17)

advertise possessions on a nightly basis. The city is a site where the representations of the faith are barked into the cultural marketplace by a mix of narratives; some owned by practitioners¹⁴⁰, some by pure capitalists¹⁴¹, and some by a mix of the two¹⁴². The city has constructed a boundless empire of hoodoo; a space where plastic possession can be witnessed twice a night for a small fee, where the loa can be called up on demand, and a consumer can be offered possessed pralines. With each space claiming to provide an “authentic” experience, the city becomes a space of the hyper real, “where images and reproductions become ‘more real than the real’¹⁴³ “. In this space, the practitioners and the pure capitalists have equal space and equal profit from their representations of “authentic possession.”¹⁴⁴

The location that made the most visible claims to authentic possession in New Orleans is *Marie Laveau’s House of Voodoo*. I wandered in the shop during my research trip and encountered one of the clerks in a heated conversation with a patron. The customer was requesting some *voodoo stuff* that would help him possess his ex girlfriend. Raven, clad in black skinny jeans, a *The Wanted* t-shirt, and long brown ponytail proceeded to curtly inform the customer that they didn’t do *that* sort of thing there. They only had *authentic* goods. I looked around during this interaction and saw voodoo dolls hanging by nooses from the ceiling, and a rather graphic poster of cartoon devils pin multiple sexual positions. The customer

¹⁴⁰ As is the case of the workers at *Voodoo Authentica* (612 Dumaine St. New Orleans, LA 70116)

¹⁴¹ See Marie Laveau’s House of Voodoo (739 Bourbon St. New Orleans, LA 70116).

¹⁴² New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple (828 Rampart Street, New Orleans LA 70116)

¹⁴³ Iwamura, Jane. Kindle Location 201-203. *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*

¹⁴⁴ This dissertation will not focus specifically on the commercial representations of New Orleans Voodoo as there is a great deal of work done in that area. Brooke Butler’s dissertation, *The Other Magic Kingdom: New Orleans Voodoo and Tourism* is a good starting point for that discussion.

eventually left in a huff, leaving Raven red faced and irritated. After he calmed down, I was able to approach him to ask about the possession artifacts the store did sell. After I presented myself as a researcher, he promised me that all the artifacts in the store, including the objects used to possess people, were real, stating “it’s authentic to us because we made it.”¹⁴⁵ Apparently, the fact that the soaps, incenses, and potions were made on the premises, and the location gave them their own form of undeniable potency and authenticity. He felt the same idea carried over to the idea of possession. If the body is present, and the act is being done, that it falls under the heading of the real. The idea of bodies, authenticity, and the real all come into play here. The idea of authenticity is always on shaky ground when writing about religion. Belief has a tendency to get in the way of those wanting empirical evidence. As elaborated in the introduction, I am using here the religious grounding of authenticity. Under this definition, all the proper actors¹⁴⁶, must be present and doing the work.

Raven’s statement that the hands doing the work make a religious act, artifact, or space authentic is one that must be closely examined. There are several academic recordings detailing and witnessing authentic possession Karen McCarthy Brown, Rod Davis, and Yvonne Chireau all explore this act in their works. In order for a possession to be religious authentic, the loa¹⁴⁷ and horse must be present. The number of loa is constantly in flux and growing, as they are created as needed by practitioners. In order for the possession to fall along the lines of the real, the loa

¹⁴⁵ Raven Interview

¹⁴⁶ the loa and the horse

¹⁴⁷ spirits of hoodoo and Voodoo. Can be described as small gods.

must embody the horse and manifest itself through it. The loa must ride and the horse must be ridden. There is a great deal of will and agency bound up in religiously authentic possession. In order for a possession to take place, first and foremost the loa have to decide to show up. An easy way to conceptualize religiously authentic possession is to think of it in terms of a big summer concert. In both cases, there is an audience who sits expectant and vaguely aware of the event as they should unfold. The audience can be other practitioners, new adherents, or curious non-initiates who have been made privy to the ceremony. The initiates and drummers serve as the opening men. They are present both to heat up the audience and announce the coming main event. In religiously authentic possession performances, the loa are the headliners. Their presence and their involvement alone is what transform performances into something greater. And much like a band performance, those in the know can tell when an opening band is trying to front and act like they are the headliners.

Plastic Possession

Images of plastic possession roll continuously off of the cultural marketplace's production line. The act is mimicked and reproduced in ways that are pleasurable, repeatable, and disposable. It has become a marketing device that can be inserted into movies, video games, food, and texts that will draw cultural eyes and profit. It can take the form of a show performed for the price of twenty-four dollars and a two-hour walk through New Orleans streets. It can be crushed into narratives of Voodoo dolls and body snatchings. It can be acted out through by twitching thumbs over plastic game controllers. As long as the easily familiar markers of dolls,

drumbeats, and dancing are involved, it does not matter what medium the act is thrust into. Plastic possession uses these three markers as symbolic ties to Black bodies and Black faith. Although each of these markers is problematic, and largely divorced from any representation that is present in religious possession, they serve as the images that the American Imagination most readily knows; nothing else but two of these three markers is needed to mark any action as possession in the mind of the larger imaginary. The imagined landscape, temporal location, or race/age/gender of those performing the act cease to matter. Most of the moving parts within plastic possession are completely interchangeable with something else.

As plastic possession is rooted in representations far removed from religion, it falls under the heading of the fake. Katrina Hazzard-Donald describes fake artifacts within the conversation of hoodoo as items that are strictly created for commercial means and have no real ties to the religion.¹⁴⁸ It is also a fake act in the way that Chidester describes fake religious acts:

I argue that despite their fraudulence, these religious fakes still do authentic religious work in and through the play of American popular culture. As a matter of urgency, in order to recover the religious, creative, and imaginative capacity of America, we need to understand and appreciate the religious work and religious play of ‘authentic fakes’ in American popular culture.¹⁴⁹

According Hazzard-Donald and Chidester’s guidelines, this type of possession is a doubly faked act. When it appears in the larger popular culture, possession¹⁵⁰, although it is largely divorced from religious representations, does “real religious

¹⁴⁸ *Mojo Workin* 16.

¹⁴⁹ Chidester vii

¹⁵⁰ that has been largely divorced from religious meaning

work”¹⁵¹ in the cultural marketplace. The work it does, however, is not as rosy as the picture that Chidester draws. When he alludes to fake religious artifacts doing real religious work in the American imaginary, he is largely referring to faith systems or cultural icons¹⁵² that are highly recognized and afforded some sort of legitimacy. These systems are able to enter into conversation with the fake artifacts created around them, and are able to insist on some boundaries concerning “defining orthodoxy against heresy, defending orthopraxy against invalid rites or deviant behavior.”¹⁵³ This is not the case for possession, or hoodoo; hoodoo as a religious system has a lengthy cooptation within the American imaginary, and all religious dialogues about its faith practices have been overlooked in favour for representations that bring profit.

Plastic possession, because it is easily reproducible, and easily accessible, is utilized in movies, video games, television shows, and tourist attractions. It can be situated in lived or imagined landscapes, with very little, if any alteration to its performance. Plastic possession is not the type of possession performance mentioned by Karen McCarthy Brown in *Mama Lola*. Brown’s possession performances were described as acts of communion. The loa and the practitioners all communicate and share intimacies. They are performances that have a set audience. It is not a performance as a staged, and rehearsed act. Plastic possession is reproducible largely because it is so well rehearsed. It is rehearsed in the larger

¹⁵¹ *ibid*

¹⁵² Chidester also refers to cultural institutions like Coca Cola and Elvis as being entities that have religious “fake” artifacts created around them and function very similarly to “real” religions that have been folded into the larger cultural imaginary.

¹⁵³ Chidester 192

cultural imaginary by being fed generations of images steeped in dangerous Black bodies, shaken voodoo dolls and violent bodily take overs. It is rehearsed in the representations in movies and video games, where the possessed body shakes and then loses all control. Because the larger cultural audience is extremely familiar with these performances, how long they last, and what their markers are, they are extremely sure of their roles in the consumption of the possession. In the case of tours, they pay their money, and can passively watch a body “catch the spirit” and then move on to the next “authentic” event. In “real” religious possession, there are very few safe and defined boundaries between the loa, the horses, and those watching. The acts are not reproducible, constant, and without clearly defined edges.

Without a commercial and popular cultural investment in hoodoo, these representations of possession would not be possible. The American imaginary has constructed a means to communicate an act, that has no literal translation in its religious form, to something that is instantly identifiable, malleable, and reproducible. As religious possession is the simultaneous embodiment of two identities working the tongue, eyes, limbs, and nerves of a single body, it is a complicated act to articulate. Only the possessed truly knows the nuanced ways in which to describe the experiences of displacement, rapture, and agency sharing.¹⁵⁴

In a religious possession, “the practitioner would be aware that their audience has

¹⁵⁴ In *Ceremonial Spirit Possession*, Walker explains the differences between trance and possession, and the different roles they play in religious ceremony. “Trance is the scientific description of a physiological state in Western terminology, whereas possession is the folk explanation, in more philosophical terms, for the same type of state. Possession is ‘any native theory which explains any event of human behavior as being the result of the physical presence of the human body of an alien spirit which takes control of the host’s executive functions, most frequently speech and control of the skeletal musculature.’” 3

no tools in which to gage the possession as authentic or not”¹⁵⁵ and construct a narrative to deliver to the audience “for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community, etc.”¹⁵⁶ In the case of plastic possession, an outside embodiment¹⁵⁷ takes the place of the possessed consciousness and constructs a narrative about possession that is most palatable and consumable for the audience. It is the market that decides what form the possession should take, and exactly what it should look like.

The appearance of plastic possession must fall within certain parameters in order to be financially successful and marketable. It has to be at once exotic and different enough to establish its direct link to Blackness and non-normative American culture, while still being understandable and safe enough for wide public dissemination. Representations of possession is the direct consumption of some form of exotic Blackness, as hoodoo and all its markers are tied to dark and primitive locations that have been reshaped by American Imaginary. hoodoo and possession are situated both within and outside of the American imaginary landscape. They are painted as heathenish remains dragged over from darkest Africa, further tainted in Haiti, and then concentrated in the American back woods and bayous.¹⁵⁸ The creation of this performance is tied directly to narratives that

¹⁵⁵ Goffman 59

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*

¹⁵⁷ The market, the actor performing in the role of the possessed body, or the designer of the plastic possession product

¹⁵⁸ in *Black Looks*, bell hooks notes the successful commodification of Black culture requires a representation that straddles the line between exotic and safe. She writes, “the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. ... The ‘real’ fun is to be

trivializes Black religion and marginalizes Black bodies: narratives that the American imaginary has deeply invested itself in.

Forms of Plastic Possession

As one of the defining characteristics of plastic possession is that it is malleable into any form that the American Imaginary and marketplace demand, it is not surprising that there are several forms that are capable of manifesting. While it is possible for countless reiterations of the act to be created, there is a constant, small body of representations that appear in the American Imaginary. Traditional and horror presentations of plastic possession are the most popular, but there is a distinct market for sexual and academic plastic possession.

The traditional style of pop-culture possession, old school possession is where the body of another person is literally taken over and controlled. There is often a voodoo doll involved in the process. The doll is there as a prop to take the part of the possessed person's body. The loa are removed, and it is people who control the bodies of other. It is a magical act, and engaged through the use of magical objects and spells. It is almost always extremely harmful to the body being possessed. The fear included in the idea of pop-culture possession, as well as the magical artifacts can be marketed as popular culture artifacts. Items like the dolls, candles, powders, and the background ethnic drum beats can be packaged together and sold to pop-culture mediums. Because these markers are easily identifiable, they can be thrust

had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (or not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy." (21-22).

into movies like *Venom*, *Ritual* and *The Skeleton Key*. They can be injected into video games and placed into music videos. These packaging are always situated in the contexts of horror or sex. The combined states of horror, revulsion and sexual desire sit where pop-culture possession dwells. While religious authentic possession dwells at the crossroads of religion, performance, gender performance, and surrender, pop-culture possession is located at the intersection of commercial profit, sexual deviance, and racialized stereotype.

The video game, *Risen 2*, is a textbook example of the traditional styles of pop-culture possession. In the game, a faceless *everyman*¹⁵⁹ pirate encounters a miscellaneous tropical island, filled with Black inhabitants that practice a *voodoo-esque* faith. They are dressed in what could be considered primitive clothing of loincloths, bone necklaces, and animal skins, body paint, etc. The everyman pirate has the option to either side with the larger colonial power¹⁶⁰ or to side with the “savages”. If the player sides with the larger, colonial power, he of course defeats them with his superior fire power, and aids the colonizers in taking over the island. If he chooses to side with the *Shaganumbi*¹⁶¹, he is taught “Voodoo” by Chani, a “strong minded voodoo witch”¹⁶² and daughter of the chief. He quickly masters the powers of the in-game religion, creates a voodoo doll to possess another pirate, and uses the powers he obtains to defeat the colonizers.

The nameless hero’s mastery of Black religious powers follows a traditional arc. It combines the historic fear of Black gods controlling white bodies with

¹⁵⁹ Muscular, white male

¹⁶⁰ in the case of the game they serve as either the French or the Spanish

¹⁶¹ The in-game tribe

¹⁶² <http://www.risen2.com/characters/chani/>

misrepresentations of the faith. The nameless hero gets permission from Chani to learn “Voodoo” and then easily defeats the religious warrior/guardian to gain access to the Shaganumbi’s ancestors. Somehow, the ancestor, who is never mentioned in the game again, teaches the player “Voodoo”. From that point on, the player can use spells to control “lesser” characters such as monkeys, and bodies more marginal than his own.

A pivotal marker of traditional possession takes place when the nameless hero approaches another pirate named Jim, and takes his hair to make a doll. The nameless character is able to convince Jim to willingly relinquish up some of his hair by telling him that he will make a Voodoo charm out of it to protect him from Voodoo witches. The fact that the character is using Voodoo to protect him from Voodoo is indicative of the traditionalist, pop culture narrative surrounding plastic possession. Whether or not the characters of the imaginary landscape believe that “voodoo” is real or not; it is only a dangerous system when it is being utilized by Black bodies against white bodies.

Even though the American Imaginary thinks of hoodoo and possession as a threat wielded by Black bodies, white on white plastic possession contains the greatest amount of threat towards bodies in these imaginary landscapes. The powers of traditional possession are most effective when wielded by white bodies. There is a distinct path that pop-culture possession must undertake in order for it to become effective. First, in the traditional format, there has to exist marginalized Black bodies, positioned on the outskirts of society; and they must have mastered practiced the craft of making *voodoo dolls*. Critical in this narrative is the idea that

even though these marginalized people in these imagined, colonial landscapes have the power to control the colonial bodies and system around them, they are unwilling or unable to use that power against their colonial oppressors. Their power is inactive until a white body from outside their community comes in, is taught, and quickly masters it. Only then, once it is in the possession of white bodies, does traditional plastic possession become active. Also telling, is that in these imagined landscapes, the person who teaches the white body how to engage in possession is always punished harshly, often with rape¹⁶³, exile¹⁶⁴, or death¹⁶⁵.

The second most prevalent form of plastic possession is horror possession; it is a representation that directly speaks to the American Imagination's investment in the narrative that Black bodies are evil and destructive to civilization. In this construct, a white body is possessed or cursed by a Black practitioner, who is destructive and on the outskirts of the community. The possession almost always includes the use of potions or herbs that the white, possessed body has no knowledge of. The practitioner also is presented as a racialized body outside of the franchise of the imagined landscape. They often speak with a "Black" accent, dress in *foreign clothes* and have few ties to the community. The means of presentation of the bodies of the practitioners and the means they use to possess speak directly to historic narratives of slavery era *witch doctors* and conjurers. Historically, "in part because they provoked fear of poisoning and slave revolts, African diaspora religions were and still are deemed dangerous and barbaric, a result of a racist

¹⁶³ *Ritual*

¹⁶⁴ *Risen 2*

¹⁶⁵ *Venom*

ideology inherent in a European discourse of enlightenment that associates Blackness with evil.”¹⁶⁶

In this form of plastic possession, the body of an unwilling or unaware victim is overtaken and possessed by an “evil” being. There are mentions of religion, but only deviated pieces that have no attachment to the larger faith. In this form, which is evident in films like *Ritual*, the *Child’s Play* (1998) series, *Venom* and *London Voodoo* (2008), the body possessed is a white body that inadvertently encounters a “voodoo” relic, a necklace that has a tenuous attachment to hoodoo. For example, in the *Child’s Play* series, Charles Lee Ray/ Chucky is supposedly a hoodoo practitioner, and invokes the loa Damballah before he forces his soul into the body of a doll. In *Venom*, there is a vèvè of the Guedé on the box with possessed snakes. In *London Voodoo*, the housewife discovers a voodoo grave in her basement. In the majority of these cases, Black bodies are far removed from the actual artifact, and in cases. The imagined landscapes utilize just enough real words and markers where the audience can feel validated that they have witnessed something authentic. In this form of pop-culture possession, the body is nothing more than a thing to be filed and controlled by evil, outside entities. The form presented in *Child’s Play* is indicative of this kind of plastic possession. The body of the horse is basically an empty vessel that is waiting to be filled by a spirit. The agency of that original vessel is not a factor and both their will and bodies become completely disposable.

The entity in plastic possession is always evil and must be exorcized by the same, seemingly evil “voodoo” that gave life to it. As a point of intersection with

¹⁶⁶ Marouan, 9

traditional pop-culture possession, the Black bodies that are loosely associated with this evil are powerless to stop it, or, to utilize it to protect themselves. In the case of *Venom*, both Black bodies using the “magic” die horribly. It is always the task of white bodies to master the evil, possessed body and defeat it.

In this form of possession, the perceptions in which ever imaginary landscape moves very quickly from disbelief to mastery. The white bodies who have only had marginal contact with Black practitioners who supposedly were directly connected to the evil magic, quickly have the ability to completely understand the magic system at work and manipulate the possessed body, or destroy it all together. While the above examples of plastic possession are situated within the imagined landscapes of film, it very much carries over into the real world. The staged possession that take place in New Orleans tours functions as this kind of quasi-religious spectacle. *Voodoo Doughnuts* also engages in this form of plastic possession. They claim that the donuts they serve will transform and possess the consumer into something else. In the case of New Orleans possession tours, there is a dual layer of possession filling.

With a minor amount of religious language thrown in, the tours present the bodies of the possessed as empty vessels that re instantly filled and controlled by whatever loa is supposedly conjured up by the tour guide. The audience on the tour is also considered to be empty. They are filled with the knowledge the tour guide presents them with, and they are changed by it. They feel that they know, and have witnessed something authentic.

In addition to the above forms, there is a slightly less visible, but equally problematic representation of plastic possession. Academic plastic contains all of the above damaging constructions of hoodoo possession as traditional and horror possession, but present them through academic texts. Two of the most prominent examples are Rod Davis' *American Vodou* and Wade Davis' *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Rod Davis' work presents hoodoo and possession in the same stereotypical constructs that render the loa as dead or invisible¹⁶⁷, the places of worship and bodies of practitioners as caricatures¹⁶⁸, the possession as entertainment. Academic plastic is the process of incorporating misrepresentations of Black religion into "the material networks of European knowledge production."¹⁶⁹ This is very much the case of Wade Davis as well. From his academic project, the Wes Craven produced *Serpent and the Rainbow* was born. Academic plastic projects are the factories that churn out images for other aspects of plastic possession to gleam onto. It is these pseudo academic sites that give legitimacy to the traditional and horror representations.

Performing the Act

Plastic possession is a performance. Where religious possession is a series of interactions between the loa, practitioner, and religious community, plastic possession it is a series of actions that demand spectators, and are always enacted for entertainment purposes. In terms of a religious possession, it is a "real" act; the

¹⁶⁷ "Voudou doesn't give people the shivers because it celebrates the dead- what religions doesn't? The shivers come from a deeper chill, a very bad memory; once upon a time, in America, an entire pantheon of gods was murdered." xii

¹⁶⁸ "The interior was dusty and dark, as was Solano himself...." (19) and "Solano opened it, admitting an older, heavyset Black woman in a blue flower print dress." 19

¹⁶⁹ Sheller 17

term real here being used both in the terms of authenticity, and in the terms of intent. In order for a religious possession to take place, there are several, specific actions that must unfold. Practitioners and worshipers must gather, the music of drums must fill the air, bodies must move, vèvès must be drawn, and Ellegua must be invoked, and the loa must be willing to come down and open the doors for the other loa. A religious possession is not an event that can easily come into being. When the loa decides to engage in communion with the practitioners, the results of that interaction are not always clearly defined and easily readable. Multiple loa may enter a single horse, and offer multiple messages to different practitioners. The body of the practitioner being ridden does not have control over their form while it is being ridden by the loa, and leaves the encounter physically drained, and unaware of what took place during the possession. While the act of religious possession is not always clearly readable or accessible to an audience, it is a sincere act. In *The Performance Studies Reader*, Erving Goffman deconstructs the language surrounding performance sincerity. He notes that viewers reserve

the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. It should be understood that the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from this masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously.¹⁷⁰

A religious possession is an act that the practitioner, the audience, and the loa are extremely invested in. Plastic possession has no such investment in sincerity. Both the actor and the audience are aware that the plastic act is being done solely for the purpose of their entertainment.

¹⁷⁰ 59

Plastic possession, on the other hand, is a specifically staged, commercial act. The American Imaginary has a great deal of investment in presenting the act as fake, and consumable. The plasticization of faiths and embodiments practiced by People of Colour is not isolated specifically to hoodoo. Deborah Wong discusses the problem of cultural misrepresentation in her book *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. She writes, “the risk of reinscription, appropriation, or orientalist misreading is ever present in Asian American performance; the possibility of empowerment stands side by side with the susceptible audience that consumes with the greedy expectation of orientalist pleasure and is inevitably gratified.”¹⁷¹ In the case of plastic possession, the audience demands static representations of the act that mimic historic and cultural stereotypes narratives. They expect traditional and horror forms of plastic possession, and are gratified when they receive them. There is no amount of sincerity behind the act; the bodies enacting it are actors, performing in movies or events, or moved by thumbs on video game controllers for the specific purpose of entertainment. But behind these obvious performances is the audience’s desire to be taken in by them. American audiences are used to viewing the act of possession with a combination of cynicism and belief. The cynicism is in place especially because plastic possession is most readily consumed through movies and television, the audience is obviously aware that they are watching a theatrical performance. The larger pop-culture discourse, although it knows it is viewing a performance, takes the representations of plastic possession at face value. Because the images are so deeply and historically engrained in the collective

¹⁷¹ Wong. Kindle Location 224-53

national discourse, fictional narratives are taken for truth. While past audiences had the stories of zombies, bloody possession, and witch doctors written by Marines from the 1915 invasion and newspaper articles linking possession to slave revolts, contemporary audiences have their assumptions reinscribed by Google and pop culture. To gratify and reinforce the audience's assurances that the plastic possessions they are witnessing are based on the authentic article, religious symbols and embodiments, like that of Baron Samedi, are folded into the plastic narrative.

Baron Samedi Action Figures: Plastic Possession and the Loa



Figure 1: Papa Shango¹⁷²



Figure 2: Baron Samedi

One of the more troubling aspects of academic plastic possession is that there are elements of real, religious representation embedded in the newly constructed narrative. When the American Imaginary needs to conjure up a character to enact

¹⁷² Tinjack

“evil hoodoo magic” against a hero, and to represent evil and death, there is a specific character type they have in mind. In religious hoodoo, Baron Samedi is one of the Guedeh, the loa who are deeply associated with death, judgment, and the space between dying and what comes after¹⁷³. The Guedeh in general, including Baron Samedi, are represented wearing funeral finery, including Black top hats, jackets with tails, and carrying canes. They wear glasses with one dark lens, one clear lens to represent the two worlds they see into. They are loa associated with excess of both sexual and death related nature. In religious hoodoo, the Guedeh are neither evil nor violent. Their role is one that is important, honored and respected by the living and the loa. The American Imagination does not share this amount of respect.

Baron Samedi is frequently and perpetually misrepresented across mediums as a dealer of Plastic Possession. One of the most famous plastic incarnations of the loa is in the 1973 James Bond film, *Live and Let Die*. Played by Geoffrey Holder, Baron Samedi is a violent, suggestive, and dangerous man, who dresses in a white top hat and open white jacket. Interestingly, the first scene with this representation of the loa speaks directly to the plasticization process that the American Imagination has forced the loa into. When the Bond Baron Samedi appears, it is on a stage surrounded by tourists sipping drinks and listening to an “ethnic” band play. He is announced by a bandleader, who yells into his microphone that the Bond Baron is “the man who cannot die, but for our purposes, is just a performer in a musical

¹⁷³ This description of the Guedeh is paraphrased from *Vèvè*, pg. 89.

extravaganza.¹⁷⁴ While the religious loa is a powerful and respected figure, the Bond Baron is evil, violent, and explicitly a performer. He performs dancing and singing for tourists. He performs the role of a simpering flute player, sitting in a cemetery for James Bond. He performs as a tarot reader and “Voodoo Master” for Mr. Big. Instead of doing religious work as a loa, the Bond Baron uses the American Imagination’s conception of plastic possession as an evil act full of tarot cards, violence, and Black male performance.

Several replicas have emerged from the Bond Baron caricature. The 2009 Disney movie, *The Princess and the Frog*, has a villain named Dr. Facilier that is a similar recreation. The character bears the loa’s characteristic top hat and tails, and is frequently situated in cemeteries. He is also presented as evil¹⁷⁵, practices damaging hoodoo, and has evil, dancing voodoo dolls all around him. He too is a devious con man, who cruelly tricks Prince Naveen, steals his blood, threatens to kill him, and murders one of the other characters. Facilier’s *Voodoo Emporium* shop functions as a shrine to plastic possession and hoodoo; it is full of shrunken heads, voodoo dolls, religious vèvès used without context as decoration, and tarot cards.

Dr. Facilier and Bond’s Baron are not the only plastic representations of Baron Samedi that engage in plastic possession. Sam B, from the game *Dead Island*¹⁷⁶ is another manifestation. These embodiments are not strictly regulated to movies and television; they also exist in the world of professional sports. In 1992, the World

¹⁷⁴ *Live and Let Die* 1973

¹⁷⁵ In his first song, “*Friends on the Other Side*”, he asks Naveen and Franklin to shake his hands to seal an evil deal. He sings, “Won’t you shake a poor sinner’s hand?”, positioning himself as a sinner and degraded in the American Imaginary’s binary construction of sinners and saints. This also positions Naveen as his moral and cultural superior, implying that Naveen would have to lower himself to shake the hand of his degraded body. *The Princess and the Frog*. 2009.

¹⁷⁶ He bears the same top hat, long jacket, and association with death

Wrestling Federation had a wrestler named Papa Shango¹⁷⁷. He too donned skull face paint, a Black top hat, and carried a cane with a skull attached. Papa Shango was famous for putting “hoodoo hexes” on his opponents, that would cause them to double over in pain without being physically touched, or otherwise be controlled by him. His most famous plastic possession hex was in 1992, where he put a curse on the Ultimate Warrior. His curse caused the Ultimate Warrior to both collapse in pain, and have some sort of “goo” pour from his face. He was able to enact other curses on other wrestlers, including setting some jobber’s¹⁷⁸ feet on fire.¹⁷⁹ Although his stint with the WWE was a short one¹⁸⁰ each of his ring appearances included the staged possession of his opponent or an announcer. The WWE¹⁸¹ indulged in the image of hoodoo as evil; “tribal” drumming and smoke often accompanied Shango’s entrances to the ring. He would rock back and forth during interviews, often warning opponents, “you have entered the dark world of Papa Shango!¹⁸²”, all the while shaking his skull cane. The fans responded to his performance predictably, yelling that voodoo was evil, drawing signs with Papa Shango Voodoo dolls, and waving bones in the air during his performances. Papa Shango’s brief appearance on the WWE rosters carried plastic possession from the television to the wrestling ring, and back.

¹⁷⁷ Shango is the name of another loa, associated with warfare and thunder.

¹⁷⁸ In Pro Wrestling slang, a “jobber” is a wrestler who does not have a set character persona or story. It is usually a local wrestler trying to break into the Pro Wrestling circuit; they are placed in warm up matches against persona wrestlers, slated to lose the match, but can eventually use this type of performance as a means to enter the pro circuit.

¹⁷⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrQnoplcmz0>

¹⁸⁰ 1992-1993. <http://www.wwe.com/superstars/papashango>

¹⁸¹ The World Wrestling Federation is now known as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) after they lost a lawsuit with the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF).

¹⁸² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrQnoplcmz0>

These misrepresentations of Baron Samedi are connected to all of the stock images of evil hoodoo that the American Imaginary can dredge up. They exist across cultural boundaries, appearing in movies, television shows, commercials, professional wrestling, and video games¹⁸³. Regardless of which specific character is in play, his face is painted often as a skull mask, he is surrounded by snakes, knives, and voodoo dolls. He is almost always placed in a cemetery. He is presented as dancing, devious, dangerous and violent; his is the literal embodiment of racialized magic and deviant evil, and set up as a body that must be defeated/destroyed by a moral hero.

Plastic Possession at Play: *The Skeleton Key*

While plastic possession manifests itself in several sites, one of the most compelling is the 2005 movie, *The Skeleton Key*. I chose to closely examine *The Skeleton Key* for several reasons. The first is that the film was the most widely distributed and highest grossing film about hoodoo before the *Princess and the Frog*'s 2009 release. *The Skeleton Key* grossed \$47,806,295, nationally, and was internationally well received. The film also explicitly makes a distinction between hoodoo and Voodoo in the dialogue, and is firmly situated in a geographic landscape of New Orleans that is readily associated with hoodoo in the cultural discourse. In this movie, plastic possession can be read as subversive, a narrative about Black bodies as dangerous, and a punishment for white intrusion. In this singular space, plastic possession is presented as pleasurable in a way that allows the American Imaginary to consume it, and horrific in a way that warns them against intruding too

¹⁸³ Dr. Facilier's character is a villain in the game *The Princess and the Frog* (2012) and Baron Samedi appears in the 1997 *007 Goldeneye* game. Facilier is also present in several Disney World attractions.

deep into racialized spaces. The movie serves as an interesting case study, as it embodies all of the plastic representations of possession.

The Skeleton Key combines racialized fears of Black deviance, white victimization, and evil magic. Caroline, the hospice worker who is perpetually invading Black spaces and asserting her white privilege within them, eventually has her body stolen by Violet/ Mama Cecil. Before the body theft, the movie features a lynching, magical negro helpers who direct her to and teach her various hoodoo practices, and various forms of Black magic at first. I have never been largely concerned with Caroline as a character: she is one of the bodies that initially spurred the creation of the *white witch* chapter. She is a white identified body that invades Black space, uses Black bodies as props and sidekicks to attempt to quickly master hoodoo, and engages in acts of physical and hoodoo based violence against Black bodies. The potential for subversion did not rest within her; rather it sat in the body of Violet/ Mama Cecil. At the end of the movie, it is revealed that the form of hoodoo Cecil/Violet practices is a viable one that has real and measurable effects on the outside world. It is also revealed that instead of being an elderly white lady, Violet's body is actually inhabited by the consciousness of Mama Cecil. Through both wit and the use of hoodoo practice, Cecil and Justify are able to escape servitude, a lynching, poverty, and even death. The movie ends with Justify and Cecil inhabiting new bodies, thus securing for themselves at least another generation of life and financial security.

In *The Skeleton Key*,¹⁸⁴ the Black bodies that practice whatever representation of the faith the movie conjures up are rewarded for their religious/magical proclivities, rather than punished. Where in most films that represent plastic forms of possession, the Black women who practice are ever met with rape or murder. Both Cecil and Justify manage at the end to live, and obtain their overarching goal of stealing the bodies of Caroline and Luke. Cecil, in Violet's body, has to suffer being pushed down stairs, beaten, and poisoned by Caroline, but she is ultimately successful in her aims. This level of success could lend the movie to a subversive reading. The movie presents its manifestation of hoodoo as something that is not easily mastered by white bodies, is a practice that is potent and viable in the imagined landscape, and is something that enables Black bodies to escape violent and oppressive circumstances.

In addition to being subversive, the movie also offers up a narrative that Black bodies that engage in plastic possession are inherently dangerous to the larger American culture. As discussed above, Black bodies that engage in hoodoo against white bodies are punished by death or exile. This is and is not the case in *The Skeleton Key*. Despite Mama Cecil and Papa Justify getting to live in the end, the movie in no way changes the representation of hoodoo or plastic possession. The same stereotypical images are applied to the movie. First, the rites of possession are viewed as something so simplistic, that children can master it. The image above is the children of the bankers drawing what the movie uses in place of a vèvè, and engaging in the steps needed for possession to take place. The children are

¹⁸⁴ like *Ritual*, or *Venom*. These films are explored at various points in the dissertation.

obviously successful in performing the possession ritual, as their bodies are then taken over by Cecil and Justify.

The movie also views hoodoo and hoodoo possession as something that is deviant, evil, and punishable by violence. When the bankers catch Justify and Cecil teaching the children to “conjure up hoodoo”, they lynch them. The movie explicitly shows the lynching: Justify and Cecil are dragged downstairs, beaten, spit on, kicked, hung, and then lit on fire. The movie instantly turns away from this scene of violence against Black bodies, immediately focusing again on Caroline. It is not even mentioned later in the movie as a justification for them utilizing hoodoo against the bankers or the larger, community.

Apart from the lived in bodies of Justify and Cecil, Violet is also punished with violence for practicing hoodoo. Caroline feels that Violet’s practice of hoodoo is enough to warrant poisoning her. Caroline later pushes her down some stairs, and attempts to kill her. In addition to enacting violence against the bodies that practice plastic possession and hoodoo, the movie serves as a modern narrative warning against passing. In *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature*, Martin examines the representations of conjure women. She says, “Other Black female supernatural specialists were presented in a gamut of gender stereotypes in fiction and folklore, from the sinister, decrepit hag to the dangerous, bewitching mulatta. African American conjure¹⁸⁵ women inherited a legacy of powerful spiritual roles

¹⁸⁵ A conjure woman is traditionally depicted as an elderly woman on the outskirts of a community that is skilled in the practice of hoodoo, Voodoo, and forms of indigenous medicine, folk healing, and/or midwifery. In these women, the perceived lines between medicine and magic are blurred.

that had been instituted by their foremothers.¹⁸⁶ Cecil is represented both as the decrepit hag that possesses the body of the youth, and as the bewitching mulatta, when Cecil over takes the body of Caroline.

One of the things that the *Skeleton Key* dredges up is the rhetoric of dangerous Black bodies passing for white. Passing stories are not considered relevant in the contemporary American imagination; those stories are replaced with narratives detailing the danger of easily identifiable, racialized bodies. Regardless of the representation that these passing bodies take, the historical narrative of fear and danger is embedded in current representations. The movie presents Violet as a deviant character throughout the movie, and justifies Caroline's behavior of disobeying her house rules, disrespecting her wishes, and poisoning her. Only towards the end of the movie does the viewer learn the Violet is really Cecil: a Black consciousness that was literally enslaved to the dominant white culture, masquerading itself inside a white body. Even though Caroline does not overtly know this, she still, perpetually feels as if she has power over Violet, and access to her house, her body, and the body of her husband.

At the end of the movie, Caroline's fears are justified when Cecil uses hoodoo to permanently possess her body. The possession and body theft at the end makes the movie a horror movie not only because Cecil and Justify steal white youth and beauty from their victims, but that they are able to hide in white bodies, and continue their appropriation of bodies generation after generation. Justify's line in the movie, "You know the Black ones never stay" alludes to their perpetual theft of

¹⁸⁶ 64

white bodies. The horror in the movie comes for the American imaginary comes not from the overt lynching of Black bodies, but their revenge theft of white privilege using Black practices.

The movie presents possession as a Black space. In order for the children to be initially possessed, they had to go into the attic room/ the space specifically designated for Justify and Cecil. The same goes for Caroline, when she intrudes into the gas station/house, the house of the blind woman who tells her about Justify's *Conjure of Sacrifice* record, the Deveraux household, the hoodoo shop disguised as a Laundromat, the attic room, the space with the mirrors, and finally the attic room again. All of these spaces are both equally tied to the movie's presentation of hoodoo, possession, and Black bodies. In many ways, the movie can be read as an injunction against white bodies traveling into these spaces. Caroline's fate is sealed when she goes into the hoodoo shop, and attempts to master a spell in order to overpower Violet's conjure work. Her insistence on mastering hoodoo, and using Black practices is what marked her body as one open to Black possession. *The Skeleton Key* makes plastic possession look easy to master. It is posited in the movie as something that took Justify and Cecil a great deal of time to master, and indeed, something that they could not control before they were lynched. It is also presented as something that white bodies can quickly pick up and master. The children in the attic were presented as skillful in their drawing of the cartoonish false vèvè. Caroline's one time entry into a hoodoo shop lends her a mastery that not only allows Ben to speak against Violet, but successfully "fix" her own door. Caroline is even successful in drawing the *Spell of Protection* symbol on the floor that keeps her

inside of it. In each of these cases, white bodies can quickly master hoodoo and possession with almost equal power of Black bodies that had been practicing it long term.

Impacts of Plastic Possession

Similar to hoodoo, there are far reaching implications regarding representations of plastic possession. Plastic representations of this religious act have long been used by the larger American imaginary to talk about Black unfitness for the franchise. This idea was present in Pat Robertson's comments regarding Voodoo in Haiti¹⁸⁷, and the attitudes of American tourists.¹⁸⁸ Commodified religious acts that are largely associated with bodies of Color are a cultural battleground. Negative representations of possession were born from fear of slave revolts and Black bodies acquiring any form of power. While fears of Black bodies obtaining power are no longer loudly spoken of in the public discourse, the racist sentiment behind these narratives is carried into the current day. The images surrounding plastic possession in the current moment position the act as dangerous, demonic, and entirely divorced from religion. As practitioners are not able to assert their space within this dialogue, there is no chance for them to engage in the critical gaze.¹⁸⁹ This inability to look back and speak against the misrepresentations of the one of the defining markers of the faith has repercussions that spin out into all other aspects of hoodoo.

¹⁸⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/pat-robertsons-haiti-comments-spark-controversy-discussion-country/story?id=9563274>

¹⁸⁸ Especially the tourist I encountered arguing with Raven in *Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo*

¹⁸⁹ "There is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations- one leans to look a certain way in order to resist." 116 hooks. *Black Looks*

Joining the Bodies: Bridging Plastic Possession and Eating the Other

In a commercial for the 2013 Super Bowl¹⁹⁰, played in New Orleans, Bud Light made a series of Voodoo themed commercials featuring Stevie Wonder as Baron Samedi. In the first commercial, a white, early twenties, male football fan is seen walking into the stadium. He collects grass from football field, a dirty sock from the laundry hamper, and a few strands of blonde hair from a hairbrush. He then walks through a graveyard where a party is being held, again, populated by white bodies. In this party, he picks up two Bud Lights that are conspicuously placed on ice. The nameless focus of the commercial then walks past a New Orleans style funeral¹⁹¹, and into a bar. After giving the bartender one of the two beers, (saving the other for himself), he is given a pass to go to the back room, where Wonder/Baron Samedi is sitting. The nameless fan then throws the items stolen from the stadium onto the floor in front of the representation of the Baron. No offering, no words, no worship. The fan did not even offer the Baron a beer. In return, the fan is given a voodoo doll, presumably meant to effect one of the members on the team the fan opposes). The next morning, the fan is in the stands, sitting next to a fan for the opposing team, with a similar doll. The commercial closes out with the Bud Light logo and the phrase “It’s only weird if it doesn’t work.”

This commercial serves as a site of intersection between plastic possession and food/hoodoo as eating the other. It is also a site that both associates Black bodies with death and “Black magic” and renders hoodoo as a service, provided by

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0fDB-I570w>

¹⁹¹ this is the only other instance of Black bodies present in this commercial

Black bodies, for consumption by white ones. The familiar troupes of plastic possession are present in this commercial. In this particular instance, hoodoo is being wielded as a weapon by white bodies; but it one that can only be enacted by Black practitioners, or loa in this specific case. The white body has no qualms in invading Black religious spaces, as evidenced both by having a party in a cemetery where a funeral procession full of Black people play outside of the gates, and by a bartender serving as a gatekeeper to Baron Samedi's dwelling place.

Baron Samedi is never named in the commercial as a loa, and could just be viewed by visual consumers as a Black man with some ties to hoodoo and "magic". He is not shown making the "Voodoo doll" but is directly tied to it. Without proper representation¹⁹², respect, offering, or the drawing of a vèvè, he is intrinsically ordered by the fan to produce for him a doll to "hex" his enemies. The doll is supposedly made up of the stereotypical personal elements, such as hair and clothing, that are represented in countless scenes of plastic possession. The doll is fully expected to do harm to the body it was created for. Along the lines of plastic possession, the commercial situates hoodoo as fake, easily accessible, and consumable. The narrative of the voodoo doll, and the effects of the chosen body are is one that is engrained in the American imaginary. The commentary, "It's only weird if it doesn't work" places hoodoo within the realm of the "fake" and represents it¹⁹³ as something that is easily accessed, purchased, and consumed.

¹⁹² Baron Samedi does have "smoked" glasses, but only one lens should be darkened, and he does wear fancy regalia, but it should be a Black top hat and tails instead of white

¹⁹³ the plastic possession enacted by the Voodoo doll

The representation of Baron Samedi in this commercial is another aspect of plastic possession, one that has marginal ties to the faith. As a practitioner, I instantly recognized the character that Stevie Wonder was representing, despite the incorrect “costuming”. For a non-practitioner, they are visually treated to the image of a Black man, in all white who is capable of making a Voodoo doll. When Wonder as Samedi is first introduced on the screen, the open chords of his song *Superstitious* play in the background. The lyric that serves as an epigraph for this chapter alludes to the fact that the two fans that *purchased* suffer both embarrassment and frustration for dabbling in perceived hoodoo practices that they don’t understand. I use the term purchased loosely, as nothing was given to the loa in question. The fan did not buy the bodily relics he stole from the stadium, he did not buy the beers he gave to the bartender or drank himself, and he did not offer anything to the loa in exchange for this *doll* Bud Light makes the connection of Wonder to hoodoo and the song *Superstition* to utilize him as a “magical negro character” that I will more fully explore in the fourth chapter.

The Super Bowl commercial is not just a site about plastic possession. Bud Light’s exploitation of hoodoo to sell beers also directly speaks to linking Black faith to food and consumable objects. Through out the arc of the commercial, Black bodies are tied to hoodoo and production, while white bodies are attached to consumption. The fan consumes and appropriates body artifacts, beer, and religious effort, all without paying or giving respect to these spaces. In religious practice, a body would not causally walk up to the loa, toss some pilfered laundry on the ground, and demand a doll. Instead of interacting with the divine, as an encounter

with the Baron would be, instead, the commercial presents the viewer with a single sided consumption arc, where Black bodies, loa or no, produce things to be consumed. At no point is hoodoo able to profit from any form of consumption; the loa does not even get a beer for his efforts, while the bartender is treated to one for simply nodding his head in the direction of a door.

Bud Light's foray into using hoodoo for advertising is an interesting one. While it can be viewed merely as an opportunistic advertising ploy based on the location of the super bowl, there are much larger implications. As will be explored in the next chapter, rum, over beer, is the alcohol of choice associated with hoodoo. The beer still is not associated with hoodoo, even though they do make several, hoodoo/Voodoo themed commercials, because at no point in the commercial is it ever consumed by a body related to hoodoo. The fan only gets to drink before he encounters the loa, and he does not have a drink in the stands when he is holding the doll. It is as if proximity to the faith taints the product.

It is also telling that Bud Light forwent their usual "drink responsibly" tag to close their commercial. Instead, it closes with Wonder/ Baron Samedi's laughing face, and the words, "here we go". The connection of hoodoo, Black bodies, and beer, allows a space for white, consumptive bodies to indulge in wild consumption. With their initial contact with hoodoo and the representation loa, the consumers no longer have to, or can, be *responsible*. Instead, they are to give in to drink, wild abandon, and are free to engage, and consume, in several forms, Black faith.

Faith You Can Taste: Edible Hoodoo

“Ah, Brown Sugar, how come you taste so good--/(a-ha) Brown Sugar, just like a Black girl should.”¹⁹⁴

When I first encountered *Voodoo Doughnuts*, I was more confused than surprised. A friend, aware of my research, overnighted me a giant pink box that was emblazoned with vèvés, snakes, and approximations of Baron Samedi¹⁹⁵. Curious and willing to ignore the overtly sexual pun that promised that “good things come in pink boxes”¹⁹⁶, I lifted the lid to discover 6 body-shaped doughnuts decorated in homage Blackface minstrelsy, each complete with a pretzel “stake” shoved in its chest and filled with red jelly “blood”. I also got half a dozen, 7-inch long, phallus-shaped, chocolate covered, cream-filled pastries. After referencing the *Voodoo Doughnut* website, I learned that I had received both the *Voodoo Doll* and *Cock-n-Ball* doughnuts, which were infused with “voodoo magic.”¹⁹⁷ This charming package was sent to me long before I began writing my dissertation, but the shop, the box, and the contents inside of it spurred my larger research interest in hoodoo-based artifacts and consumption culture. There is a large commercial market for hoodoo-themed snacking, drinking, and utensils; the cultural desire for these objects takes the commercial consumption of a religion to a new level.

¹⁹⁴ Rolling Stones. Brown Sugar.

http://www.lyricsfreak.com/r/rolling+stones/brown+sugar_20117857.html

¹⁹⁵ Baron Samedi is one of the Guede, the loa who are deeply associated with death, judgment, and the space between dying and what comes after

¹⁹⁶ voodoodoughnuts.com

¹⁹⁷ ibid

When I began conducting research for this chapter, I of course reached out to *Voodoo Doughnuts* to request interviews and resources about their shops and products. While I was unable to interview them, a member of their team offered a nuanced suggestion as to how to proceed: “its [sic] just doughnuts. Get over it.”¹⁹⁸ The producers of these cultural artifacts felt I was taking their products too seriously, and that they were not enacting any form of rhetorical or physical violence against the faith or the imagined bodies of its practitioners and Black bodies. The Blackface on the doughnuts does not solely effect practitioners, but damages African American and diasporic bodies that are affected by the narratives of racism and violence bound up in Blackface. I argue that this is an ideological approach utilized by the vast majority of edible hoodoo producers and marketers: they claim they are merely selling a product and it’s all just in good fun. After all, in the larger American Imaginary, they are not appropriating a religion, as hoodoo is a pop cultural practice to be utilized for entertainment and profit. That discursive practice renders it perfectly acceptable to fill a phallus pastry with “authentic voodoo magic”¹⁹⁹ in addition to sweetened cream. It ostensibly removes the narratives of violence and sadism from stabbing minstrel/voodoo-doll doughnuts with pretzel stakes and watching the red jelly blood ooze out, or from biting into a disembodied Black phallus.

The consumptive implication of hoodoo in food or food related artifacts go beyond doughnuts. This practice displaces the faith from its religious roots and

¹⁹⁸ Personal correspondence. For legal reasons, I will not be quoting from the correspondence at length in the dissertation.

¹⁹⁹ Voodoodoughnuts.com

allows it to be utilized as a spice to flavour otherwise nondescript and uninteresting products. In creating, consuming, and appropriating images, bodies, and words associated with the faith²⁰⁰ the American Imaginary engages in a cyclic pattern of desiring, creating, consuming artifacts around the faith that are perpetually present but never satisfying. The constant desire for faith-based cultural artifacts is not based in religious representations; rather it is firmly situated in stereotypical and caricaturized narratives of bikinied voodoo queens, pin pricked dolls, and “exotic” sensations that straddle the borders between pleasure and pain. In this ever present system of literal consumption and perpetual desire, hoodoo and edible objects are thrust together in ways that reinforce the authenticity narrative about the simulacra constructed around the faith, and engage in discourses of violence and marginalization that effect both practitioners and lived Black bodies. In lived Black bodies, I am referring to actual, tangible, and living Black and African American bodies in the North American landscape. These bodies may or may not intersect with the faith in the form of practitioners.

This chapter explores the edible artifacts built around hoodoo. The larger American Imaginary perpetually produces items that claim association with the faith, and covers these wares in images of voodoo dolls, half naked voodoo queens, and appropriated loa. The various forms of consumption associated with edible hoodoo²⁰¹ rely heavily on similar associations and narratives: those based in hyper-sexualized, violent, and irreligious discourses about the faith. These artifacts straddle the line of taste and representation; they claim that hoodoo somehow has a

²⁰⁰ these include voodoo dolls, Marie Laveau, Baron Samedi, or even the words “Voodoo” or “hoodoo”

²⁰¹ (visual, edible, tactile)

taste, and that their products are flavoured and infused with it. By insisting on this cultural and culinary bond, edible artifacts use signifiers of the faith to present themselves as foreign and exciting, while at the same time being palatable, familiar, and accessible. To embody this conflicting position, the faith is made into a malleable simulacrum that possesses a thousand-fold different tastes and can be indiscriminately plastered onto any consumable object.

hoodoo has the potential to taste like a vast variety of things. It is used to add *oomph* to drinks, a kick to hot sauces and pastas, and a sugary boost to doughnuts. Its flavoring properties go beyond food, and are used to add “spice”²⁰² to cutting boards, tea bags, and knife blocks. The sheer volume of these cultural artifacts speaks to the persistence of the American Imaginary’s desire to consume images of the faith through every medium possible.

There is a large existing body of work exploring the relationship between food and popular culture. In *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*²⁰³, Fabio Parasecoli notes, “food influences our lives as a relevant marker of power, cultural capital, class, gender, ethnic, and religious identities.”²⁰⁴ He explores multiple layers of popular culture, and uses food as the means to more fully examine the larger national narratives. He covers a wide range of pop culture discourses, from cannibalism and narratives of lynching to American local food culture; describing

²⁰² The reference to spice here is grounded in bell hook’s *Eating the Other*, in which she explores the ways that Blackness is appropriated by the larger white culture and used as a “spice” to make everyday and nondescript cultural manifestations somehow “exotic”.

²⁰³ Parasecoli 3

²⁰⁴ 2

food and edible items as items that connect imagined cultural landscapes with physically tangible ones.

Here food is relevant, since it deals with those crucial aspects of the human experience that hinge on the material, the physical, and the body. We all realize how fraught and complex the relationship between lived bodies and imagined realities [sic] often is: desires, fantasies, fears, and dreams coagulating around and in the body deeply influence our development as individual subjects.

Plainly stated, food is both vital and transcendental. His examination of the deconstruction of the Black body into an edible object will be extremely helpful for the Voodoo Doughnut portion of this chapter. Referencing the interaction between food and religious identities, Parasecoli examines food items that are overtly tied to mainstream religions and the ways these items move between religious artifact, and an object one is meant to eat for pleasure or sustenance. He claims that the majority of food items that become religious artifacts are transformed through performances of sacrifice, belief, or violence.²⁰⁵ hoodoo food items require a different theoretical approach than the one offered by Parasecoli; the food items tied to religion that he examines are tied to faiths that are considered “legitimate” and the representation of the food item is often controlled by adherents of that religion. Edible hoodoo artifacts are not created, distributed, or most likely consumed by practitioners, nor is the faith considered to be legitimate in the eyes of the American imaginary. As stated in the introduction, the faith is considered more a

²⁰⁵ There are larger and nuanced conversations around the idea of sacrifice, steeped in narratives of mob/religious violence and fervor. For example, in some Christian traditions, the Eucharist is not metaphoric; it is a food item transformed through prayer and belief into the literal body and blood of Christ, which practitioners then consume. The Eucharist becomes a sacred object through multiple violent acts: the crucifixion of Jesus, and the later ritual consumption of his literal body.

system of kitsch entertainment. The move to detach hoodoo from its religious roots ensures that the edible representations of the faith are not religiously accurate. Additionally, while edible hoodoo items are not transformed from food to sacred through religious fervor, they are firmly steeped in discourses of violence. Many of these objects, both edible and otherwise, encourage, and necessitate the consumer to engage in violent acts to enjoy the item.

As an edible, consumable object, faith based food items are at once salty, spicy, alcohol-soaked, pastry-based, and/or countless other manifestations. When the American Imaginary creates edible hoodoo objects, it participates in the creation and continuance of several *strange* discourses. The term *strangeness* here is used not only in reference to the multiplicity of items that hoodoo is appropriated into; the term is theoretically embedded in the work done by bell hooks in “Eating the Other” and Sarah Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters*. Both of these works provide a solid framework to examine the ways in which racialized cultures, embodiments and artifacts are rendered strange, and often violently consumed by the larger²⁰⁶ culture. Ahmed writes that “in consumer culture, the commodity object which is, at once, an image and a material thing, enables subjects to have a close encounter with a distant other (the other already recognized as ‘the stranger’)²⁰⁷. Ahmed’s positioning of commodity objects as artifacts attached to racialized and inherently exoticized bodies and cultures is integral to reading edible hoodoo

²⁰⁶ white

²⁰⁷ Ahmed 114. The quote continues, “Through consuming objects that are associated with other places and strange cultures, either in how those objects are represented or framed (As in Boots’ *Global Collection*) or in how they are proposed and travel, subjects can almost become the stranger or smell *like* the stranger

objects. Even though the faith is inherently North American, it is presented as strange, exotic, and in most cases violent and deviant. When the larger consumer culture appropriates and consumes hoodoo in a distinctly edible form, they are able to devour, encounter, and temporarily “feel like” they are part of hoodoo performance. The act of touching replaces the sense of smelling the *Other* that Ahmed describes. Through touch and consuming edible hoodoo, the consumer is still consuming familiar products, that are molded, shaped, and masqueraded as the *Other*. The consumer is encouraged to drink like Marie Laveau, and flavour their dishes with some *exotic* spice.

As edible hoodoo is constructed as *strange* and exotic, it can be utilized by in everyday culture as a spice to liven up indistinct popular culture artifacts. In “Eating the Other”²⁰⁸, bell hooks examines the way that the larger white culture appropriates and consumes Blackness. She situates culture in explicitly racialized terms, noting that the consumption of items attached to Black culture is steeped in racism and colonial discourses.²⁰⁹ In the case of edible hoodoo, the racialized lines of cultural consumption are definite. The food artifacts produced around hoodoo are not elements of Black culture; rather they are simulacra of racist narratives, constructed by the larger white culture to legitimate violence, oppression, and colonial rule over Black bodies abroad and domestic. The narratives about hoodoo being deviant, evil, and full of dolls, pins, and cannibalism are rooted both in

²⁰⁸ *Black Looks*

²⁰⁹ “While it has become ‘cool’ for white folks to hang out with Black people and express pleasure in Black culture most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism. Indeed there is often the desire to enhance one’s status in the context of ‘whiteness’ even as one appropriates Black culture.” (17)

narratives told to legitimize slavery and the US invasion of Haiti in 1915. The same narratives are reconjured up whenever Haiti is prominently featured in the cultural consciousness. This is most often the case after natural disasters. For example, in 2010 in the aftermath of a massive earthquake, Pat Robertson equated Voodoo with a “pact with the devil” and claimed that the earthquake was a result of Haitians using Voodoo to rid themselves of colonial rule.²¹⁰ The cultural artifacts that this chapter explores all exist and are utilized specifically within a colonial discourse. Items like the *Cock and Balls* doughnut, which is “infused with voodoo magic,”²¹¹ and the Blackface *voodoo doll* doughnut all represent appropriations of what the larger, American Imaginary has decided what hoodoo, and its relationship with Black bodies, looks like. It is impossible to examine edible hoodoo without a close examination of the colonial discourse that goes into making artifacts items simultaneously exotic and familiar enough to be consumable.

Food items steeped in representations of hoodoo are rhetorically curious items; they exist simultaneously within popular culture and alongside semi-religious discourses. I use the term “semi-religious” because, as was explored in the introduction, hoodoo is not presented as a religion, but rather as a mismatch of magic, kitsch, and entertainment. This rhetorical positioning is made even more complicated by the American Imaginary’s insistence that the items they create around hoodoo culture are *authentic* and accurate representations of the faith. The representations of hoodoo in the larger consumer culture separate it from mere popular culture. Because they function as the most prevalent markers of the faith

²¹⁰ (<http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/01/13/haiti.pat.robertson/>)

²¹¹ (voodoodoughnuts.com)

that the American Imaginary consumes, they can be rhetorically moved into the narrative of religious artifacts. While the ways in which the consumer culture views them as markers of the faith and wraps them in narratives of authenticity makes them artifacts, their distance from practitioners or religious practice necessitates the term *objects*. The term *cultural artifact*, rather than *religious artifact* or *popular culture object* is most helpful in describing the items in this chapter. *Cultural artifact* indicates that they exist as objects steeped in a popular culture narrative that indulges in perceived religion. I also use the term to speak to the idea of memory and persistence. An artifact is an object that persists, remains from older cultures, older times and is viewed, consumed and puzzled over by current eyes. Edible hoodoo items exist as cultural artifacts because they are steeped in historic and frequently resurrected images and discourses that have been maintained about hoodoo since slavery, and intensified after the 1915 invasion of Haiti by United States Marines. The insistence that hoodoo is naught but voodoo dolls, violence, and cannibalism have been used for colonial control over Black bodies²¹². The items also speak to the current popular culture's desire to indulge in these narratives, and make them contemporary while still preserving the historic and stereotypical discourses at play in them. For these above reasons, this chapter will utilize the term *cultural artifact* when referencing its edible objects.

While the persistent representation of hoodoo in the American Imaginary is the base for this work, it is not the only faith that participates in food culture. In terms of the artifacts that this chapter examines, the faith is not engaging in

²¹² as evidenced in the US invasion of Haiti

voluntary participation. It is not practitioners marketing or producing these edible artifacts, nor are religious images properly being utilized in the representations. The larger, popular culture²¹³ widely incorporates faiths that are considered as mainstream religions²¹⁴ into consumer culture. Fast food giants *Chick-Fil-A* and *In-and-Out Burger* overtly engage Christian, Protestant themes in their products and advertising. *Chick-Fil-A* has issued several official statements positioning their business as a Christian one, which is reflected by their being closed on Sundays, and political contributions. *In-N-Out Burger* takes a subtler, but still powerful approach to their advertising. On the inside of all of their cups, John 3:16 is printed. When customers drink from their cups, they are consuming from, in the eyes of the owners, a blessed vessel marked with the message of Christ. Removed from the fast food industry, there exist products like *Ezekiel 4:9 Bread*: a product with overt ties to the Hebrew Scriptures and Christianity.²¹⁵ There also exist products like *Manischewitz Wine* and *Hebrew National Hotdogs*. All of these items have overt religious ties, but are marketed to a national, consumptive audience within a secular marketplace. All of these cultural artifacts can be adapted, co-opted, and utilized by a larger culture, without significant thought to its religious base. It is highly improbable that people examine the inside, bottom rim of their In-N-Out cup every time they take a sip, or turn to their Bibles when using Ezekiel bread to make toast.

²¹³ The popular culture I reference is the specifically racialized form of consumer and predatory culture described by bell hooks in *Eating the Other*.

²¹⁴ Mainstream religion here references religions that are accepted as legitimate by the dominant discourse, and their religious markers are well known and widely associated with the faith in positive, and sacred ways.

²¹⁵ Technically, the product also has ties to Judaism as it is based in the Old Testament.

hoodoo's long-standing presence as a consumable good in the public eye makes it highly marketable. This contradicts the statement made by Katrina Hazzard-Donald in her work *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System*²¹⁶ where she states, "Unlike African-American music, which has been highly visible, hoodoo has not proved to be universally marketable, so we must exclude marketability and cultural appeal as the only significant factors in its longevity."²¹⁷ The reason for the contradiction of Hazzard-Donald's statement and the prevalence of hoodoo themed consumable items in the cultural marketplace is linked to the veracity of the representation. When Hazzard-Donald states that hoodoo is not marketable, she is looking for cultural representations that situate it as an actual religion that has a spiritual and cultural impact on the lives of practitioners. She is not examining the cultural artifacts and consumable objects crafted by the American consumer culture that possess only a tangential resemblance to the lived religion. There is little profit to be had in religious representation, especially in terms of crafted objects to be quickly consumed and forgotten. There is a great deal of profit, however, in misrepresentations of the faith that continue racialized and religious narratives that further marginalize the faith and the bodies associated with it.

The commercial use of cultural artifacts that appropriate hoodoo is vastly different from edible objects grounded in mainstream religions. Edible cultural artifacts erected around religions like Christianity and Judaism engage in what

²¹⁶ This work explores the way hoodoo as a religious system works in the larger American culture, tracing its historic roots up to the contemporary moment. She specifically focuses on the root work and conjure aspects of hoodoo, and presents it as a practice, rather than specifically exploring the loa, the role of possession, or other inherently religious actions.

²¹⁷ 14

Chidester call the “political economy of the sacred.”²¹⁸ He constructs the idea of this political economy by examining the ways in which sacred objects are represented and consumed in a commercial discourse. Even when these religiously aligned objects are consumed within a secular marketplace, they are still recognized as having associations with legitimate faith systems; the products they are utilizing have significance to practitioners or specific religious use. However, there is a level of distinction between active and passive recognition of the religious significance of objects that engage in the political economy of the sacred. There is a distinct difference between intentional usage, for example, utilizing Manischewitz Wine at Passover, and passive usage, like eating at *In-n-Out Burger*. Cultural artifacts like the *In-and-Out* cup are not engaged in Chidester’s political economy. For it to be actively engaged, the cultural artifact must have overt representational ties to a religion, and be recognized for its potential for sacred use.

Edible cultural artifacts appropriating hoodoo do not engage in the political economy of the sacred for multiple reasons. First, these artifacts are consumed solely for entertainment/sustenance purposes. As hoodoo is not considered to be a real faith system by the American Imaginary, there exists no religious significance to attach to the items. The ties to the faith that the objects claim are viewed simultaneously as fake yet magically real. For example, when *Voodoo Doughnuts* claims to infuse their pastries with “voodoo magic”²¹⁹, it is presented as a perfectly reasonable form of advertising and narrative that consumers can

²¹⁸ “By using the phrase ‘political economy of the sacred,’ I want to focus attention on the ways in which the sacred is produced, circulated, engaged, and consumed in popular culture.” 19

²¹⁹ voodoodoughnuts.com

participate in. Another element that separates these objects from Chidester's political economy is the discursive alliance between colonial ideas grounded in historic "evidence" regarding hoodoo's religious deviance and imaginary conceptions around the racialized bodies that practice it. To clarify: the cultural artifacts dreamed up by the larger consumer culture are purposely constructed to have highly visible ties to Black bodies and a presumably deviant religion. Artifacts from hot sauce to pastries are decorated with Black bodies to be consumed by the larger dominant culture.²²⁰

The visual markers of these hoodoo items are focused to entice the consumers to consume and disregard the faith, often in ways that are extremely sexist and violent. The bottles of *Voodoo Queen Hot Sauce* all bear the figure of a light skinned Black woman who wears a skimpy, black bandeau top, and skimpier, red bikini bottom. She holds in one hand a voodoo doll, the other a pin for jabbing, and a heart on a platter lies at her feet. The advertising on the bottle combines hypersexualized images with icons of violence and savagery that the American Imaginary has associated with the faith. Each bottle of sauce comes with its own decorative voodoo doll, encouraging the consumer to reenact the scene on the bottle. The body on the bottle functions as an interesting animated crash site. The drawing, as a static object created by an outside party, has no agency. The body is only a symbol of what the American Imaginary associates with Black women. This is the reason her body is undressed, violent, and consumable. The bottle is the crash site that beckons spectators; it exists in the middle of hypersexualized narratives

²²⁰ again, culture here is defined utilizing bell hook's highly racialized terms. The larger culture here, is white culture and it's ever present desire to consume Black bodies in multiple forms.

around Black women's bodies that describes them in one dimension, violent terms. The physical body is drawn out of proportion, improbably dressed, and surrounded by hyper violent objects. It is the combinations of racial, religious, and sexual assumptions, all of which are heightened by the attached doll, which make this bottle so enticing to consumers.

The *Voodoo Tea Bag* steps away from sexualization and grounds itself directly in violent imagery. The tea bag is body shaped and is attached to a small card that emphasizes the blackness of the attached tea. The human figure bag is sewn with red thread, and has giant red X's for eyes. There are no other facial features on the bag. While the X (dead) eyes of the tea bag are disturbing, the tea bag is utilized by lowering into boiling water by a red thread noose that is knotted tightly around its neck. The same red thread that binds the bag together is used to lynch it/make tea; this cements the association between violence against black bodies, hoodoo, and colonial consumption.

Integral to the consumption of these artifacts are acts of representational and literal violence. When a consumer looks at a bottle of *Voodoo Queen Hot Sauce*, they see the doll prime for stabbing and the heart on a platter. When they bite into a *Voodoo Doll Doughnut*, or pull out the pretzel "stake" imbedded in its heart, they are encouraged to lick up the red jelly "blood" that oozes out. In order to steep a *Voodoo Tea Bag*, you have to use the string/noose to lower it into boiling water, from its neck. These artifacts, with their attachment to presumed religious, highly racialized, and violent narratives do not exist in a vacuum. They are specifically crafted by consumer culture to indulge existing narratives surrounding the faith

while at the same time keeping afloat on the desires of a contemporary consumer culture. Colleen McDannell elucidates this phenomenon and its relationship to Christianity in her work *Material Christianity*. She notes that material culture is not static; it is constantly changing as people invent, market, gift, or dismantle it. A natural product like water, for example, is transformed into an artifact when Catholics in France bottle it and priests ship it to the devout across the United States. Christian T-shirts do not merely appear on teenager's bodies. They must be conceptualized, manufactured, advertised and sold. Changes in technology, fashion, and community composition alter the production and use of material culture.²²¹

While the artifacts that McDannell explores are situated well within Chidester's *political economy of the sacred*, her deconstruction of the fluid nature of material culture provides a helpful vantage point to deconstruct cultural artifacts based in presumptions of hoodoo. These edible objects move in concert with the changing tastes and desires of consumer culture. While acts of violence against the Black body have always been in vogue,²²² combining hoodoo and consumptive violence has experienced a renaissance. This can be attributed both to the cyclical nature of consumer culture and the recent intensity in the larger culture of overt acts of racism and violence against Black bodies.²²³ When the larger, consumer culture interacts with these edible objects that encourage consumption and violence against Black bodies and cultural representations, they are encouraged to disregard

²²¹ 3

²²² To engage in additional research regarding the entertainment value that the larger culture has taken in enacting violence against Black bodies, please see Harvey Young's *The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching*.

²²³ A specific contemporary case is Brian Cloninger's shooting of 8 year old Donald Maiden, because "he felt like it." <http://politicalblindspot.com/yeah-i-shot-that-kid-an-8-year-old-trayvon-martin-was-just-shot/>

the historic and colonial narratives that created these violent narratives and to become desensitized to violence against Black bodies in representational, or literal forms.²²⁴ In most cases, practitioners do not reproduce them; instead they are perpetuated, repurposed and consumed by the larger colonial and consumer culture. There are exceptions to this statement, of course. It is highly possible, especially in New Orleans, that practitioners are engaging in collecting commercial profits from their relationship with the faith.

Regarding the term *colonial*, I reference the definition offered by Emma Perez in *Queering the Borderlands*. Perez defines colonial culture as “the rulers versus the ruled, without forgetting that those colonized may also become like the rulers and assimilate into the colonial mindset/ The colonial mindset believes in a normative language, race, culture, gender, class and sexuality.”²²⁵ In terms of the normative, larger discourse, hoodoo is both too racialized and too seemingly exotic for it to be considered a normal representation of a religion, practice, or cultural expression. The associations with skulls, chicken bones, and evil dolls thrust it well outside of the realm of normative American expression. Consumer culture dips directly into colonial images to resurrect images of voodoo dolls and bloody body parts. The deliberate distillation of hoodoo representation into food objects contributes to various forms of consumption culture. Edible artifacts are a textbook site for the dissemination of cultural discourses around colonial control and racial deviance.

²²⁴ The idea of consumer culture being tied to racist and colonial discourses is elaborated in Mimi Sheller’s *Consuming the Caribbean*. The purpose of her text is to “lever the study of Western consumer culture back onto the tracks of slavery and tropical colonialism that sped it towards modernity, and to show how these relations of consumption continue to inform the inequalities of the Atlantic world today.” 13

²²⁵ 5

The reasoning for this is that food is necessary but access to it is culturally controlled along racial and class lines.²²⁶ The edible artifacts related to hoodoo are marketed to white, middle-class consumers²²⁷; they seek out consumers whose privileged status allows them to see past the damaging racialized and cultural discourses embedded in these food items. The rhetoric of colorblind consumerism is at play here. White consumers do not see the artifacts they consume to be part of a system of racism and white supremacy that marginalizes Black bodies and religious practices. While Black upper and middle class consumers also indulge in these artifacts, they are not the primary and projected audience.

Given that cultural artifacts dependent on the appropriation of hoodoo rely heavily on a lack of racial, class, cultural, or religious awareness, it is unsurprising that many of these objects are based in the Pacific Northwest. The production of these artifacts relies heavily on what this dissertation describes as the “Portland Problem”.²²⁸ Portland, Oregon boasts *Voodoo Doughnuts*, a shop whose signage is emblazoned with what can best be described as a *Blackface doughnut*²²⁹ and whose windows display Black phallus pastries. While objects based in New Orleans or that exist in the imagined landscape of digital storefronts rely heavily on imaginary narratives specifically about the faith,²³⁰ cultural artifacts based out of Portland actively indulge in artifact creations that are inherently racist and dismissive of the faith. The racial make-up of Portland enables the producers to market their wares

²²⁶ Food as politics, is subtle and unexpected because it is not seen as a tool of opposition but as necessary substance.” Williams-Forson, 69

²²⁷ This is especially the case in Portland, a city with a less than 2% African American population.

²²⁸ According to the 2010 census, only 6% of Portland’s population identifies as Black or African American.<http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/ipmtext.php?fl=41>

²²⁹ see voodoo doughnuts sign

²³⁰ like voodoo dolls, Marie Laveau, swamps, zombies, etc,

with little fear of cultural or religious pushback from a significant portion of their community. The extreme locality of their artifacts reduces the chance for interaction with practitioners, or racialized bodies that take offense to their products. During my research trip to Portland, I experienced a great deal of this pushback first hand; I was ordered not to take pictures, speak to, or interact with any staff, owners, or objects inside of the business.²³¹ It is evident that their isolation from hoodoo practitioners and racially diverse bodies makes them unprepared for investigation of their wares.

While the *Portland Problem* is a specific manifestation of the isolation narratives that cultural artifact producers indulge in, it is by no means the only symptom of problematic consumption. All of the edible, hoodoo-based artifacts are steeped in a visual consumer culture marked by colonial narratives. The representations of voodoo dolls, half naked voodoo queens, and appropriated loa are evidence of the larger culture's attachment to passive racism and commitment to paint hoodoo as barbaric, violent, and deviant. The edible objects are visibly grounded in a fantasy narrative that allows the consumer to wield the faith and hold dominion over the ways in which it is expressed. bell hooks examines this idea of dominance and consumption in *Black Looks*. She notes that the "mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality and variations of white

²³¹ outside of buying doughnuts

supremacy.”²³² The idea of mutual recognition is absent in regards to these artifacts, both in the terms of race and of faith; the artifacts are not viewed as racist, even though they obviously engage in lynching, violent, and racist images, representations and discourses, and hoodoo is not viewed as an authentic religious system. As explored in the introduction, it is more represented as a combination of kitsch culture and entertainment by the larger consumer culture. hoodoo based cultural artifacts can only be imbued with power when the consumer wants to use it against someone else.²³³ As any sense of racialized or religious recognition is absent in the production and marketing of these artifacts. There is no desire by either the producers or the consumers to seek out authentic representations of either facet. In fact, the artifacts themselves become authentic through their repetition and perpetual presence. When the consumer sees countless representations of consumable hoodoo mired in voodoo dolls, hyper-sexualized Black women, blood and bones, these become the expected, and preferred image. The producers label the majority of these artifacts as “authentic,” meaning their consumers see these images as legitimate.

The secular and racialized make-up of the majority of these images brings an important distinction to the narrative around how these artifacts are visually consumed. Returning to *Black Looks*, bell hooks argues that in terms of representation of Black bodies in the larger cultural landscape, it is not merely an issue of white bodies producing damaging representations of Black culture and

²³² hooks 28

²³³ This is an idea that is present in all consumable hoodoo cultural artifacts, whether or not they are edible. I will return to this idea in the chapters focusing both on literature and racial presentation.

people. The contemporary moment finds the same stereotypical and racist images being marketed by Black bodies as well to gain access to the same cultural capital. As the stereotypical, simulacra images are the ones viewed as authentic and necessary by the consumer culture; Black bodies are just as likely to engage in them for commercial profit. hooks notes that it is not an issue of 'us' and 'them.' The issue is really one of standpoint. From what political perspective do we dream, look, create and take away from the conventional ways of seeing Blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the *status quo*."²³⁴ This same idea applies to the visual representations of hoodoo based cultural artifacts in a consumer culture. hooks questions the point of perspective that these images manifest themselves through. In the terms of hoodoo based cultural artifacts, the point of perspective is very clear: it is one steeped in colonialist discourses that do not recognize the religion as such or as something that is viable in ways other than commercial consumption.

While the visual aspect of edible hoodoo is important, ultimately the artifacts are consumed either by the hands or the mouth. While literal, edible hoodoo is at the heart of this chapter, it is important to explore the ways that touch and utility feed into the narrative that hoodoo is meant for commercial consumption. Not all of the artifacts are to be eaten or consumed. There are several cultural artifacts, like the *Voodoo Tea Bag*, and the *Voodoo Knife Block*, that require and encourage the

²³⁴ 4. The quote began: "For some time now the critical challenge for Black folks has been to expand the discussion of race and representation beyond debates about good and bad imagery. Often what is thought to be good is merely a reaction against representations created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical. Currently, however, we are bombarded by Black folks creating and marketing similar stereotypical images."

consumer to manipulate them. The *Voodoo Knife Block* is yet another body shaped object. Similar to the tea bag, it has X's for eyes, and carvings in the block that look like thread stitches. Where the violence attached to the tea bag was a noose/string, with the knife block, there is a large knife sticking out of the back of the wood. The aim is to take out the knife, use it on the body to cut goods, and then slide it into the back when done. Both in storage and in use, the doll body is in constant, violent contact with a knife. These misrepresentations of hoodoo involve stabbing things either with pins in the commission of using a voodoo doll, or with a knife in the commission of human sacrifice. Neither one of these violent acts is an accurate representation of the faith, and has no tangible place in the religion. Instead, they are based in an imaginary and colonial discourse that marks the faith and the Black bodies that engage in it as violent and deviant.

The producers of these cultural artifacts convince the consumer that there is a great deal of pleasure and entertainment in the violent acts. In *Authentic Fakes*, David Chidester explores the connection between tangible pleasure in the handling of cultural products that combine religion and popular culture. To quote, at length:

Basically, popular culture is regarded as a good if it feels good, if it provides pleasure sensations along the tactile register of the body. Tactility involves three things: the feelings of the flesh, the movements of the body, and the handling of objects by the body, especially the hands, in any sensory, perceptual, cultural, or religious environment. If we want to understand religion and popular culture, we need to pay close attention to these tactile engagements with the binding, burning, moving, and handling of the world that are simultaneously human, cultural, and religious.²³⁵

Chidester's description of tactility's role in religious consumption culture is well suited to examine the way that cultural artifacts interact with religious that the consumer culture considers "legitimate". However, when utilized in concert with hoodoo based edible artifacts, his argument is rendered *strange*.

Regarding edible hoodoo, there is a great deal of pleasure expected in the tactile use of these objects. The consumer is encouraged to enjoy and have fun utilizing tangible objects like the cutting board or the tea bag. The descriptions of these artifacts often contain puns, jokes, and sexual allusions to indicate the levity with which consumers should approach the items. For example, the description of the *Ouch! Voodoo Cutting Board* asks if the consumer has anyone "you need to cut out of your life" and describes an additional "backstabbing knife" that fits in a compartment of the back of a voodoo doll-shaped board.²³⁶ To utilize this artifact, the consumer pulls the knife out of the back, uses the body as a cutting board. the board ultimately becomes scarred, damaged, and cut in the use. The purpose of the shape and the narrative surrounding it is to encourage the consumer to equate the board with an enemy, and using both hoodoo and therapeutic food item chopping, relieve their stress and find enjoyment. The puns about stabbing, cutting, and piercing are all grounded in the narrative that hoodoo is deeply invested in the violent use of dolls, pins, and knives.

The tactile and visual pleasures attached to edible hoodoo are present to intensify the act of literal consumption. The fact that the faith is turned into an object that can be tasted, chewed, and swallowed by an eager consumptive culture is

²³⁶ <http://www.horrorsociety.com/2013/01/02/ouch-voodoo-cutting-board/>

noteworthy. The opportunity for consumers to actively swallow what are presented as accurate depictions of a faith is marketed to be highly pleasurable. As mentioned earlier, the consumption of various forms of Black culture has long been in vogue in the larger American culture. In *Black Looks*, hooks asserts that the larger consumptive culture is temporarily transformed and takes a great deal of pleasure in devouring Black culture and its markers; this transformation is not without risk. In *Consuming the Caribbean*, Mimi Sheller proves that the Black bodies they consume colonial cultures. While slavery and exploitation of Caribbean land, resources and bodies tainted²³⁷ the moral, history, and trajectory of colonial nations, the consumption of hoodoo and the indulgences in acts of violence that are attached to it damage²³⁸ current consumer culture. A vast majority of the edible hoodoo artifacts encourage the consumer to tear, chew, and swallow items that make both the religion and Black bodies food.

The *Voodoo Doll Doughnut* serves a touchstone for the idea of tactile, visual, and edible hoodoo consumption; as an artifact it does so much work. As I described previously, the doughnut itself is a voodoo doll-shaped pastry, with Blackface characteristics, and filled with red jelly blood. When people order these pastries from Voodoo Doughnuts, they are rhetorically eating the blood and body of a doll that is described as being filled with "*voodoo magic*".²³⁹ That particular pastry is not the only one literal representation of a Black body that Voodoo Doughnuts boasts.

²³⁷ Through acts of rape, murder, mutilation, linguistic and cultural colonizing

²³⁸ through the absorption of violent, racist, sexist, and colonial imagery

²³⁹ voodoodoughnuts.com

Their *Cock n Balls doughnut* is a chocolate phallus shaped pastry,²⁴⁰ also infused with *voodoo magic*, and spills "cream" when bitten into. The descriptors for all of these items rely heavily on the sexual and violent puns earlier expressed in this chapter and allude to the high potential for pleasure by the consumer.

Instead of being *cute* or entertaining, I argue that these edible artifacts, especially the ones that literally connect Black bodies to the faith, indulge in a form of metaphoric cannibalism. Mimi Sheller asks, "What happens when we think about bodies not as consuming food, but as becoming food for others/ in what sense can one human body be 'eaten' by another?"²⁴¹ Thanks to Voodoo Doughnuts, and the other producers of these edible hoodoo artifacts, consumers are encouraged to ignore the idea of cannibalism completely, and eat literal representations of a faith, and entire bodies. The red jelly "blood" and the cream "semen" present in the *Voodoo Doughnuts* add an element in literal realism to the pastries. As the sugary fluids explode in the mouth of the consumer, they are intimately aware that they are biting into an avatar of a body. The emphasis that the pastries are "infused with voodoo magic" specifically links the edible Black bodies to the faith.

It is impossible to separate these edible artifacts from the colonial narratives that Sheller explores in her work. However, the discourses of the Black body and accompanying Black culture as sites of consumption are not just bound to Caribbean landscapes. The U.S. American landscape has a long relationship with viewing the

²⁴⁰ the employees at the Portland Voodoo Doughnuts (VD! #1) boast how *large* the Black cock doughnuts are. Apparently one of the branches offers a "plain" cock-n-balls doughnut which is a full 3 inches shorter than the chocolate one at VD 1 & 2.

²⁴¹ the quote continues, "the figures of the cannibal in a refined and ahistorical way, simply as a metaphor, which prevents any deeper analysis of its colonial and post colonial implications. What if we instead try to locate cannibalism in relation to the very specific set of violent bodily relations through which the Caribbean was (and continues to be) formed?" 114

Black body as an edible and entertainment object. The American culture of lynching often rhetorically combined the mutilation of Black bodies with food language like “barbecue” and “picnic”. After a lynching, body parts were displayed in store windows, and sold to the highest bidder. It is impossible to separate this history of lynching, violence, and the Black body as food from the visual, tactile, and edible actions encouraged by these hoodoo cultural artifacts. Specifically, the *Cock-n-Balls* doughnut, which is often displayed in the windows of Voodoo Doughnuts, speaks directly to this horrific and violent discourse.²⁴²

The larger consumer culture devours hoodoo in the form of snacks, cutting boards and Black bodies as a way to spice up otherwise unexceptional cultural artifacts. While this is done in figurative ways²⁴³, the literal manifestations of flavoring and food are the avenue explored in this section. hoodoo very much becomes the flavoring of excitement to the larger dominant cultural discourse that bell hooks is referring to in *Black Looks*. hooks explains that the “contemporary commodification of Black culture by whites in no way challenges white supremacy when it takes the form of making Blackness ‘the spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’”²⁴⁴. Referencing the faith, the popular narratives about hoodoo are directly situated in an equally imagined discourse of Blackness.

According to the larger American Imaginary, hoodoo is very much meant to be

²⁴² “...Leon Litwack explains: Newspaper reporters dutifully reported the events under such lurid headlines as ‘COLORED MAN ROASTED ALIVE,’ describing in graphic detail the slow and methodical agony and death of the victim and devising a vocabulary that would benefit the occasion. The public burning of a Negro would soon be known as a “Negro Barbecue,” reinforcing the perception of Blacks as less than human. (Allen et al. 2000:10).” 121

²⁴³ There is a synthetic THC replicant on the market called “Voodoo Spice”. It is named so because it is intended to put the consumer into a trance-like stupor that is both highly pleasurable and transcendent.

²⁴⁴ 14

dangerous and volatile when wielded by Black bodies, but useful and affirming in white hands. This narrative is perpetuated in the other cultural artifacts²⁴⁵ that represent the faith as effective and safe only when wielded and consumed by the white protagonist. The faith of hoodoo is represented as Black enough to be considered dangerous, exotic, and exciting but still something that can be managed and mastered by white bodies. This idea of representation is visually and rhetorically carried over into the spice arena of edible artifacts. Sauces, seasonings, and salts are labeled with hoodoo²⁴⁶ to be consumed by very specific subsets of the American consumer culture and often on very specific occasions. Very similar to the annual mass appearance of hoodoo-themed drinks in mid to late October to coincide with Halloween celebrations, spiced hoodoo often appears in the same calendar cycle, or when a specific landscape and cuisine—New Orleans and Creole food—needs to be invoked.

The cultural artifact that is the clearest example of religious appropriation is the *Voodoo Spice Blend* by Seattle's *World Spice Market*. The point of origin of this product, and the narrative spun around it, is indicative of the *Portland Problem*. It is a geographic area in the United States with a low population of African Americans, or other diasporic bodies that might engage in the faith. I argue that because these communities are not highly visible and able to protest, the consumer culture either is blithely unaware of the damage these artifacts cause or feel there will be no

²⁴⁵ This includes the movies, television shows, video games, novels, and other visual mediums that the American Imaginary constructs around the faith

²⁴⁶ Very often, edible hoodoo items are labeled with "Voodoo" rather than hoodoo. But as explained in the introduction, the American Imaginary is rhetorically unsure of what hoodoo is, the ways in which it is different from Voodoo. Because it views Black cultural practices, religions, and bodies as interchangeable, the terms are often used indiscriminately.

immediate consequence to produce these representations of the faith. There is also the direct element of adding an exotic, invisible element of spice and culture to an otherwise racially homogenous location. The fact that Pacific Northwest consumers are able to take home and taste some hoodoo with little thought towards the representations of the faith or the Black bodies that are associated with it is one of the driving forces behind this dissertation project. The spice mix is described as a mix “inspired by the magic of the Gulf Coast, this robust seasoning includes onion, garlic, thyme and allspice on a base of peppercorns and sea salts”.²⁴⁷ While the website does not reveal the exact ingredients of their mix, there is nothing in the mixture that explicitly relates to the faith. Or Black bodies. so Instead, the web descriptions invoke Marie Laveau and promise to transform the consumer with spice and flavour that hints to hoodoo.

The small packet of seasoning offered up by the Seattle Spice Market is not the only example of stitching the faith to a flavoring agent. While the spice packet advertising is seemingly benign ²⁴⁸ there are other products what do not indulge in such restraint. For example, *Voodoo Queen Fiery Revenge Hot Sauce*²⁴⁹ bears the picture of a Black woman in a Black bikini top and red, high cut loincloth. She is barefoot and at her feet are lit candles and what appears to be a mix of hot peppers and a human heart on a platter. The words “Fiery Revenge” and “Vengefully Hot” are emblazoned in red on the bottle, and the sauce comes with a complimentary

²⁴⁷ <http://www.worldspice.com/blends/voodoo—2>).

²⁴⁸ <http://www.hotsauceworld.com/h709.html>, http://ep.yimg.com/ca/I/hotsauceworld_2253_93646539)

²⁴⁹ The advertising on the packet only appropriates the word “Voodoo” and invokes Marie Laveau in the advertising description. But it does not employ images most commonly associated with consumable hoodoo such as voodoo dolls, skulls, or witch doctors as is the case with other items.

“voodoo doll”. This form of advertising is more commonly utilized than words alone. The advertising employs the familiar discourses of the hyper-sexualized Black bodies and violence associated with hoodoo and the presumed importance of specific cultural artifacts to the faith. The woman on the bottle, who is meant to represent Laveau, stands in a provocative posture, and wearing very little clothing. The graphic design places the text visually close to the figure’s breast and groin region, drawing the consumer’s eyes. She holds a voodoo doll in one hand and a pin in the other. The doll, in conjunction with the words “Revenge” and “Vengefully” connect the religion to pain and violent practices. The sauce itself comes with a small voodoo doll figurine attached to the cap for the consumer to play with/utilize as they see fit. The company advertises their product as extremely, almost painfully, spicy and uses the narratives of pain, violence, and sexual carnality associated with hoodoo to emphasize that fact. In addition to the “Fiery Revenge” sauce, *Voodoo Queen* offers *Burnin Desire*, *Lucky Mojo*, and *Who Dat* hot sauces. Each of these offerings features the highly sexualized “voodoo queen” in various bikini covers on their bottles, perpetuating the narratives that the faith is highly sexualized, violent, and made for consumption.

There is a separation in these products determined by their geographic location. The products physically based in New Orleans, like the *Blackened Voodoo Lager* or *Voodoo Queen Hot Sauces* rely heavily on the American Imagination’s association of the faith with the landscape, and the tourist dollars it generates. As an advertising strategy, they pull heavily from the archetypical narratives that tourism has conjured of hyper sexualized Black bodies tied both to hoodoo and Mardi Gras,

“magic” rituals enacted in misty swamps, and of painted witch doctors stabbing dolls. Products based far away from the bayous of New Orleans, like the Pacific Northwest’s *Rogue Beer*, *Voodoo Doughnuts*, or the *Voodoo Spice* packet, rely on a decentralized, imagined landscape to peddle their wares. In most cases²⁵⁰ the images and narratives employed in advertising are different; regarding alcohol and spice, when the products are not produced in Louisiana in general, or specifically in New Orleans, they tend not to employ the more sexualized and stereotypical images regarding the faith. As seen with the *Voodoo* spice, they most often allude to figures or landscapes far away, and use this geographic decentralization encourage the consumer to build the imagined landscape in their own homes. The products situated in New Orleans encourage the consumer to take their tangible, if imagined, hoodoo culture with them from a specific place. In other words, when consumers use spices not based in a specific landscape, they are conjuring up the same imagined powers, flavours, cultural representation of the faith in their own space. When they use spices based in a specific landscape that is rhetorically and culturally associated with the faith, they are being figuratively transported to that real/imagined landscape to participate in the indulgence culture that already exists there.

The idea of transporting in comparison to conjuring creates questions regarding the ideas of racism, damage, and intent that go into the forms of representation. This question is common in regards to films; in her work *A Skin For Dancing In*, Tanya Krywinska poses a similar question in regards to the movie *The*

²⁵⁰ which is the brand name, situated in New Orleans

Serpent and the Rainbow in contrast to other films about Voodoo. Because the film is situated in Haiti, and informed by a scholar,²⁵¹ Krywinska argues that it is more culturally informed and less damaging than other films on the faith. Regarding the perpetuation of the racist discourses and colonial savior/consumer culture in the film, she claims, “there is certainly an exploration of otherness in the film which has a white hero who does battle with Black magic; but does that necessarily make it ‘racist’? This reading does not take into account the implicit contradictory elements of the film, which in many ways was far less blatantly racist than other voodoo films.”²⁵² Her argument is one that is insistent upon “degrees of racism” in cultural consumption and representation. She utilizes the idea that the film, with its white male hero battling, learning²⁵³ and ultimately wielding “Black”²⁵⁴ magic against Black bodies, is rendered less racist because it engages a small amount of cultural awareness offered by the anthropological work that it is based on.

Returning to literally, in contrast to visually, consumable hoodoo, the argument can be made that because many of the alcohol and spice based edible hoodoo artifacts are based geographically in New Orleans, they are inherently less racist or less damaging to the overall narrative of the faith. The geographic associations with historic New Orleans Voodoo and current hoodoo cultural practices could offer the products a form of legitimacy. This, however, is not the

²⁵¹ her reading does not take into account the problematic, racist, and imperialist representations present in the book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* written by Wade Davis, which the film was based on.

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²⁵³ And in this case, consuming

²⁵⁴ in the movie, Haitian Voodoo is presented as Black both in the terms of being inherently racialized, i.e, attached to and used (ineffectively by) Black bodies until it is mastered by white men, and “Black” in the Western association sense of Black as evil. This association also has racist and colonial attachments

case. The edible artifacts based in New Orleans are not offering any more of a realistic, accurate, or geographically based representation of the faith when they attach it to locally bottled beer or hot sauce. Instead, they are perpetuating the narratives of an imagined landscape (that pretends to be real) and an imagined non-religious/ fully commercial practice. They are not offering realistic representations of the faith by emblazoning their bottles with bikinied women holding dolls and pins, even if the imaginary bodies are supposed to be local. Regardless of location, the products employ images and narratives about the faith that perpetuate marginalizing, racist, and damaging discourses.

The various ways in which edible hoodoo is consumed are evident; it is not important to deconstruct what these forms look like. While there exists almost infinite variation in the tangible artifacts that appear in the cultural marketplace, the vast majority of them employ one of three specific representational forms. In order to claim discursive ties to the faith and their products, cultural artifact producers either appropriate the name of the faith,²⁵⁵ the specter of the voodoo doll, or, in rare and extreme cases, images of specific loa. The actual means of appropriation are listed from most to least offensive in their means of representation.

The idea of offense requires a great deal of unpacking. Here I return to bell hooks' idea of cultural positionality, domination, and intent.²⁵⁶ Each of the

²⁵⁵ without visual markers

²⁵⁶ "Unlike racist white men who historically violated the bodies of Black women/women of color to assert their position as colonizer/conqueror, these young men see themselves as non-racists, who choose to transgress racial boundaries within the sexual realm not to dominate the Other, but rather so that they can be acted upon, so that they can be changed utterly. Not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racial domination, they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change in white attitudes towards non-whites. They do not see themselves as perpetuating racism" (24).

representational forms of edible hoodoo engage in various forms of intent, research, and perpetuation of colonial and racist narratives. By research, I reference the amount of effort that the producer undergoes to engage with representations of hoodoo. When producers, like the makers of the *Voodoo Spice*, splash the name of the faith across their wares, the actions they partake in takes little thought or research. It is no large rhetorical stretch to attach a faith that is associated with Black bodies to a spice mixture that is supposedly Cajun or southern in origin. While this glomming on to the name of the faith does perpetuate the racist and colonial narratives that present Black bodies and Black culture as consumable objects, it registers as the least offensive preparation of edible hoodoo. The lack of specific, visible representations or violent action makes this form of appropriation less offensive and harmful to the extant culture.

When cultural artifacts appropriate specific images, like that of Marie Laveau, voodoo dolls, and of hyper-sexualized supposed practitioners, the level of offense increases. To engage in these specific images requires the creators and consumers to dip into the discursive well that the larger culture has created about hoodoo. They have to research images of voodoo dolls and practitioners that are familiar, palatable, and something that consumptive audiences respond well to. Rendering visible the faith and the bodies that are associated with it requires more research, and intent. When visibly constructing the faith and injecting it into artifacts, the producer is willingly and purposefully handling racist, sexists, and damaging representations of the religion.

The most offensive use of edible hoodoo is present in the artifacts that utilize specific loa. Artifacts like the Bud Light Super Bowl XLVII commercial, or the use of vèvés in Voodoo Doughnuts, attach singularly specific loa or religious markers to their products. The use of these images requires an intensive amount of research into the definitively religious aspects of hoodoo and its deities. It is impossible to access these images and religious symbols without acknowledging the religious import that they possess, and that hoodoo is a specific faith system. The images and vèvés are not familiar to the larger consumer audience, so the producer has to do more rhetorical work to make them palatable to the consumptive audience.

In Name Only

The least offensive, and frankly, the most lazy appropriation of hoodoo is manifested when producers simply splash the name of the faith across their products. In these cases, the very name of the faith conjures up an intoxicating association with magic, the exotic, and “cool” Black culture. The words “Voodoo”²⁵⁷ and “hoodoo” are very much utilized as the *spice* that bell hooks examines in “Eating the Other”: the “contemporary commodification of Black culture by whites in no way challenges white supremacy when it takes the form of making Blackness ‘the spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.’”²⁵⁸ The cultural artifact that is the clearest example of name-only appropriation is the *Voodoo Spice*

²⁵⁷ The word “Voodoo” is used interchangeable with hoodoo in the American Imagination. As explored in the introduction, the two are interchangeable because the larger culture does not view hoodoo as legitimate, and anything other than a commoditized system of magic and entertainment.

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Blend by Seattle's *World Spice Market*. As mentioned above, the spice mix is described as "inspired by the magic of the Gulf Coast." While the website does not reveal the exact ingredients of their mix, there is nothing in the mixture that explicitly relates to the faith. There is nothing specifically "hoodoo" based about a mundane mixing of various spices and salts. The packet is even missing some of the spice agents most associated with New Orleans culture, like paprika, cayenne, and red pepper flakes. Rather than having any ties to the culture, faith, or geographic location, the producers at the *World Spice Market* splash the name of the faith onto the packet to convince their consumers that the wares are both foreign and palatable.

There are geographic distinctions to be made in the artifacts that merely appropriate the name of the faith. The products physically based in New Orleans, like the *Blackened Voodoo Lager* or *Voodoo Queen Hot Sauces* rely heavily on the American Imagination's association of the faith with the landscape, and the tourist dollars it generates. As an advertising strategy, they pull heavily from the archetypical narratives that tourism has conjured of hyper sexualized black bodies tied both to hoodoo and Mardi Gras, *magic* rituals enacted in misty swamps, and of painted witch doctors stabbing dolls. Products based far away from the bayous of New Orleans, like the Pacific Northwest's *Rogue/Voodoo Doughnuts Beer*, or the *Voodoo Spice* packet rely on a decentralized, imagined landscape to peddle their wares. In most cases the images and narratives employed in advertising are different; regarding alcohol and spice, when the products are not produced in

Louisiana in general, or specifically in New Orleans, they tend not to employ the more sexualized and stereotypical images regarding the faith. As seen with the *Voodoo* spice, they most often allude to figures or landscapes far away, and use this geographic decentralization encourage the consumer to build the imagined landscape in their own homes. The products situated in New Orleans encourage the consumer to take their tangible, if imagined hoodoo culture, with them from a specific place. In other words, when consumers use spices not based in a specific landscape, they are conjuring up the same imagined powers, flavours, cultural representation of the faith in their own space. When they use spices based in a specific landscape that is rhetorically and culturally associated with the faith, they are being figuratively transported to that real/imagined landscape to participate in the indulgence culture that already exists there.

The repeated utilization of cultural artifacts that encourage consumers to desire, purchase, and employ reductive images of hoodoo along with their food products creates a desire/consumption cycle. The images associated with edible hoodoo²⁵⁹ become “authentic” and the only viable representation due to repetition and visibility. When consumers indulge in consumption, and then express desire for the misrepresentations they have just consumed, they move the narratives from caricatures into the real. The shuffling from desired image to reality is explored in Deborah Wong’s *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. In regards to the ways in which the prevalent images about Asian Americans created by the popular culture imagination interact with living examples of tangible bodies, Wong claims

²⁵⁹ (Black women in bikinis, consumable voodoo dolls, Marie Laveau is a directly edible body)

that “a postindustrial, mass-mediated age inaugurates the condition of the hyperreal, where images and reproductions (or in Baudrillardian terms, simulacra) become ‘more real than the real.’”²⁶⁰ In terms of edible hoodoo artifacts, the images on the packaging and the presumed flavour associations that the cultural artifacts claim become the only, and thus the authentic, representations that the consumer culture desires. When they become real, and the larger American Imaginary is encouraged to consume them and view the images as valid and authentic representations of the faith of hoodoo, the edible artifacts become much more than just food. They are transformed into vehicles that carry commercially driven narratives that bind the faith to the commercial images, and encourage figurative and literal violence against it.

Voodoo-Doll Knife Blocks and Other Such Things

As I established earlier in this chapter, the most common form of edible hoodoo present in cultural artifacts takes the form of a voodoo doll. It is visually attached to artifacts like hot sauce bottles, liquor, and key chains. It is everywhere. The shape of the doll is easily identifiable, needs no instruction, and encourages consumer interaction.²⁶¹ While I situate this representation in the middle of the constructed hierarchy of “offensive”, I consider it to be highly troubling and damaging for many reasons. The first is that it perpetuates the narrative that hoodoo is naught but voodoo dolls wielded by deviant Black bodies. The presumed associations between voodoo dolls and hoodoo represent the faith as violent,

²⁶⁰ (Wong, Kindle Location 201-203)

²⁶¹ It is also a shape that is wrongly, but heavily associated with Black bodies and African American religious culture.

deviant, and ultimately a harmful system of magic, rather than a system of religious transcendence. The representation of the voodoo doll as a marker of edible hoodoo also encourages the larger consumer culture to gleefully engage in explicitly violent acts against the faith, and the bodies that mark it.

There is a dedicated market for interactive objects that combine the faith with the above two sensations with tactile and tangible actions. Hoodoo-themed tactile artifacts encourage the American consumers to buy and participate in violence against unprotected Black bodies as entertainment. Kitsch kitchen objects like cutting boards, toothpick and knife holders, and fondue sets appropriate the name of the faith and superimpose it upon supposedly blank figures. While these specific items are not edible, they are not created without thought and exist in the same cultural spaces as food. Not only are these items consumed in a way that highlights the American Imaginary's obsession the misrepresentation of hoodoo as violent, but also they are designed so that the consumer can repeatedly engage in physical and metaphoric acts of violence against imagined bodies and a real faith. Each of these objects relies on the "voodoo doll" theme that renders the act of stabbing a body as entertaining and utilitarian.

Items like the Voodoo knife block, tooth pick holder, and cutting board are all grounded in narratives of violence against Black bodies. Each of these objects are constructed to encourage the consumer to pierce, slice, or stab the body; each of these packages also have the word "voodoo" emblazoned in bold on the package, encouraging the consumer to connect the ideas of the faith and violence in their mind. Ultimately, these items work to perpetuate narratives of violence against

Black bodies, and reduce them to edible, and easily consumable objects. The idea that Black culture and bodies function as edible artifacts has long been a familiar narrative in the American discourse.²⁶² I would argue that this narrative of food and commodified Black bodies has existed well beyond the advent of American popular culture: Items like sugar, rum, and Black bodies themselves have always been subjects of transnational cannibalism or grinding down.²⁶³ The consumption is one-directional. Black bodies and images of the faith are to be consumed by the dominant culture. This statement excludes Black bodies that are situated in Western landscapes. While there are certainly people of all races who indulge in consuming these particular food items, Black bodies are not able to pass out of being damaged by these representations. The damaging, perpetual narratives of Black bodies being deconstructed to violence and consumable sites are being perpetuated, even if Black hands are the ones wielding the knife and scrapping it across the block.

The stabbing artifacts are clearly designed to simultaneously represent real bodies and intangible ideas. They are all body shaped; they have arms legs, and torsos, all of which are constructed for easy damaging. The term damaging here is loaded and complicated. While their actual construction is sturdy and intended for

²⁶² "It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of certain images and labels, but since the beginning of American pop culture we notice a recurring theme of the Black body perceived and described not only as a source of food, but as an edible substance in itself. This topic is made even more intricate by a strong, ambivalent element of sexual attraction and repulsion, danger and fascination." (Paraseccoli 105).

²⁶³ "Northern consumers are able to experience their proximity to Caribbean people as pleasurable even when it manifestly involves relations of subordination, degradation, or violation. And conversely, when Caribbean commodities are consumed in the North they are experienced as 'getting closer to' or 'touching' the essence of the Caribbean (hooks 1992; Cook and Crang 1996), even when they are manifestly involve limitations on the mobility of the very people who have produced those commodities. Bodily (im)mobilities [sic], therefore, are a crucial nexus of the system of the transatlantic exchange that depend on embodied relations of distance, proximity, and co-presence at different moments in the process of production and consumption." 27

frequent, vigorous use, these objects are built to be damaged. The idea of damage comes from the rhetorical harm the repeated, joyful act of stabbing sharp metal in approximated Black bodies brings. In the case of the voodoo knife block and voodoo appetizer tray, the bodies are hard forms of Black plastic, with pre made holes for either knives or metal skewers to repeatedly be inserted and used. The blades slide easily into the sheaths with no resistance whatsoever. This ease in stabbing allows the consumer a level of freedom to engage in several dissociative narratives. The first allows them ignore the performance of violence they are engaging in. There is no blood in these violent recreations, no resistance to pushing sharp metal into the approximation of Black skin. The only emotions present are engineered to be pleasurable. The consumer is able to engage in a violent act, a jovial way to “vent frustrations” as is advertised for the knife set, or merely to entertain party guests.

Knife blocks, cutting boards, and appetizer bodies are both supposed to be, and not supposed to be, real bodies. They, of course, mimic the physical form, and are painted all Black to be both featureless, but definitely rooted in a particular discourse of anonymous Black bodies. Rendering Black bodies faceless, and therefore open to all sorts of violence, is deeply engrained in narratives of entertainment. In her chapter in *Beyond Blackface*, Stephanie Dunson²⁶⁴ argues, “the erasure of Black identity as a historical fact, perhaps even a psychological necessity,

²⁶⁴ Dunson’s article is *Black Misrepresentation in Nineteenth Century Sheet Music Illustration*. In her work, she deconstructs racist images and caricatures that appeared in popular sheet music. Each of the images she examines are hyper exaggerated representations of racialized features, and in all of them, the caricatures were victim to forms of violence that were supposed to be comic to the white consumer. The hyper exaggeration of the facial features erased any form of humanity from the bodies; this erasure allowed the consumptive audience to enjoy, laugh at, and feel more at ease with their own direct acts of violence against African Americans.

is a precondition for the American tradition of Blackface minstrelsy.”²⁶⁵ The sanded down features of these items serve to erase the tangible evidence of the bond that the highlighted word “voodoo” creates in these objects. The heavy-handed associations with voodoo make the consumer aware that the bodies these objects represent are Black ones. But because they are featureless, voiceless, and often faceless, the consumer is blithely able to stab at them to their hearts content, since they are not attacking a specific body.

While the voodoo doll as a cultural artifact most presents stabbing as an almost natural act to associate with hoodoo, there is a specific item that deserves mention. The *Voodoo Tea bag* is an artifact that sits at the intersections of food, violence, and action. Similar to the knife block and cutting boards, the tea bags encourage action and present a faceless and unidentifiable “voodoo body” as the site of violence. Relating to the hot sauce and *Voodoo spice* packet, the tea bag is a directly edible item that the consumer is encouraged to use to master and enjoy the consumer culture’s approximation of the faith. While it is an object that firmly represents all of the sensory elements of edible hoodoo, the actions inherent with the tea bag move it into a space separate from the other violence based edible artifacts.

The tea bag utilizes the familiar voodoo doll theme that all of the non-edible hoodoo artifacts embody. The action of hanging and inclusion of boiling water locate the tea bag firmly within the discourse of lynching. The stabbing and hanging bodied

²⁶⁵ she continues, Thus disparagement lies in the cultural systems of privileging representations over reality and in the systems of power and oppression that allow such privileging to become the standard.” 45

objects enact a simultaneous erasure of Black bodies and a purposeful connection between these violent acts and the faith. Spice and alcohol based items highlight the imagined bodies they use to advertise their wares, while simultaneously erasing the racialized and identifiable markers of the items. For example, in the Bud Light Super Bowl Commercials, the Voodoo Doughnuts Ale bottle, and on the Voodoo Queen Hot Sauce Bottle, the imagined practitioner bodies are presented at the forefront. They are highly visible on the bottle, and in the advertising and purposefully racialized. The highly visible Blackness of the advertising bodies is meant to lend a measure of authenticity to the products. The purpose for the negation is twofold: Dunson explores the first and most likely more prevalent reason in *Beyond Blackface*.²⁶⁶ She notes that the cartoon Blackface bodies present on nineteenth-century sheet music were rendered faceless and used as blank canvases to present both entertainment and narratives about the foolishness and baseness of Black bodies. She states, “The erasure of Black identity as a historical fact, perhaps even a psychological necessity, is a precondition for the American tradition of Blackface minstrelsy. Thus disparagement lies in the cultural systems of privileging representation over reality and in the systems of power and oppression that allow such privileging to become the standard.”²⁶⁷ To clarify, Dunson argues that the American Imaginary has a concerted need to remove and distance real Black bodies from the artifacts and narratives it creates around them. The erasure is allowed to perpetuate itself because of the persistence of privilege that allows the larger American Imagination

²⁶⁶ Her article elucidates the role of Blackface minstrelsy in 19th century sheet music. The illustrations used to decorate the images utilized hyper-sensationalized and caricatured images of Black bodies.

²⁶⁷ 45

to deny that the images it creates around Black bodies are damaging, or that the artifacts do not encourage the depicted violence against these bodies to transition from the artificial to the lived realities. To tie Dunson's work on Blackface and erasure to both edible non-edible hoodoo, the current American Imaginary deploys the same erasure and denial in its depiction of faceless, violence based artifacts.

Loa Appropriation

While it is extremely rare, the most offensive and troubling manifestation of edible hoodoo is made manifest when producers of cultural artifacts appropriate the images, names, and vèvés of actual loa. The loa²⁶⁸ and their vèvés are both highly unfamiliar to the larger consumer culture and require a great deal of work to appropriate. As the loa are highly specific deities, with individual clothing, behaviour, and appearances; in order for a cultural artifact to utilize their images on their wares, the producer must conduct research into the religious aspects of the faith. The same intensive amount of research is necessary to utilize vèvés in advertising. They are not random images or a haphazard collection of lines and crosses. Vèvés are even less accessible than representations of loa are. While images of the loa,²⁶⁹ have been occasionally appeared in popular culture²⁷⁰, authentic vèvés are virtually absent.²⁷¹ The only edible artifacts I have encountered in my research

²⁶⁸ which can be described as gods in the hoodoo pantheon

²⁶⁹ Especially Baron Samedi

²⁷⁰ As noted in the chapter on possession

²⁷¹ The only occasion that I have come across in my research of vèvés in popular culture is in the Disney *The Princess and the Frog*, where the religious symbols are used as background "decoration" in Dr. Facilier's *Voodoo Emporium*

that employ loa and vèvés in their product advertisements are Bud Light beer²⁷² and Voodoo Doughnuts.

Bad Things Come in Pink Boxes

I close this chapter by briefly revisiting Portland's *Voodoo Doughnuts*. The existence of these pastry shops is the inspiration for both this chapter, and several rage filled lamentations. On a summer research trip to Portland, I attempted to interview both the owners and employees.²⁷³ While I was ultimately unsuccessful in interviewing them, I was able to interact with their products. The shop's insistence on engaging in every narrative damaging to the faith is highly problematic and indicative of all of the colonial and violent discourses that the larger American culture engages in regarding hoodoo. Not only do they appropriate the name of the faith to advertise their wares in the racially homogenous Pacific Northwest, but they also encourage their consumers to link hyper violence, sexualization, and evil with hoodoo. In their advertisements, signs, and on their pastry boxes, they appropriate the likeness of Baron Samedi and his vèvè. To put it bluntly, *Voodoo Doughnuts* serves up the most, and worst manifestations of edible hoodoo.

While the allergy warnings on their website claims that all of their doughnuts contain "voodoo magic"²⁷⁴ alongside traditional allergens such as dairy products, wheat, and soy, there are three doughnuts that specially bear the most visible markers of racial and religious misrepresentation: the previously explored voodoo doll doughnut, Cock-n-Balls doughnut, and the Diablos Rex. On the website, each of

²⁷² as explored in the chapter on possession

²⁷⁴ Voodoodoughnuts.com

these treats is advertised with pictures and descriptions that situate them inside of VD's²⁷⁵ specific narrative. While both the Voodoo Doll and Cock n Balls doughnut have been thoroughly described in this chapter, the Diablos Rex has so far escaped attention. It is described as a "chocolate cake doughnut with chocolate frosting, red sprinkles, vanilla pentagram, and chocolate chips in the middle!"²⁷⁶

While a pentagram²⁷⁷ doughnut seems out of place in a shop that is purportedly more aligned with "Voodoo" than the Devil, its presence is appropriate given the historic and contemporary lack of understanding regarding religious hoodoo, or its separation from devil worship. hoodoo has long been historically and culturally constructed as demonic. The rites of hoodoo possession as described in the last chapter are viewed through a Eurocentric view of possession that positions it as an invitation of evil. Due to this association, hoodoo was "and still [is] deemed dangerous and barbaric, a result of a racist ideology inherent in an European discourse of enlightenment that associates Blackness with evil."²⁷⁸ Because the idea of Blackness is still situated as evil, this, and the other doughnuts specifically tied to sex and "voodoo magic," are chocolate-covered. The purpose behind this is to feed into the narrative that the snack items, filled with *voodoo magic*, are aligned with the devil²⁷⁹.

²⁷⁵ The owners of Voodoo Doughnuts often shorten the name of their shop to "VD" to play up the hypersexualized theme of their shop. This also speaks to narratives that Voodoo is negative, infectious, and deviant.

²⁷⁶ Voodoodoughntus.com

²⁷⁷ Interestingly enough, the pentagram on the Diablos Rex doughnut is not inverted on their website. The pentagram on their pastry is not the Satanic pentagram, which is what I am assuming they were going for. Instead, it is the symbol closely affiliated with Baha'i and Neo-paganism.

²⁷⁸ Marouan 9

²⁷⁹ Or at the very least, possess a chaotic neutral alignment.

“Television is to blame for this. You see this shit in bad television.”²⁸⁰

There is an expansive glut of edible hoodoo artifacts in addition to representations of possession in popular culture. While these two formats are highly popular and accessible, they are not the sources through which the majority of the American population acquires most of ideas regarding the faith. While the above tag line situates the blame on bad television, textual representations of hoodoo are the original source. The United States Marines emphasized the narratives they brought back from Haiti further demonize Black bodies. These tales have been present ever since in popular culture, and manifest themselves in the modern days’ “Voodoo sex guides” and “hoodoo Self Help” books. The next chapter will explore the modern day manifestations of these tales, and the ways in which they feed into narratives of plastic hoodoo.

²⁸⁰ The Boondock Saints. 1999

Binary in the Bookshelf: Literary and Pulp Hoodoo

One of the unexpected outcomes of my dissertation research was an ever-increasing disappointment in bookstores and the development of a tumultuous love/hate relationship with Amazon.com. Regarding the bookstores, every trip turned into a disheartening game of “bookstore roulette” where I would search the shelves of 19 different bookstores in 5 different cities²⁸¹ for any evidence of literary Hoodoo. In both national chain and independent bookstores, I would invariably have to engage in the scripted drama of asking someone working there where the books on Hoodoo were. The store clerk would frequently balk, and insist that I meant voodoo and that “hoodoo [was] just a mispronunciation”²⁸². I would then either be directed to the Fiction section, where I would find the occasional work by Zora Neale Hurston, nestled among the copies of *Zane*, or to the “Occult” section, where I would root through the books on Satanism, Witchcraft, and UFOs. In that section, I would invariably find *Wicked Voodoo Sex*, *VaVa Voodoo* and *Urban Voodoo*. The store associate would assure me that these were the most *authentic* and helpful books on the subject matter that they had. My frequent and disappointing trips to the bookstore eventually drove me to Amazon. In the digital aisles, I had unlimited literary options; a quick search provided me with fiction offerings from Nalo Hopkinson and Gloria Naylor in addition to more scholarly texts by Jeffery Anderson and Yvonne Chireau. I could find serious reading for my serious research. But

²⁸¹ Houston TX, Austin TX, Lawrence KS, Chicago IL, Kansas City KS

²⁸² I was told this by associates at the Hastings and Half Price Books in Lawrence Kansas, and the Barnes and Noble in the Kansas City Plaza Center

always lurking in the “Suggested Reading” section of my literary Wish list were *Wicked Voodoo Sex*, *VaVa Voodoo*, and *Urban Voodoo*: the same pulp texts that ruined my games of “Bookstore Roulette”.

This trinity of pulp hoodoo is inescapable, both in physical and digital bookshops. While both serious academic work²⁸³ and fiction based, literary Hoodoo works²⁸⁴ are popular with specific audiences, pulp hoodoo books are ever present, nationally popular and widely consumed. Rather than offering academic or pseudo fictional accounts the works offered by Charlotte and Black/Hyatt provide their readers with the stereotypical and familiar images of Hoodoo that are steeped in and sustain the larger American Imaginary. I use the term pseudo fictional in reference to the descriptions and literary embodiments of Hoodoo other diasporic religions present in the works by Nalo Hopkinson and the other authors I will engage during this chapter. While they are writing specifically within the context of literary fiction, there is a large degree of religious research, and careful religious representation in their work. The authors take care to research the loa they are referencing, and to present them in their work in ways that are highly consistent with their religious manifestation. So while it is fiction, there is research, religion, and intent in their writing and presentation. They function as step-by-step manuals that claim to allow the consumer to wield significant power over others; they are guidebooks that promise to teach their purchasers how to wield hoodoo for vengeful or sexual gain. The works by Charlotte and Hyatt/Black reinforce the American Imaginary’s perception that the practical and total utility for Hoodoo is as

²⁸³ Like Yvonne Chireau’s *Black Magic* or Jeffrey Anderson’s *Conjure in African American Society*

²⁸⁴ Like Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*

a means of murder, control or sexual domination. They negate the racial and religious implications of the faith in favour of catering to a consumptive audience interested in domination.²⁸⁵ Their wide reaching popularity is a direct result of the grasping by these texts away from religious representations, and more towards the readers baser desires.

This chapter is interested in the ways that books steeped in pulp hoodoo manifest themselves in the American Imaginary and its cultural marketplace. I choose to examine pulp literature, as it is a root and a perpetuation site of the narratives about Hoodoo that are explored here and in the other chapters of the dissertation. When movies, television shows, and video games begin research for their visual projects²⁸⁶, they turn to popular and pulp texts on the faith. The religious, anthropological, or literary texts that represent Hoodoo as a racialized and religious system present the faith as something too far outside of the comfortable confines of consumption. The ways in which the faith and the loa are presented are too specific, foreign, and heavily racialized in non packable ways for the reader to easily incorporate them into preexisting cultural narratives. Pulp texts, which are highly produced, un-cited, un-peer reviewed works of fiction that can be disguised as ethnography, or non-fiction, like *Urban Voodoo* are instead utilized as easily accessible, familiar, and popular sites of Hoodoo reference. I use the term *pulp hoodoo* to describe very specific works. *Pulp hoodoo* works are texts that emphasize hoodoo specifically as a utilitarian practice, market it to the larger culture, and make

²⁸⁵ While the books by Charlotte does explore images of sexual power, when I reference domination in this context, I am separating it from the narratives of domination found in BDSM circles, and situating it firmly within discourses of uneven power, physical harm, and cultural malice.

²⁸⁶In terms of characters or hoodoo related plots

the claim that their texts are authentic and accurate representations of the practice.²⁸⁷ *Wicked Voodoo Sex* and *Urban Voodoo* both make the claims that they are telling the consumptive culture accurate and useful information that will grant them power over the bodies of others. There is little mention of the loa or the other religious aspects of Hoodoo. The promises of tangible power with minimal consequence to or effort on the part of the consumer are what make these texts consistently popular with the larger imaginary. It is important to note that the texts engage in authentication narratives throughout the books. The authors emphasize their academic or other “occult” religious credentials in order to assure the American Imaginary that they are knowledgeable about their topic, and that the practice of hoodoo as utility magic can be palatable to white audiences.

Literary Hoodoo: The Good Stuff

“The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.”²⁸⁸

While the scripts, forms of utility, and damage associated with *pulp hoodoo* is the topic at the heart of this chapter, it is important²⁸⁹ to explore the literary artifacts attached to the faith that do not largely engage in predatourism.

Predatourism is a theoretical construct created in conjunction with porn scholar

²⁸⁷ Faith system is different from a practice. Faith and religious systems are interactions with the divine grounded in prayer, fasting, reading sacred texts, and other such manifestations of a religious life. They are ideas grounded in some sort of relationship with the divine based on worship systems. Practices are ritualized, and occasionally religious based systems that still interact with the divine, but expect tangible reaction back from them. Practices serve immediate, and measurable needs of the practitioners.

²⁸⁸ The Boondocks. 1.11. 2006. “Let’s Nab Oprah”.

²⁸⁹ and largely unaddressed in this dissertation

Diana Pozo²⁹⁰. It is a focused deconstruction of tourism and cultural consumption that preys directly on POC in multiple ways. While tourism relies specifically on creating an imagined landscape within a tangible one, and employing/forcing People of Colour into exploitive jobs that maintain the scripted illusion for white tourist, predatourism perpetuates imagined landscapes within other imagined landscapes, and draws them into the world of the real. To clarify, predatourism is a system that recreates, perpetuates, and insists on stereotypical and racist narratives and discourses about multiply marginalized Black bodies, through embodiments like non “normative” religious worship, sexuality, visible disability, etc. and inserts them into mediums like movies, books, and video games that are widely consumed by the American Imaginary. These consumed narratives then have a tangible impact on the ways in which Bodies of Colour are viewed, treated, and policed in their lived realities.

Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and the edited collection *Mojo: Conjure Stories* all present Hoodoo in ways that is markedly different than the widely consumed images that pulp hoodoo offers. While the stories in *Mojo: Conjure Stories* and *Brown Girl in the Ring* present Hoodoo as both a faith and a practice, these works insist on representing the loa and all other representations with seriousness and respect. In terms of this dissertation, a faith system is different from a practice. Faith and religious systems are interactions with the divine grounded in prayer, fasting, reading sacred texts, and other such manifestations of a religious life. They are ideas grounded in some sort of relationship with the divine based on

²⁹⁰ University of California, Santa Barbara

worship systems. Practices are ritualized, and occasionally religious based systems that still interact with the divine, but expect tangible reaction back from them. Practices serve immediate, and measurable needs of the practitioners. For example, conjure is a practice it has elements that are meant to address immediate needs. Hoodoo is a faith. There can however be overlap between these two systems; this idea is present in “The Horsemen and the Morning Star²⁹¹”, where the practitioners engage in their religion on a regular basis, and invoke it as a practice for a specific incident. These works are all created by authors who have a great deal of investment in producing a culturally helpful product that engages in non-damaging and religious based representations of Hoodoo and the loa. They do not function within the construct that renders practice into a system of profit or control; rather they are interested in integrating lived religious acts²⁹² within the narratives of folklore and story. The religious acts they present within the context of their more convincing stories can be expanded to the lived reality; these works open the doors between the “real” and “imaginary” and between the sacred and seemingly secular, and provide a baseline common experience through which readers can access interactions with other faiths, our conversations with other gods, and their hands on our lives. These stories provided a base for reality to take hold.

Despite what I felt from my frequent attempts at *Bookstore Roulette*, there is exists and established body of work about Hoodoo that has a literary agenda that is markedly different from the purveyors of *pulp Hoodoo* works. Works of the *pulp* genre divide and package the faith as a one directional magic system that

²⁹¹ Barbara Hambry. This story is featured in *Mojo: Conjure Stories*

²⁹² like possession

grants the consumer sexual and vengeance based powers. Hoodoo and the racialized bodies attached to it are presented as deviant and wild, yet easily mastered by the right²⁹³ hands. What I am defining as *literary Hoodoo* is different in packaging, message, and representation along racial and religious lines. This genre is made up of works that can range from 19th century folklore to contemporary Afro-Futurism. While works of *literary Hoodoo* span time, location, and in some cases, language, they all have extremely similar narratives. These works describe Hoodoo as both a faith and a practice, and present it in various forms that do not rely on colonial and stereotypical narratives of chicken bones and prone bodies. While all presentations of the faith may not be positive ones, various representations and performances of the faith are offered to readers. For example Rudy's use of Obeah in *Brown Girl In The Ring* represents both a negative performance of the practice, and indulges momentarily into Western and stereotypical narratives around the ways in which the faith is actually practiced. However, the example of Rudy is tempered with Ti Jeanne and Gran Jeanne, two characters who recognize the religious and practical aspects of the faith and how it could or could not be utilized in their lives. Rudy's performance of Obeah is presented as the wrong way, and he is eventually punished through intervention by the loa for his religious transgressions. Hoodoo is not offered as a one-dimensional magic system, or an irreligious system of power consolidation²⁹⁴. There is a marked investment in presenting the bodies of practitioners, and Hoodoo in multiple forms that are complex, fleshed out, and in many ways, intangible. The idea of intangibility

²⁹³ Western, heteronormative, white, upper middle class

²⁹⁴ as is presented in texts like *Urban Voodoo*.

acknowledges the ways in which the authors treat Hoodoo with a degree of religious reverence. In the narratives, the will of the loa and the actions of practitioners are not often explained in incremental detail. The authors give due reverence to certain loa and religious practices; a level of respect that is evident with other genres examine religions that are considered more “mainstream” and widely recognized. Hoodoo is treated in these texts with equal airs of everyday acceptance and mystery that is suitable for writing about a religion that its practitioners hold as sacred.

When I reference authors of *literary Hoodoo*, there are specific names that best embody the genre: Nalo Hopkinson, Zora Neale Hurston, Rosa Guy, and Charles Chestnut. Even though their works were published across a large temporal span, there are consistent representations and narratives that bind these works together. One highly visible bond between all these works is the multifaceted ways they present the faith in their texts. There are several distinct reasons for the degree of respect and care present in *literary Hoodoo* that is long absent in *pulp* hoodoo. The most clear and easily identifiable reason for this difference in representation is due to the race and proximity to the faith of the authors. While not all writers of *literary Hoodoo* are practitioners²⁹⁵, but they all have a marked investment in destabilizing the racist and colonial narratives that are perpetually attached and reinscribed on *Hoodoo* and its practitioners by the American Imaginary. The most prevalent literary²⁹⁶ manifestations of Hoodoo in the larger culture are invested in presenting Black bodies as savage and dangerous, but easily mastered. One of the overarching

²⁹⁵ one notable example is Zora Neale Hurston, who was a practitioner, and is considered a loa by a sizable body of contemporary adherents

²⁹⁶ and cinematic, and edible

objectives of *literary Hoodoo* is to engage in new forms of representation and *seeing* in regards to the faith and its relationship to the textual characters and the larger American culture.

In *Black Looks*, bell hooks examines the ways in which the gaze of the larger white culture, and its insistence on perpetuating racist images and narratives damages Black bodies. She insists on a means of “looking back” as an initiation point to change the way that Black bodies are seen. One means of looking back and challenging the gaze is by reshaping the colonialist narratives into complex, human, and centered readings of Black bodies. She writes, “It is the way of seeing which makes possible an integrity of being that can subvert the power of the colonial image. It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world can we change how we are seen.”²⁹⁷ The authors of *literary Hoodoo* works destabilize the American Imaginary’s narrative surrounding the faith by presenting a more honest and complex presentation of the faith and its practitioners. For example, the edited collection *Mojo: Conjure Stories*²⁹⁸ contains short stories that all focus specifically on Hoodoo and sites of interaction between the loa and practitioners. Some of these interactions are more along the lines of magic and practical and some deal explicitly with the loa and more religious examples. In Andy Duncan’s short story, “Daddy Mention and the Monday Skull” where a practitioner/prisoner in Florida invokes a loa to help him break out of jail. While the story presents Hoodoo as a magical system where the loa aid humans, the story has

²⁹⁷ The quote is born of an initial question, “And if we, Black people, have learned to cherish hateful images of ourselves, then what processes of looking allows us to counter the seduction of images that threatens to dehumanize and colonize?” 6

²⁹⁸ edited by Nalo Hopkinson

strongly manifested themes of reverence, sacrifice, and trade laced alongside the humor and storytelling. There is a definite emphasis on the divinity and power of the loa in the story and price attached to interaction with the divine. When Daddy Mention speaks to Uncle Monday, he ages a year of his life for every moment of the interaction²⁹⁹. The short story “The Horseman and the Morning Star” present Hoodoo specifically as a religion, where the loa are called down, fed, and worshiped in order to save one of the practitioners. The story revolves around Ajax, Flavia, Dede, and Mambo Marie, who are slaves to a plantation master who worships the devil. The plantation owner sacrifices the slaves children to the devil in order to obtain earthly riches; to stop a second child sacrifice from happening, the slaves invoke the loa and request themselves to be ridden³⁰⁰. Steeped in bell hooks’ assertion that Black bodies must look back at and fight against racist narratives surrounding them, the characters in Hambly’s story invoke Black gods to fight against both the literal Devil and the devil of white racism, disregard for Black life, and consumption of Black bodies. The stories in this collection present multifaceted manifestations of Hoodoo and the Black bodies that practice it. Even when Hoodoo is presented more as a system of magic practice than as a faith, there is still a large degree of reverence attached to the bodies and the practitioners.

The authors who engage in *literary Hoodoo* are very much creating the oppositional gaze that bell hooks defines in *Black Looks*.³⁰¹ When they create stories

²⁹⁹ 6, Andy Duncan

³⁰⁰ possessed

³⁰¹ "That all attempts to repress our/Black people's right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we definitely declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.' Even in the

that present Hoodoo as complex, fluid, and a living religion/ practice and practitioners as characters who approach Hoodoo with a marked level of respect and reverence³⁰², they create a larger representation of the faith that stares back at the stereotypical and racist images that are perpetuated by *pulp* works. The authors' insistence of creating narratives that critically engage the images found in *pulp Hoodoo* destabilizes the existing monopoly on representations of the faith.

The authors of *literary Hoodoo* works are consciously constructing oppositional narratives. In presenting the loa, practitioners, and the faith as multifaceted, important, and in some ways, mundane. By mundane, I in no means reference the stripping of the religious, sacred or magical aspect from the faith/practice. I instead wish to emphasize the *lived* aspect of Hoodoo in these stories. The characters treat their religion as an everyday, lived affair. At times in the stories, the loa linger in the back of the characters minds and activities. In other moments, the loa are specifically evoked through ritual, supplication and sacrifice. But before those specific times of worship, the text present characters engaging in everyday acts to make ready for worship. In *literary Hoodoo* texts, Hoodoo is an everyday, accessible, tangible practice. The literary texts do the same rhetorical and critical work that Judith Weisenfeld deconstructs in *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, where she examines the ways in which "Black audiences and critics engaged with [these] white mainstream entertainment products as having profound religious, political and social consequences, and in some cases, produced their own films to narrate

worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structure of domination would contain it opens up the possibility of agency." (116)

³⁰² whether it be for religious or for magical/practical purposes

themselves religiously and politically.”³⁰³ Weisenfield’s work looks closely at religious movies made around and about Black Christian life, and the various manifestations of stereotypes, clichés, and racial tropes that appear in these films. The ways in which Black and white artifact creators, whether through film or literary texts, create images of Black faith are extremely similar. The *literary hoodoo* writers, much like Black filmmakers, constructed layered, nuanced, and personal representations of the faith that appeals largely to audiences with similar cultural proximity. The *pulp* writers and white filmmakers constructed images of Black religiosity that relied heavily on racist constructions of Black subservience, ignorance, and hyper emotional outburst. In terms of *literary Hoodoo*, authors create narratives about Hoodoo from a position of proximity and care that attempts to reshape the way the American Imaginary interprets the faith; they work to challenge head on the narratives indulged by *pulp* Hoodoo texts, and instead present their multifaceted imaging. The problem is, the consumer culture is not buying it.

I utilize the phrase “not buying it” to indulge in its literal and metaphoric contexts. To begin with the literal reading, complex representations of Hoodoo is not marketable. Katrina Hazzard-Donald notes, “Unlike African American music, which has been highly visible, Hoodoo has not proved to be universally marketable.”³⁰⁴ She is grounding her usage of Hoodoo in its authentic and religious form. Hoodoo, as a religion and spiritually grounded magic practice, is not marketable. The narratives that have been marketed and consumed among Americans are often garish and sexualized. Publishers of pulp fiction are not

³⁰³ 6

³⁰⁴ 14

interested in multifaceted images of Hoodoo as religious ritual or in characters that practice the religion as quotidian. The images and stories produced for publication do destabilize the perpetual racist and colonial narratives from the eighteenth-century. If the American cultural imaginary were to change its consumption and representation models of the faith, there would be a several industries³⁰⁵ would be financially harmed or be forced to restructure entirely. The American Imagination is not interested in investing in, or largely consuming *literary Hoodoo*³⁰⁶ instead of *pulp* works. Rather they employ a colonial insistence on narratives of sexual and physical domination.

Grit and Pulp: Pulp Hoodoo and Cultural Damage

Literary and *pulp* Hoodoo exist on very opposite sides of a distinct, representational binary. In her work *Skin For Dancing In: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film*, Tanya Kryzwinska describes the three veins of popular investment in representing Hoodoo in popular mediums. To quote at length they are:

- the 'counter-discourse' approach. Voodoo is taken to be a romantic and exotic form of magic that carries with it a Western dissatisfaction with rationalism and other key values. This involves identification with voodoo.
- the 'nonsense' approach. Voodoo is rubbished as childish superstition. This involves a superior distancing from it.
- the 'satanic' approach. Voodoo is regarded as a form of anti-Christian Black magic. This may be used as a way of creating a moral distance from it, or it might be deployed to boost its attraction as other.³⁰⁷

The *pulp hoodoo* texts explored in this chapter are highly invested in the first and third approach; they present hoodoo as a magic practice that is removed from,

³⁰⁵ for example, a large bulk of New Orleans tourism, the horror film industry, the *pulp hoodoo* industry, and a rather unfortunate doughnut shop in Portland, Oregon

³⁰⁶ while the works by *literary Hoodoo* authors are popular and well received in academic and Afro-futurist environments, they do not receive the wide recognition and accessibility that pulp and stereotypical representations enjoy.

³⁰⁷ 157

but can be easily mastered by white protagonists. The books are written as “how to” manuals for the everyday consumer and provide instructions as to the process of mastering this Othered faith for practical gain. There is a great deal of emphasis in presenting hoodoo as *Other* yet accessible in *pulp* works. In his *New York Times* article about Voodoo, Samuel Freedman notes “Voodoo is one of those flashpoints for Americans because it’s exotic, unknown, and has strange connotations. It may be a matter of underlying racism because voodoo is African and Caribbean in its origins, or because voodoo seems so different from Christianity that it’s the perfect other.”³⁰⁸

While *literary Hoodoo* has a marked investment in presenting the faith as fluid, lived, and complex, *pulp* works have no such goals. There exists a vast market of theme novels that utilize the faith as an easy plot device. When an author needs a mysterious religion as a backdrop for human sacrifice, unsolved murder, or nubile and bound captive, Hoodoo is often evoked³⁰⁹. These works insist upon the narrative that the faith is either satanic or horrific, and construct stories to emphasize its otherness. The association of the faith with exotic deviance makes it a mainstay in pulp works. Krzywinska emphasizes the connection between Hoodoo and horror, writing “the horror genre is dependent on the evocation of otherness³¹⁰” The racialized and diasporic origins of the faith, as well as its unfamiliar loa and sensationalized worship practices mark it as an easy other. There is much cultural

³⁰⁸ 1

³⁰⁹ This is very much the case in works like Stephanie Bond’s *Voodoo or Die*, Rochelle Staab’s *Who Do, Voodoo?* and Robert Crais’ *voodoo river*.

³¹⁰ 157 the quote continues, “often corresponding to the Gothic notion of the sublime- a term that describes the way in which radical otherness attracts and repels with equal power.”

and political gain for furthering these narratives.³¹¹ *Pulp* works are invested in representing Hoodoo in very specific ways. First, they separate it from all religious and sacred moorings. Where the loa are mentioned³¹², they are represented more along the lines of Black-based, magical vending machines. The consumer only has to chant an oddly constructed “spell”³¹³ or tear the head off of a bird that happened to crash through your window³¹⁴. With the removal of the loa, narratives of bloody animal sacrifice, human domination, and sexual initiation take their place. The texts rely heavily on stereotypical narratives that depict Black bodies as savage, uncontrollable, and in definite need of civilizing. The most prevalent images that take up space in the American Imaginary reach back into slavery and the Nadir era where Hoodoo was linked to presumed Black savagery, insurrection, and need for control, and are linked with colonial narratives steeped in the US 1915 invasion of Haiti, and continue in the contemporary moment. An example of a more recent investment in diasporic religious practices as evil and damning is evident in Pat Robertson’s comments about the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.³¹⁵ The final element of *pulp Hoodoo*, after removing all religious or decolonizing elements from it, situates white bodies at the center of the practice. This allows white bodies to easily master all aspects of the practice, and use it to fulfill their own sexual and

³¹¹ “I argue that recent negative portrayals of voodoo have been disseminated by various claims-makers - including military personnel, the print media, and law enforcement officials - all of whom have had a vested interest in misrepresenting this Afro-Caribbean religion. Each set of claims makers offers a specific portrayal of voodoo which caricatures this religion in a particular fashion. In constructionist parlance, these divergent portrayals are called typifications, and they are closely linked with the interests of the various parties promulgating these claims about voodoo.” Bartkowski 560

³¹² as is the case in *Wicked Voodoo Sex and Urban Voodoo*,

³¹³ often in iambic pentameter

³¹⁴ (Kindle location 551-554)

³¹⁵ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/pat-robertsons-haiti-comments-spark-controversy-discussion-country/story?id=9563274>

domination based desires. This is evident in *Urban Voodoo*, where the authors brag about their quick ascension from unaware of hoodoo to mastering it. Within a short period of time, they are able to use their powers to physically hurt coworkers and enemies.

Pulp works maintain a tenuous balance between marking hoodoo as something exotic and Othered while still making it consumable enough for the Western audience. Charlotte explicitly grounds hoodoo in Black bodies, landscapes and locations, but makes sure her readers understand that the Black practitioners are willing and eager to initiate white consumers. She writes, “in Haiti there remains to this day a hidden society within Voodoo that exists to preserve the teachings of the Horae and their practices of sexual magic. It is called the Sisterhood of the Miracles of Night, and through its secret knowledge, you can reclaim your power and start your own sexual revolution to become the wholly happy, holy healing slut the goddess intended you to be!”³¹⁶ Black and Hyatt take a more blatantly racialized approach to situating hoodoo and making it palatable to the consumer. They assert that the practice they see as authentic is not the cultural or religious property of Black bodies. They state, “while most white Americans think of Voodoo as Black, in fact the vast majority of practitioners are Latin, or of mixed blood.”³¹⁷ They make this assertion to make the practice seem more accessible to their own, white bodies and their professed mastery of the practice. This assertion is however tempered, when the authors link hoodoo to hyper-sexualized and violent Blackness throughout the text Throughout the texts, the authors link hoodoo practice to Black bodies they

³¹⁶ Kathleen Charlotte. *Wicked Voodoo Sex* (Kindle Locations 124-126). Kindle Edition.

³¹⁷ Kindle location 89-91

describe as deviant. The practitioners are always situated in the “ghetto” and as prostitutes, thugs, and faceless and primitive threats. *Pulp* hoodoo has a marked emphasis on race and accessibility. The vast majority of the authors of *pulp* hoodoo identify as white. Black and Hyatt continually assert their whiteness throughout the text, often referring to themselves as “the white boy[s]”³¹⁸ and Black even situates himself as someone who dabbled in Nazi-ism.³¹⁹ Charlotte grounds her work directly in whiteness, and places a white body in a “skull bra” as the cover image of her book. They follow in the commercial tradition described by Katrina Hazzard-Donald in *Mojo Workin’*, where she deconstructs the way in which marketers with little to no connection to the faith proclaim themselves masters and experts with the ability to instruct and sell to consumers. She writes,

As old tradition Black belt Hoodoo became nearly publically invisible, some marketeers have been able to present themselves as self-styled experts on Hoodoo, even offering classes and certification. Lifting their information from others’ scholarly research and printed materials, marketeers present what is by comparison Hoodoo that is truncated, marked by disclaimers, superficial, without spiritual substance or healing content, and often fabricated by other marketeers.”³²⁰

Their wares are constructed and marketed to white bodies. *Pulp* works are specifically racialized and “conceived, produced, distributed and consumed within a driven environment³²¹ that demands and thrives off of pre-established representations of deviant Black religions, and their easy mastery by Western culture. In order to make their wares as commercially profitable as possible,

³¹⁸Kindle location 504.

³¹⁹ Kindle location 1571.

³²⁰164.

³²¹ Parasecoli, 4.

pulp hoodoo writers offer their consumers power and mastery over others along the lines of sexual pleasure or violence.

The Seat of the Power

While there are a wide-range of texts to draw from in terms of *pulp* hoodoo, this chapter focuses explicitly on the mini-genre of hoodoo self-help books. These are books, written by white authors that present hoodoo as a magic system that grants powers and satisfaction to the consumer. The authors describe themselves as experts and often bokors, or zombies,³²² in the faith. A bokor is a sorcerer that practices black magic and dark conjure. It is not a term that the American Imaginary would be familiar with, but sounds exotic and authentic enough to give the writer cultural credibility. Through the writing of exotic phrases, the authors represent themselves as credible and *safe* mediums to pass the practice of hoodoo onto the consumers. For example, the use of the term *bokor* in *Urban Voodoo* and the ambiguous claim of being initiated to the faith that is present in *Wicked Voodoo Sex*. According to the consumers, the authors braved the savage and deviant initiation, and in turn pass on the acceptable, filtered results on to them. Their whiteness and distance from the racialized roots of Hoodoo make them more credible in the eyes of the American Imaginary than the producers of works of *literary Hoodoo*.

³²² the authors of *Urban Voodoo* rhetorically claim to be “bocors” in their work (Kindle location 192)

The theme at the heart of all *pulp* hoodoo texts is power. There is an established historical record of the larger culture³²³ shaping and distributing narratives both connecting and stripping the faith of power and authority, depending on the needed cultural narrative. Hoodoo³²⁴ was associated with slave revolts and violence against white bodies.³²⁵ Fearing the possibility of revolt and Black empowerment, the larger white culture presented the faith as deviant, satanic, and powerless³²⁶. This racist and colonial discourse was intensified with the work of Spenser St. John alongside the 1915 invasion of Haiti³²⁷. As a result of the military action, movies like *White Zombie*, and *I Walked With a Zombie*³²⁸ served as propaganda to show that Hoodoo was a dangerous, and malignant magic practice that harmed white bodies³²⁹. The faith was an evil practice to be conquered by *civilization*³³⁰.

The narrative of evil and power shifted with landscapes. For example, with the invasion of Panama in 1989, Hoodoo, the practice was far away from white

³²³ white and commercial

³²⁴ and Voodoo

³²⁵ Voodoo gatherings were integral to the beginnings of the revolts: As C.L.R James observes, these clandestine gatherings provided the future leaders of the revolts with the opportunity to meet and gather supporters, and it was in fact, at a Voodoo meeting that the revolution began. From nearly the beginning, external commentary painted Voodoo as central to the revolt and merely the possibility of a connection between the revolution and Voodoo presented opponents of Haitian independence with a means to disparage revolutionary ideas by linking them to a supposedly barbaric, superstitious belief system. 10 Kee

³²⁶ In part because they provoked fear of poisoning and slave revolts, African diaspora religions were and still are deemed dangerous and barbaric, a result of a racist ideology inherent in a European discourse of enlightenment that associates Blackness with evil." Marouan 9

³²⁷ (Spenser St. John's *Hayti, or the Black Republic*) Although he never actually attended a Voodoo ceremony, relying instead on gossip and newspaper articles as sources, St. John tied it to cannibalism, human sacrifice, and grave robbing in what would become one of the most-read texts on Haiti in the nineteenth century. 12 Kee

³²⁸ as explored in the possession chapter

³²⁹ both the bodies practicing hoodoo and the bodies it was aimed at

³³⁰ whiteness

bodies. The US spun a contradictory narrative around the ousting of Noriega. He was presented as deviant and unfit for power because he practiced the faith.

The denigrations have all contributed to a repulsive portrayal: the American public has been told that Noriega wore red underwear to ward off the evil eye, practiced voodoo with vats of blood and animal entrails, kept *a witch's diary* in the same room with his favorite pornography and a portrait of Adolf Hitler, cavorted with his mistress in the mirror-walled bedroom of a luxurious yacht, and loutishly ignored the well-being of his wife while warning only his mistress that the American invasion was on its way"³³¹.

But at the same time, voodoo had to be propped up as evil, powerful, and in need of concurring in order to make the invasion seem like a significant victory for America³³². The Panama invasion was happening in the same temporal moment that *The Serpent and the Rainbow* was a widely read book. I include this text as a *pulp* text, because its transition to a movie, and its extreme popularity³³³ functioned like a tabloid tell-all regarding the faith. The shift made by Davis's text, however, was that the practice firmly became accessible to the Americans as *something they could practice*.

Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* dissolved the inherent Blackness of hoodoo to a faith widely consumable by whites.³³⁴ Wade Davis functioned as the harbinger of consumable, *pulp hoodoo*: he braved the dangers of interacting with

³³¹Meisler and Rosensteil.

³³² Yet, portraying Noriega as a religious deviant, and impugning voodoo in the process, was not just a military strategy. This tactical maneuver also paid political dividends to the Bush administration and to George Bush's public image as well. When Noriega was first arrested by U.S. military officials, Republican national party chairman Lee Atwater hailed this development (albeit inadvertently at the time) as "a political jackpot"; and, soon after the arrest, one network news anchor declared, "Nobody can call George Bush a wimp any- more" (Payton 1990). 565

³³³ especially for an "academic" text

³³⁴The "problematic" relationship between popular culture objects and their roots/ties/manifestations with Black culture and bodies is explored in Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Visions*. She writes, "...The desire to have the cultural product solve the very problem that it represents: that seeing Black is always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of Blackness." 3

a *savage* practice, and brought it back to the United States as consumable religion. His dissertation project became a book, which became a horror movie. From this movie, spawned a *pulp* empire. There are, of course, other horror movies that featured hoodoo as a big evil, and as a force used to subdue and control white bodies. What made *The Serpent and the Rainbow* different is that it's textual origins by a safe, white academic, and horror connections made it a gateway texts for contemporary *pulp* authors to claim authenticity, accessibility, and the role of hoodoo peddlers. The text's passage through the horror genre emphasized the American Imaginary's fear of racialized and sexual power and control³³⁵. The narrative of controlling bodies was harnessed with Davis's mission to make a Black practice work for and be explicitly consumed by the American consumer culture. From this point, *pulp* authors could claim authority in the faith, while still engaging in horror movie marketing. Hoodoo became about sex and murder and controlling white bodies. *The Serpent and the Rainbow* started the market for *pulp* sex and murder.

Urban Voodoo

The narratives of domination, exoticism and supposed danger are made manifest on the book cover of *Urban Voodoo*. Black and Hyatt's cover is a background swirl of Black and blood red, which arcs across the cover in fluid waves. The title is written in large red font, with the letters shaped out of bones. At the bottom of the cover³³⁶ is a shape that is meant to represent a vèvè, without actually

³³⁵its representation of women either reiterates male fears surrounding sexual difference, or anxiety about female power in general." Hancock, 2

³³⁶ in a red or yellow circle, depending on the edition

being one. The bone text and the impostor vèvè are meant to entice the consumer and present an air of foreign danger. The textual bones are meant both to invoke the American Imaginary's association between Hoodoo, chicken bones, human sacrifice and death. Combined with the skeletal text, the rhetorical dog whistle of *urban*³³⁷, the cover of *Urban Voodoo* promises the reader violence, blood, domination, and deviant Black bodies. These visual promises are emphasized by the impostor vèvè on the cover. The symbol on the cover is simultaneously more and less easy to access than the skeletal title. The symbol is a combination of inverted crosses, tridents, and a pitchfork. While the creation of vèvés is fluid and ongoing, the symbol on the cover is decidedly not one. This is evident for several reasons. First, it lacks any of the major physical or symmetrical characteristics that is present in authentic vèvés. Artistically, the shapes do not share similar characteristics. In addition, they do not bear any resemblance to the vèvés of loa mentioned in the text, nor is the cover image explored at any point in the work. The shapes of the inverted crosses, the symbol under the pitchfork and the tridents are more similar to pagan glyphs.³³⁸ Rather, the symbol exists to serve as a visual marker of the exotic and dangerous, and perhaps "evil." The American Imaginary would associate the tridents, pitchforks, and inverted cross with evil, Satanism, and defiant anti-Christianity. The associations between Hoodoo and witchcraft are both unfounded and unoriginal. Hazzard-Donald³³⁹ notes that "the conceptualization of Hoodoo as

³³⁷ used to denote Black bodies and "dangerous spaces" in the current cultural lexicon

³³⁸ For visual examples and references, please see Jean Seznec's *The Survival of Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Arts*

³³⁹ Katrina Hazzard-Donald and her work, *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System* explores some of the ways in which Hoodoo has been historically fabricated and consumed by outside cultures.

the devil's work is not new; this long standing conceptualization of conjure as evil sometimes leads contemporary informants to refer to conjure as witchcraft and to view it as a force opposing Christianity."³⁴⁰ The authors play off of this idea, and construct the cover so that it is carefully crafted to indulge the American Imaginary and reify the narratives it holds dear to its cultural heart: that hoodoo is dangerous magic, anti-Christian, and a Black and deviant thing that must be mastered.

The stories in *Urban Voodoo* live up to the violent and magical discourse that the cover art promises. Although the text often references the "ancient voodoo gods"³⁴¹ what they offer most is a system of magic and domination that is focused on subjugating racialized bodies and violence; as *pulp*, *Urban Voodoo* functions both as self-propaganda and as an instructional text. Early in the work the authors establish that they wrote with the intent to teach and encourage the inquirer or potential practitioner to engage in the practice they describe. They offer a call for "an involvement by 'outsiders' in what may prove to be the religion of the future"³⁴². They consider the irreligious practice of domination hoodoo to be a spiritual refuge for white bodies to turn to instead of Christianity, which they consider a faith practice managed by "a narrow spectrum of humanity- straight white males of no talent and small intelligence- who are acceptable in the eyes of 'God'"³⁴³. Hyatt and Black present hoodoo as an outlet for consumers who want to opt out of a religious system³⁴⁴ and instead what to engage in a magical practice that

³⁴⁰ 3

³⁴¹ kindle location 186

³⁴² Kindle location 92-4

³⁴³ Kindle Location 136-8

³⁴⁴ represented in this text by Christianity

promises them power over the bodies and wills of others without remorse. They refer to Christianity and its accompanying moral system to an “attack ... on the civil rights,- if not the very existence- of certain groups of people who will no longer submit to psychological disfigurement.”³⁴⁵ The promise of power gained through domination hoodoo is the weapons that will help white bodies win this war. There is a specific emphasis on white bodies as the recipients of victory through the use of hoodoo. When describing the attack, and the “distinct cultures, cultures with different goals, lifestyles, and religion”³⁴⁶, it is explicitly explained that they were not referring to “some racial problem”³⁴⁷. Hyatt and Black make clear that they are writing for white bodies that want a system of power that sidesteps morality or what is modally considered to be religion. To further clarify their assertion that the practice they offer is based solely in domination, they promise the reader that they will not tell them “that curses are forbidden and will ‘rebound on the sender’” and that ideas of morality attached to hoodoo are “rubbish promoted by failures”.³⁴⁸ With the American Imaginary fully assured of the idea that hoodoo is a system based in power and domination that is designed for white consumption, the text continues to detail acts of hoodoo based domination and offer instructions on how to enact them.

The authors also explicitly state that the purpose of the work is to showcase the ways in which they use hoodoo as a system of violent magic to harm and subdue others, especially Black bodies. The authors also assert that they are in solidarity

³⁴⁵ Kindle location 163-5

³⁴⁶ kindle location 162-3

³⁴⁷ ibid

³⁴⁸ Kindle location 191-3

with the “ancient Voodoo gods” when they claim that “desire is honorable, that anger may well be justified, that the will to power is nothing to be ashamed of”³⁴⁹. They are of course speaking of their own desire for domination; when Black women are described in the text as using hoodoo, they are described as witches and prostitutes.³⁵⁰ It is a story of physical domination and magical violence inflicted against a Black woman that serves as the first example of hoodoo practice in the text, and functions as the seminal example of the authors’ presumed power and prowess that they access time and time again in the work.

In a reflection written by Hyatt, he reminisces about a “clinically obese Black woman who sat at the desk” next to him³⁵¹ at a former job. He describes her as jovial and simpering around the boss, but as “doing whatever the hell she wanted”³⁵² to him and others he worked with. After expressing the desire to physically assault her³⁵³ and to disfigure her with a staple remover³⁵⁴ he proceeds into a description of a psychic voodoo doll he makes of the woman. To quote at length, he reminisces

In it, I saw a pair of hands (mine) molding what appeared to be soft Black wax into a the lumpy form of what the woman at work would look like if I had the misfortune to see her naked. When this work was done, the hands took a box of pins and stuck them into the figure’s stomach until it looked like a pincushion.³⁵⁵

According to Hyatt, he then became aware that he had the power to use hoodoo magic to affect the woman³⁵⁶ and informs the consumer that the next day at work,

³⁴⁹ Kindle location 186-88

³⁵⁰ Kindle locations 186 and 995

³⁵¹ Kindle location 224

³⁵² *ibid*

³⁵³ Kindle location 229

³⁵⁴ Kindle location 233

³⁵⁵ Kindle Locations 233-238

³⁵⁶ Kindle location 243

“SHE”³⁵⁷ doubles over with stomach pain and has to be hospitalized. Hyatt is extremely gleeful in his act of domination through the creation of a mental voodoo doll and credits this as the catalyst for his interest in the practice. He repeatedly emphasizes the race and sexual undesirability of his victim, describing her as a obese Black woman, and noting how the wax doll he mentally created was both Black and shaped similar to her *unfortunate* and naked body. He then is able to mentally enact the acts of physical violence that he is unwilling to do in public. Through a magic practice, that he and Black have systematical and rhetorically separated from Black bodies and culture in their text, he is able to dominate and harm.

The authors provide the consumer with multiple examples of of their prowess in hoodoo and the ways in which it can be used to harm and dominate others, especially Black women. Black again provides a narrative detailing a visit he paid to a former friend who hired a woman to do housework and hoodoo. Hyatt immediately sexualizes her³⁵⁸ and upon seeing her, states that he was attracted to her, but put off by her growl of communication³⁵⁹ and “the stare of a big Black man”³⁶⁰ who stood near her. The woman, who is presented only as an attractive body, is in the kitchen, practicing hoodoo. She cuts the head off of a live chicken and, chanted, and squirted “the blood into the pot”³⁶¹. While all of this takes place in a small kitchen in an LA apartment, Black claims that he was surrounded by “the smell

³⁵⁷ Kindle Location 247

³⁵⁸ "Was she beautiful and would I like to date her." Kindle location 928

³⁵⁹ Kindle location 954

³⁶⁰ Kindle Location 955

³⁶¹ Kindle location 955

of grass, the beat of jungle drums, the candle flickering, the women gyrating, the Black man staring and the jumping chicken”³⁶². He was later nudged towards the pot, spurred on by “the big Black man” who stood behind him³⁶³. He was horrified when he saw “the indented shape of a human form with a small needle in its heart and a drop of blood.”³⁶⁴

This is the only instance in the text where hoodoo is presented as negative, horrifying and evil. Black even refers to the woman in the kitchen as a “witch”³⁶⁵. This example is also the only occasion in the text where hoodoo is presented as something actively being done by Black bodies. Here, Black associates the magic practice engaged by the nameless women in the kitchen³⁶⁶ with the childishness and violence. He mentally connects her with images from his childhood where he “used to stick pins into bugs and imagine the bugs were [his] enemies or [his] parents. [He] remembered torturing a cat and calling it by someone else’s name.” There is a large discrepancy in the way these two incidences of hoodoo³⁶⁷ are presented. The acts of violence and hoodoo that Black engaged in were childish, and he was “practicing an organic, primitive religion”³⁶⁸ but his acts were not evil because the torturing of cats or insect did not actually harm people.³⁶⁹ He couches the concept of blame and evil in race. He, “as a white man, felt guilty over [his] death chants even

³⁶² Kindle location 955-960

³⁶³ Kindle location 964

³⁶⁴ Kindle location 964-970

³⁶⁵ Kindle location 978. He also tells the man who allows the *witch* in his house “You used to have so much class.”

³⁶⁶ who he refers to as a *witch*

³⁶⁷ as claimed by Hyatt and Black

³⁶⁸ kindle location 990

³⁶⁹ He makes no reference to his earlier story about using a mental voodoo doll to torture a woman who he worked with, nor does he show any remorse in the text for those actions.

twenty years later while she didn't"³⁷⁰. Black claims that the *witch* who is practicing hoodoo³⁷¹ is evil and primitive. However, when it is his white body, either adult or child, he is without guilt and within his rights to practice this system of domination.

The examples of interaction between hoodoo and Black bodies are always presented as deviant, childish, hyper sexualized, or evil. The authors refer to all of the Black women that they encounters as prostitutes³⁷² and as witches. In addition to being presented as deviant, hyper-sexualized witches, Black practitioners were incapable of telling the truth about hoodoo. When Black has an interaction with a prostitute³⁷³, he requests that she tell him about hoodoo. When she tells him "You are not a doer but a dabbler. You play, you don't believe because real Voodoo would terrify you"³⁷⁴, he dismisses her, calls her a liar³⁷⁵, and claims he is "bored with her superiority"³⁷⁶. To drive the point home that she was unsuitable to communicate anything meaningful or important to either him or the consumer, Black states that he was sure his hoodoo practicing prostitute was still "psychologically speaking, living in a jungle"³⁷⁷. By continually emphasizing the savage, primitive, and hyper-sexualized assertions that the authors are making about the bodies of Black practitioners, they reify the narrative that hoodoo has no place in Black hands. In order for the faith to be communicated and properly consumed by the American

³⁷⁰ Kindle location 990

³⁷¹ as described as a system of domination magic in the book

³⁷² Location 995, 935, 998, 1035, 1071, 1081, 1084

³⁷³ who he attempts not to pay

³⁷⁴ kindle location 1065

³⁷⁵ Kindle location 1039

³⁷⁶ Kindle location 1075

³⁷⁷ Kindle Location 1080

Imagination, it has to be communicated through white non-adherents who have braved the savage faith and brought back a safe narrative.

The vast majority of *Urban Voodoo* contains the recounting of Hyatt and Black's mastery of hoodoo, which offers various accounts and instructions for physically punishment and animal cruelty in an attempt to contact the ancient voodoo gods. The authors assure the consumer that the process of enacting hoodoo spells "are very little different from European witchcraft"³⁷⁸ in order to distance it from the primitive practices engaged by Black prostitutes. The book then offers a collection of 13 spells, 11 of them focusing explicitly on domination or harm.³⁷⁹ While a general sense of domination and harm drives *pulp hoodoo* texts, *Urban Voodoo's* exhibits a particular insistence of using hoodoo as a means to subdue and sexually dominate the bodies of women. When briefly describing the ways in which the practice of hoodoo described by the authors empowered them, one of the authors claims to have attempted a magic act in order to "entice a girl to have sex with [him]."³⁸⁰ Although his act of controlling magic was unsuccessful, he still enjoyed and continued to remember "the feeling of power it produced in [him]."³⁸¹ The authors then continue the promise of power and excitement as they instruct the consumers to practice hoodoo to subdue others.

Wicked Voodoo Sex

³⁷⁸ Kindle location 2482

³⁷⁹ These include four spells that will grant the caster sexual control over another person, a spell to create dissension in the lives of others, and four spells that detail physically harming enemies. Kindle locations 2482-2547

³⁸⁰ Kindle location 912

³⁸¹ Kindle location 913 and location 951

The body of *pulp* *hoodoo* works focus on physical domination of others; the genre is created to both allow the authors to indulge in congratulatory tales of their own supposed prowess, and promise the consumers access to the wellspring of forced subjugation. While sexual domination appears in *pulp* works that are largely focused on punishment, physical violence and revenge as is seen in *Urban Voodoo*, *there* exist a separate wing that deals explicitly with the dubious combination of sex and hoodoo. Kathleen Charlotte's *Wicked Voodoo Sex* is such a text. It is a curious mix of instructions for sexual acts, spells, popular hoodoo narratives, and sexy tips. All of these involve varying levels of consent. For example, Charlotte instructs consumers that a powerful hoodoo sex spell involves having men trick women into consuming their sperm³⁸². Her introduction accesses the familiar trope of the educated Westerner who is initiated into hoodoo³⁸³. Where many *pulp* texts regale consumers with their initiation story³⁸⁴ in order to establish a reason for their access to magical powers and control, Charlotte claims the initiation transformed her into a "spiritual slut"³⁸⁵, a position that imbued her with sexual powers. Powers that are easily accessible to the American Imaginary through her text and psychic initiation. Charlotte firmly presents herself within the text as the Western conduit, who is skilled at translating magic practice from Black bodies and rendering them acceptable. She claims "in Haiti, there remains to this day a hidden society within Voodoo that exists to preserve the teaching of the Horae and their practices of

³⁸² "Sperm magic works when she drinks in your will" Kindle location 702-3.

³⁸³ or in this case, a sect of Voodoo run by the Horae, a cult of sacred prostitutes dedicated to Aphrodite. Kindle location 95.

³⁸⁴ Kindle location 129

³⁸⁵ Kindle location 97

sexual magic. It is called the Sisterhood of the Miracles of Night, and through its secret knowledge, you can reclaim your power and start your own sexual revolution to become the wholly happy, holy healing slut the goddess always intended you to be!”³⁸⁶ She references a secret voodoo society named “The Sisterhood of the Miracles of Night”³⁸⁷ that exists solely for the purpose of carrying on the sexual traditions of Aphrodite and teaching its sexual secrets to consumers of *Wicked Voodoo Sex*.

Charlotte’s work and other sexual *pulp hoodoo* texts tap directly into the American Imaginary’s narratives regarding sex, hoodoo, and women’s bodies. As hoodoo is presented as a mysterious magical practice that gives individuals the power of domination, it is presented in texts like *Urban Voodoo*, that framed hoodoo as a masculine practice and depicted women that engaged in it as prostitutes and witches, and other manifestations of the American Imaginary³⁸⁸ as an anxiety provoking practice, especially when in proximity to women’s bodies. This anxiety around the combination of women’s bodies and hoodoo is the reason that there is such a large consumptive desire for both types of *pulp hoodoo* texts: the domination and subjugation branch, represented by texts like *Urban Voodoo* that are projected to a decidedly masculine audience, and sexual texts like Charlotte’s work, that are projected for feminine audiences.³⁸⁹ While one of the aims of *pulp hoodoo* texts is to provide the American Imaginary with a sense of horror, texts like *Wicked Voodoo*

³⁸⁶ Kindle location 122-125

³⁸⁷ Kindle Location 125. Which doesn’t sound made up at all, especially for Haitian religious practices.

³⁸⁸ like horror films, television shows, comic books, and the other mediums explored in this dissertation

³⁸⁹ I use the terms masculine and feminine here, but am fully aware of the complexity inherent in the conception of binaries when it comes to sex, gender, and consumption.

Sex are decidedly more horrifying to the American Imagination. Conventional, cultural narratives surrounding hoodoo have historically and perpetually presented hoodoo as a dangerous, unacceptable pastime for respectable American bodies. Historically, the practice was considered not only “a potential breeding ground for rebellion³⁹⁰, it was perceived as a horrifying brew of sorcery, devil worship, interracial fraternization and sexual license”.³⁹¹ Modern variations of those same fears are made manifest in the contemporary imagination. The narratives of danger constructed around pop hoodoo are steeped in fears surrounding Black bodies, Black religions, and the idea of those subjugated bodies gaining some sort of power over the larger cultural discourse. When *pulp hoodoo* texts make some representation of the practice accessible to the American Imaginary with the promise to remove Blackness from the equation of power, those anxieties are transferred to the bodies of women. Charlotte’s book is focused on empowering women, by turning them into “holy sluts” who can wield hoodoo as a power system to indulge their own desires.

While *Wicked Voodoo Sex* promises to empower the feminine reader through the powers of hoodoo, it still indulges in the familiar narratives regarding the faith that are highly prevalent in the American Imagination. The most common is the idea that hoodoo is a magical practice constructed by Black bodies to be completely in service of the American Imaginary. Charlotte often references her initiation and how excited, humble, and willing the Haitians were to bring her into their secret

³⁹⁰ both historically in the case of slave revolts in America and the colonies

³⁹¹ Long 88

practices.³⁹² The text indulges in the utilization of the loa, as magical servants and mystic, sexual Santa Clauses. For example Charlotte encourages the consumers to instruct the loa Erzuile with this prayer³⁹³: “I call you to bless and protect me, to energize, relax and refresh me, and to hold me in your love and wisdom so I am safe on the journey I take in Voodoo”³⁹⁴. In several locations in the text, the American Imaginary is encouraged to demand pleasure from the loa, and informed “Voodoo is about the magical manipulation of energies for the purposes of their own pleasures. The practice, learned from a “third world country”³⁹⁵ is presented as something designed only for Western pleasure and the loa³⁹⁶ are medium to bring enjoyment. For example, Charlotte claims that Ogoun’s role is to offer the consumer “sexual power, as well as the power to know yourself, your needs, and to embrace your sexuality fully.”³⁹⁷ In addition to helping the American Imaginary embrace it “sexuality fully”³⁹⁸, the loa also exist to sexually service the consumers. She encourages the consumer to psychically request sex of the loa, stating that “the gods of Voodoo enjoy sex as much as anyone and know the value of a creative union, so they’re unlikely to turn you down.”³⁹⁹ The consumer is encouraged to make these demands to the loa without sacrifice, worship, or creation of a vèvè; Charlotte indulges in the use of the loa and other words specific to Hoodoo practice as a marker of her magical authenticity.

³⁹² Kindle location 333, kindle location 231-232

³⁹³ who Charlotte informs the reader is a hoodoo Aphrodite kindle location 206

³⁹⁴ Kindle location 206

³⁹⁵ Kindle location 333

³⁹⁶ Especially Erzulie and Ogoun in this text

³⁹⁷ Kindle location 375-6

³⁹⁸ *ibid*

³⁹⁹ Kindle location 1436-8

While the ideas of power and pleasure are at the forefront of *pulp hoodoo* texts, they, much like the other pop hoodoo mediums this dissertation explores, are at their heart talking about race. Hoodoo is always presented as a focus point to which anxieties about Western domination, Black cultural visibility, and sexual access are made manifest. *Pulp hoodoo* texts engage in the same work that horror films, television shows, and video games do regarding reducing the faith and practice into “the products of a highly conservative colonialist imaginary.”⁴⁰⁰ Every self-constructed manifestation of pop-hoodoo in the American Imaginary, whether it be in *pulp* texts, video games, movies, or even doughnuts, revolves closely around the simultaneous consumption and denial of Black faiths, cultures, and bodies. The final chapter of this dissertation, *White Witches*, will directly examine the ways in which race, fear, and sexuality play out in the American Imagination’s narratives about the faith.

⁴⁰⁰ Krywinksa, 157

White Witches and Voodoo Girls: Hoodoo and Digital Domination

“Hit her up with the dead stuff.” – *Voodoo Girl*
“Somebody been workin’ roots on you!” – *The Skeleton Key*

Although texts like *Urban Voodoo* and *Wicked Voodoo Sex* can easily be found crowding the stacks of chain and used bookstores, they ultimately leave their consumers unsatisfied. Despite their lurid tales and breathy promise of physical and sexual domination, they overwhelmingly fail to provide the consumer with the powers they so desperately seek. These instruction manuals that are distinctly tied to the narratives constructed by the American Imaginary only serve to perpetuate and recreate violent and highly sexualized role plays, rather than imbue the readers of these texts with powers. No matter how many spells chanted in iambic pentameter, or potions brimming with ingredients from an inaccessible *Botanica* the works contain, they fail to live up to their domination-based promises. When the American Imaginary turns from these texts in search of validation for the fantasies bound to racial and sexual domination, it seeks out other pervasive, and highly accessible mediums: movies and video games. This dissertation is no stranger to these forms of hoodoo-based goods. Rather than fleshing out specific objects, this chapter focuses on the racial and sexual narratives that they are steeped in. In all of the artifacts constructed and maintained in the larger consumer culture, hoodoo is always presented as a fluid site of sexual and racial transgression and pleasure. In the instructional/confessional books examined in *Binary in the Bookshelf*, the American Imaginary is forced to get its hands dirty, so to speak, and to engage

directly and physically with the bodies they wish to dominate. The violence that the authors of *Urban Voodoo* supposedly inflicted on their enemies worked only on close proximity, and the close quarters necessitated by the instructions given by Charlotte are obvious. When consumers tire of the promises offered by hoodoo instructional manuals, they often turn to movies and video games. The representations of the practice in these mediums offer controllable fantasies that are pleasurable and safe.

Similar to the prior chapter's thematic division along the lines of sex and murder, this chapter splits along the highly visible lines of whiteness and sexual domination. The term *whiteness* is used instead of race for very specific reasons. The first is that hoodoo is already inherently tied to Black bodies; in all the objects and movies, Black practitioners are depicted as evil, outside of progress, and revealing in their Black magic. The reason hoodoo is able to function as an exotic and enticing cultural offering is that is so obviously and distinctly racially positioned away from whiteness. When the American Imagination builds and indulges in hoodoo artifacts, they draw from narratives that position hoodoo as "a primitive physicality, a satanic sensuality threatening to overcome white Christian civilization."⁴⁰¹ hoodoo is always presented as a deviant system enacted by Black bodies⁴⁰² that must be subdued and ultimately mastered by white protagonists. In many of the commodities examined in this dissertation, hoodoo has been firmly attached to Black bodies. This is because the larger Imaginary has constructed images that reflect its own colonial and white supremacist longings. They appropriate "real

⁴⁰¹ Douglas, 8

⁴⁰² Specifically see the chapter on possession

Voudou's subaltern existence, its ties to African religious and cultural practices, its widely feared connections to Black conspiracy and slave rebellion, and ... is powerful women of color"⁴⁰³ and restructure it into images and conditions that can best benefit white protagonists. When I deconstruct whiteness in this chapter, I will examine multiple cinematic and game based objects, and the ways in which they present hoodoo as a way to glorify and construct narratives around and for white protagonists.

The highly binary roles of Black practitioners and white protagonists are just as visible in the objects whose primary objective is to fulfill fantasies of sexual domination. The fantasies about racial domination and the elevation of white protagonists carries into the directly sexual presentations of these objects; specific artifacts, like the porn video game *Voodoo Girl*, center white bodies at the center of stereotypical narratives around "Black sexual and social danger, helping justify the violence white men employed to police white women's sexuality"⁴⁰⁴, and Black people's social status"⁴⁰⁵. In hoodoo manifestations that are explicitly sexual, as is the case in texts like *Urban Voodoo*, *Wicked Voodoo Sex* and *Voodoo Girl*, white protagonists exhibit their magical and sexual mastery by subduing and dominating practitioners, often using the magical practices that they learned from their victims. The gendered balance of these interactions most frequently depicts white males sexually dominating Black, female practitioners⁴⁰⁶. In objects that center on

⁴⁰³ Gordon 772

⁴⁰⁴ And demand sexual access to the bodies of Black women, specifically in this case, practitioners

⁴⁰⁵ Gordon 780

⁴⁰⁶ "Popular culture provides countless examples of Black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it." (hooks, 65)

whiteness, the Black practitioner is occasionally in a role that is subservient and constructed to aid and protect the white protagonists⁴⁰⁷; in goods that are specifically sexualized, practitioners are “wild sexual savages” that “emerged from the desires of a white patriarchal controlled media”⁴⁰⁸ that shapes the concept of reality around Black practitioner’s bodies and the practice.

The driving force behind the American Imaginary’s use of hoodoo to fulfill its fantasies or racial and sexual domination is the idea of distance and consumption. Mimi Sheller, in her work *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawks to Zombies* examines the roles that white tourists enact when they encounter Caribbean people and landscapes. To quote her at length, she writes

Northern consumers are able to experience their proximity to Caribbean people as pleasurable even when it manifestly involves relations of subordination, degradation, or violation. And conversely, when Caribbean commodities are consumed in the North they are experienced as ‘getting closer to’ or ‘touching’ the essence of the Caribbean⁴⁰⁹, even when they manifestly involve limitations on the mobility of the very people who have produced those commodities. Bodily (im)mobility, therefore, are a crucial nexus of the system of the transatlantic exchange that depend on embodied relations of distance, proximity, and copresence at different moments in the process of production and consumption.⁴¹⁰

The Northern tourist that Sheller writes about occupies the same ideological space as the consumer in the American Imaginary. Both of these subject positions find and take enjoyment, fulfillment, and pleasure in the consumption of products, images, and ideas rooted in Black bodies. Both hoodoo and Caribbean commodities are shaped by the consumer’s imagination, where a specific level of “authenticity” is

⁴⁰⁷ This chapter will examine “magical Negro” characters, and the ways in which they are constructed by the American Imaginary to prop up and legitimize white consumption of hoodoo

⁴⁰⁸ *Black Looks*. (hooks, 67).

⁴⁰⁹ (hooks, 1992; Cook and Crang 1996)

⁴¹⁰ 27

demand; by this I mean that the consumer has to be able to view their desires and preconceived notions in the goods and images they are consuming and receiving. These objects are mired in narratives of white supremacy. In order for the consumers to maintain this imaginary, a certain distance from everything must be maintained. In this project, distance must be maintained from “real world” practitioners⁴¹¹, *Hoodoo*, and all of its acts and embodiments⁴¹². Instead, consumers and the larger imaginary interact with digital images, actresses, and scenes; all imagined constructions that can be controlled and disposed of at will.

The fantasies of hoodoo based racial domination and sexual conquest revolve around a small group of very specific figures: white witches, voodoo girls, magical Negroes, and white heroes. These four archetypes exist across all of the commodities present within the dissertation. The *white witch* always white, female protagonist who is placed in a dangerous situation, and quickly masters hoodoo in order to save herself and vanquish an evil and out of control manifestation of hoodoo conjured up by a Black practitioner. This character is often taught how to master hoodoo by the *magical Negro* character. This is most often a larger, maternal, *mammy* figure who is in place to protect and teach the *white witch* how to master hoodoo. The *magical Negro* is often presented as powerful, but she only uses this power to instruct, rather than to better her own situation, or that of other Black practitioners. The *magical Negro* is ultimately disposable, and after the *white witch* is done learning from her, she is either killed or disappears from the text/narrative.

⁴¹¹ This means living practitioners who practice *Hoodoo* in the physical and tangible landscape of the United States of America

⁴¹² Like possession.

The *voodoo girl* archetype⁴¹³ is the hoodoo equivalent of the jezebel. She is hyper sexualized, both in terms of her appearance and her practice of hoodoo. The spells and rituals she practices are focused on causing pain for others and sexual pleasure for herself. The *voodoo* girl is always constructed as deviant and her body is a site of conquest for *white hero*. This final archetype is often seen in video games: it is a nameless white male, who dominates *voodoo girls*, learns magic from *magical Negroes* and uses or disposes of it as he sees fit. The *white hero* is the epitome of patriarchy and the ways in which the American Imaginary views hoodoo as disposable, consumable, and something quickly mastered. While these archetypes exist across multiple mediums, this chapter will situate them within the specific sites of the films *Venom*, and *The Skeleton Key*, the video games *Dead Island* and *Risen 2*, and the interactive porn game, *Voodoo Girl*.

Archetypes

All of the commodities explored in this dissertation follow extremely similar arcs: hoodoo is either a system of power that white heroes and protagonists can quickly tap into and master, or is a site of Black deviance that must be controlled by the same white hero before practitioners wreck havoc on the community. Strict binaries of good and evil are maintained both for white and Black bodies attached to the practice. White bodies are heroes and victims, who either use master the Black arts of hoodoo or are harmed by it to serve as evidence for why hoodoo should be stopped. There is a singular exception to this representation, which is seen in *The Skeleton Key*; this exception will be explored later in the chapter. Black bodies are

⁴¹³ This archetype borrows its name from the interactive porn game *Voodoo Girl*

evil *magical Negroes* who are powerful but only present to shield and protect the white protagonist, or jezebels and witch doctors, whose bodies must be vanquished and controlled.

The *magical Negro* figure is a staple in the American Imaginary's investment in hoodoo. The character is always presented as a dark skinned, often large Black woman who exists in the plot only to instruct the white protagonist, witch, or hero in hoodoo practices. While she is depicted as having a great deal of mastery over her practice, the reason for her power is grounded in the teaching of white bodies. In situations of danger or oppression, she is not able to use her magic to save herself, and is often abandoned or killed. For example, in the movie *Venom* (2005), a zombie/monster is created by the hoodoo work of a grandmother/magical Black woman. She is unable to both stop the monster her magic created, or save her own life. As the monster goes on to rampage about the town, her granddaughter takes on the mantle of the Magical Negro. She quickly teaches hoodoo to her white best friend when confronted by the monster. After the quick instruction, the second Magical Negro figure is killed, and her white best friend goes on to use hoodoo to conquer the zombie and save the town. Her role as an important site of knowledge and culture in the film is always temporary; early in the narrative, this archetype often engages in a display of power to define herself as a powerful practitioner and a strong magical force within the narrative. However, this show of strength is only in place in order to legitimize the power obtained by the white protagonist, hero or witch. After a few brief interactions with the magical *Negro*, the white hero has powers that greatly surpass her, and they become masters of this dominantly Black

practice⁴¹⁴. In various mediums, from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) to *The Skeleton Key* (2005), the *magical Negro* functions as the mammy figure. In hoodoo artifacts, her only purpose is the care and wellbeing of white protagonists. Her large, comforting body, familiar headscarf, and subservient coddling of the protagonist⁴¹⁵ are all markers of the mammy⁴¹⁶ stereotype that are “manufactured as ‘controlling images’ in systems of power⁴¹⁷” that “create the process of ‘un-mirroring,’ in which struggles for Black female subjectivity constantly grate against the distorted images of the dominant culture.”⁴¹⁸ The American Imaginary creates these images of Black women’s bodies as sites of thankless instruction, and as disposable bodies. Despite their comforting and protection of the white protagonist, they as characters are rarely given significant face time⁴¹⁹ in their movies or video games, and they are never mentioned again after their moment of utility has passed. When the white protagonist no longer needs a mammy, the *magical Negro* figure is killed without a second thought.

This character manifests all of the fears associated with racial deviance; they are either represented as queer⁴²⁰ socially non productive in other ways. In using the term “non productive”, I reference productivity in a neo-liberal, Western sense. The negative representations of *magical Negroes* are not involved in the larger,

⁴¹⁴ Which is the case for both Jill and the nameless woman in *The Skeleton Key*, and the case for CeCe (the granddaughter) in *Venom*.

⁴¹⁵ Mama Cynthia in *the Skeleton Key* calls Caroline “child” repeatedly in a way that is meek and subservient, not infantilizing.

⁴¹⁶ “Mammy, an overweight Black woman who took care of the white master’s children, without concern for her own.” (Benshoff, 76).

⁴¹⁷ Collins, 1990, 72

⁴¹⁸ Hobson 15

⁴¹⁹ And very often, they are nameless within the plots or storylines

⁴²⁰ Both in terms of sexuality and in cultural visibility

dominant society. They are often presented as charlatans, or cultural predators that live in isolation and fail to use their powers to benefit the protagonist or other white bodies in the narrative. These representations are put in place as foils to the “positive” representations, where the practitioner uses their mastery of hoodoo to aid the white protagonist and ensure her safety. While many benevolent representations embody the mammy caricatures⁴²¹, newer manifestations of helpful young women⁴²² have begun to manifest. Regardless of their physical representation, they are in place to provide sympathetic foils to the evil practitioner, and fulfill their most important role of protecting and instructing the protagonist in the ways of hoodoo. While the power of the Magical Negro figure is highly visible, they are not the sources of hoodoo most respected or acknowledge in the film; they are the conduits to elevate the white practitioner to her fullest heights.



Figure 2: Voodoo Girl"⁴²³



Figure 3 "Voodoo Girl"⁴²⁴

On the opposite side of this representational binary is the *voodoo girl*, a highly sexualized, half naked, nubile Black body whose presence in hoodoo

⁴²¹ They often are depicted as large, kindly women. They are shapelessly dressed, asexual, and at the ready to pamper and pander to the protagonist.

⁴²² As seen in *Venom* in CeCe and *The Skeleton Key* in Jill

⁴²³ <http://artforadults.tumblr.com/post/13827855279/voodoo-priestess-by-kent-floris>

⁴²⁴ <http://www.funny-games.biz/seduce-voodoo-girl.html>. This is a still from the porn game *Voodoo Girl*

commodities is to provide the white protagonists with sites of sexual conquest and “an excuse for expressing ‘baser’ transgression proper white society disallowed.”⁴²⁵ Her body is present in every imaginable artifact, from hot sauce bottles to video games; she is created, acted, or drawn in order to entice the American Imagination into dominating and consuming them. The often half, or more than half naked bodies of *Voodoo Girls* are used as enticements to the consumers. When the American Imaginary eats, watches, or controls these bodies through video games, sauces and movies, they link hoodoo to the sexual conquest of Black women, and the infinite controllability of their bodies, and the ultimately disposability of the faith. This is especially the case for the in the video game, *Voodoo Girl*, where the ultimate goal of the game is to use *Hoodoo* phrases and terms to gain sexual and power based access to her body.

hoodoo follows the same trajectory as the *voodoo girl's* body in terms of accessibility, and opportunities for mastery⁴²⁶. The bodies of *voodoo girls* follow the same animated models for *performative crash sites* as Chani's from *Risen 2*. These bodies are constructed sites that are completely created, managed and controlled by the white Imaginary to serve as a supposed stand in for authentic Blackness. In both the case of Chani and the *voodoo girl* from the interactive, pornographic game, the digital bodies are not voiced by Black actresses. In every step of their creation, they are constructed to titillate the consumptive audience, who will equate the digital forms they are dominating with Blackness. These images perpetuate domination

⁴²⁵ Dunson, 48.

⁴²⁶ Undesirable in the conventional in sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to extend that it is idealized an unattainable, the Black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant” (hooks, 65-66).

fantasies that leave women's bodies open to sexual and colonial violence; the sexual and cultural subservience written into these characters justifies whatever action the game controller takes against them. Although there is nothing Black about these digital bodies but their animated skin tones, they are forced to stand in the place of *real* Black women's bodies in the popular discourse. All of the narratives of sexual subservience, religious negation, and savagery that these virtual bodies perpetuate are attached to bodies in the lived world.

When the American Imaginary links sexual fantasies and domination of Black bodies to hoodoo, it is overtly engaging in the historic narratives that situate Black women's bodies as spaces of wildness, corruption, and deviance. When the white hero dominates, conquers, and masters both the practice of hoodoo and the bodies of the *voodoo girl*, he is asserting his superiority and positioning whiteness as the only possible civilizing factor. In *Consuming the Caribbean*, Sheller describes white tourism into Caribbean spaces as excursions into " 'going native', to crossing the frontier of another culture, never to return.⁴²⁷" There is an inherent danger implied in going native, where it is highly possible for white bodies to be corrupted by the Blackness they encounter. This corruption takes the form of sickness, mutilation, madness, or death; all maladies caused by proximity to Black bodies and Black cultural practices. What the American Imaginary offers itself in the sexualization of hoodoo and the creation of *voodoo girls* is the ability to voyage to, conquer, and dispose of their temporary interest with no ill effects. In the playing of a video game, or the viewing of a movie, the consumer is treated with the vision of a white male

⁴²⁷ Sheller, 111

body sexually and physical dominating a jezebel and her supposedly savage practice. The digital make up of these consumption sites allow the consumer to dispose of her both digitally, through the course of the game or movie, and physically, by turning away or the medium off when they have had their fill. The persistence of *voodoo girls* in the American Imaginary is testament to the larger desire to conquer supposed ideas of Black bodies and practices.

These archetypes are products of manufactured desire on the part of the American Imaginary. They, combined with other Black bodies attached to hoodoo, like the mammy-esque magical negroes, fall in line with historic tropes⁴²⁸ of Blackness that “have historically insured physical violence, poverty, institutional racism and second-class citizenry for Blacks.”⁴²⁹ The hoodoo based plot lines and the characters attached to it are creations of what the American Imaginary imagines both to be: savage, exotic, sexualized, but ultimately conquerable, accessible, and controllable. This is the case for all hoodoo-based artifacts built by the American Imaginary, from movies to doughnuts. They are all constructed to play out fantasies where Blackness is controllable and constructed⁴³⁰ and can be easily dominated.

Magical Negroes and *voodoo girls* embody the misrepresentation of both hoodoo and Black bodies that fall in line with Weisenfeld’s work on misrepresentation of Black Christianity⁴³¹. For both religious manifestations,

⁴²⁸ These include “Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, Jim Crow, Sambo, Zip Coon, pickaninny and Stepin Fetchit, and now enlarged to include welfare queen, prostitute, rapist, drug addict, prison inmate, etc.—” Johnson 4

⁴²⁹ Johnson 4

⁴³⁰ constructed in ways that establish whiteness as civilized and powerful, while Blackness is savage, sexualized, and degraded.

⁴³¹ For example, white writers depict heaven for Black people as a southern plantation: “Instead it points to a persistent fantasy among white writers who use African American religion in their work,

whiteness is the focal point of Black religious representations, gods⁴³², practitioners, and religious landscapes. The archetypes of the *magical Negro* and the *voodoo girl* are conjured up by the larger cultural imaginary as a means of controlling and shaping the forms of representations around Black bodies and practices. This has been consistent since the 19th century, where “Voodoo narratives expose key patterns and shifts in the discourses, logics, and instabilities of white patriarchal supremacy as whites responded to slavery, Emancipation, and the perceived dangers of Black citizenship.”⁴³³ While the fears of slave revolts and Black emancipation are things of the past, fears of surrounding the Black body still remained ingrained in the larger cultural discourse. It is significant that the vast majority of the *magical Negroes* and all of the *voodoo girls* are depicted as women; it is their gendered, imagined bodies that provide the fertile ground of conquest for the larger imaginary. The cultural landscape is still highly invested in the narrative of the “Black man as a vicious sexual predator”, a trope “born out of the gross misperception that all Black men had enlarged penises and excessive confidence gained from emancipation.”⁴³⁴ hoodoo artifacts are constructed to be consumable sites where the might and virility of the white protagonist is not brought into question. On the rare occasions where the Black penis is linked to hoodoo, it is in

that Blacks envision heaven in terms of the pastures of southern plantation life, a belief underscored in Connelly and Keighley’s forewords to the film.” 71

⁴³² For example in *American Horror Story: Coven*, the loa Papa Legba is represented as a drug addict and a hustler

⁴³³ Gordon, 768

⁴³⁴ Williams-Forson, 48

objects like the *Cock-n-Balls Doughnut*⁴³⁵, items that are meant to be destroyed in their consumption.

In each of these movies, video games, and other visible artifacts, white bodies are positioned at a *safe* center point. The idea of safety is a mobile one in many of these mediums; the protagonist is often chased, wounded, scared, and temporarily subdued by deviant Black bodies, but the arc of the narrative and the persistence of white supremacy over hoodoo practitioners necessitates their victory.⁴³⁶ The reasons for the victory of white protagonists and heroes are both raced and gendered. hoodoo is always depicted as a possessing and intrusive force. If the protagonists are defeated by Black practitioners, they become “vulnerable to intrusive forces” ... and “are in effect feminizing their bodies”⁴³⁷. This perception of Black mastery over white bodies upsets the narratives that the American Imagination has constructed around itself, and therefore is extremely rare in the popular culture. Instead, white protagonists are encouraged to view and control digital white bodies controlling and dominating Black bodies and practices. This digital and visual control allows the larger cultural imaginary to indulge in the acts of tourism and control that Sheller describes, but offers them the distance necessary to be unmarred by it. It also reinforces the Imaginary’s ability to create what images around hoodoo it sees fit, and ensures the any form of enjoyment or profit from it feeds back into itself.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ See the chapter of food and hoodoo

⁴³⁶ The one exception to this is *The Skeleton Key*, which will be examined further in this chapter

⁴³⁷ Masquelier, 89.

⁴³⁸ Because these images and commodities are created within a specific context of a white imaginary, real practitioners, or religious *Hoodoo* spaces are cut out from all input of representation or profit.

Opposite from the damaging and negative representations of practitioner's bodies is the depictions of *white witches* and protagonists. The figure of the *white witch* is a white woman who is able to quickly master hoodoo and use it for her own means. They are always presented as positive and empowering figures in their mediums⁴³⁹ and they use their newly mastered hoodoo powers to fight against violence, Black deviance, and other controlling social forces. For *white witches*, hoodoo is a type of fairy-tale magic that allows them to dominate those around them. Her abilities and whiteness offer both binary gender identities in the American Imaginary an opportunity to identify with a hero and dominate the practice. "The very structure of classical Hollywood narrative form encourages all spectators, regardless of their actual color, to identify with white protagonists."⁴⁴⁰ I would argue that this is the same in regards to gender, but the American Imaginary constructs heroes on both sides of the gendered binary in order to give the vast majority of consumers a body to identify with. In her work, *Misfit Sisters*, Sue Short explores the link between women's bodies⁴⁴¹, fairy tales, and horror movies; she writes, "fairy tales and horror share a number of elements, including the possibilities of pleasure offered by a fictional domain in which many rules cease to apply."⁴⁴² In the imagined landscapes that *white witches* exist in, they are able to quickly subvert the rules that are strictly applied to *magical Negroes* and *voodoo girls*. They are able to learn and wield hoodoo without stigma, and they are not tortured with sexual domination or punished with death. *White witches* often use

⁴³⁹ As is the case in *Venom*, and *The Skeleton Key*

⁴⁴⁰ Benshoff, 54.

⁴⁴¹ All of the examples offered and deconstructed in this text were bodies of white characters

⁴⁴² 22

their newly acquired mastery of hoodoo to subvert patriarchy, and dominate Black bodies.

The contemporary *white witch* is a rather recent phenomenon. In movies featuring hoodoo from the early 20th century⁴⁴³, the bodies of white women were props to move along the narrative of white masculinity, or victims of Black practitioners who used hoodoo to overturn the dominant discourse's racial and gendered order. *White witches* in contemporary commodities are shown mastering hoodoo; their mastery is constructed as a triumph over negative and evil forces, and they viewed as having "an unparalleled degree of agency."⁴⁴⁴ During this process, the fact that they

acquire elements of "monstrosity" in breaking with convention, and are frequently ostracized in their communities, is considered to be one of their most alluring features, and it is suggested that the trials they face, and the levels of courage and determination shown, our⁴⁴⁵ sympathy and admiration are evoked.⁴⁴⁶

Unlike *voodoo girls* who are intensely and violently punished for their mastery of hoodoo, or *magical Negroes*, whose only purpose for existing is to teach the *white witch* the practice, this character is rarely punished for her association with hoodoo. More often than not, she is constructed as victorious, powerful, and worthy of a great deal of praise. The one contemporary exception to this rule is in the movie, *The Skeleton Key*, where Caroline, the *witch*/ protagonist is severely punished⁴⁴⁷ for her attempts at hoodoo mastery. The viewer's of this film did not see her punishment as

⁴⁴³ These films include *White Zombie* (1932), *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943), and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988)

⁴⁴⁴ Short, 3

⁴⁴⁵ In this case, the "our" represents the larger American Imaginary

⁴⁴⁶ Short, 3

⁴⁴⁷ She has her body and youth stolen by Mama Cecil, a Black practitioner

justified or entertaining, as is the case when Black practitioners are punished⁴⁴⁸. Rather, the whiteness of the protagonist and the suffering of multiple white bodies at the hands of Black hoodoo practitioners was viewed as horrific, rather than justified. More gravity in the film was attached to the suffering of the taking of Caroline's body than to Papa Justify and Mama Cecil, who suffered a graphic lynching scene.

Mediums

While the above archetypes exist across all mediums in the larger consumer imaginary, there is something specific about their presence in movies and video game that warrants special attention. Both of these visual mediums are highly controllable by the purchaser: a movie watcher can pause to linger on a specific scene, fast forward and rewind to control the pace of the narrative, and stop to dispose of the story all together. The amount of control the consumer has in video games is even higher. The player is able to move and choose the interaction of the white hero/protagonist or occasionally that of the Black practitioner. This control is situated within an imagined landscape that reinforces the narratives that the larger culture has created around hoodoo and the Black bodies it has attached to it. In short, consumers are allowed to move within and control their own imaginary narratives.

Movies are a popular and highly accessible site for the dominant culture to display and retrench its perceptions and attitudes around Black bodies and

⁴⁴⁸ Short notes that "certain characters may be demonized as 'dangerous' in some way yet the punishment this yields, far from being approved by viewers, may...be 'elided' instead, along with any other elements that are obviously designed to fit a patriarchal agenda, rather than a feminist one." 3.

practices, like hoodoo. In *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, Judith Weisenfeld examines the ways in which Black religious life has historically intersected with film, especially when white filmmakers turned their cameras to gaze at Black religiosity. She writes, “film, as a significant contributor to the discursive productions of race, gender, and sexuality in America, deserves an important place in any discussion of the technology of race.”⁴⁴⁹ This is very much the case with hoodoo, as it has been a fixture in American cinema since 1932.⁴⁵⁰ In the contemporary moment, hoodoo is inserted into films to give a consumptive culture both distance from and access to what it considers strange and deviant practices. Movies show hoodoo and the strange bodies that supposedly practice it. The practice is considered outside of the realm of normal interaction, and therefore it can be sensationalized, stripped, and represented as any way the larger culture sees fit.⁴⁵¹

Video games follow an identical representational arc as movies; both grant the consumer access to and control of narratives the larger culture has created. The difference between these two is that video games are more interactive and directly controllable by the consumer. When hoodoo appears in gaming, it is presented as a prop and magic system that white heroes can quickly access and master. After mastery, the practice is then both optional and disposable⁴⁵². The majority of gameplay leads the protagonist to some combination of *magical Negroes* and *voodoo girls* to teach them, and the hoodoo is again reduced to a series of tasks and exotic

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⁴⁵⁰ In the film *White Zombie* (1932)

⁴⁵¹ “Some skins are touched as stranger than other skins. Some are whipped, others caressed; some are dressed in fine clothes and others are stripped and raped.” Ahmed, 113.

⁴⁵² This is very much the case in *Risen 2*, where the white hero can use hoodoo to summon evil monkeys to fight for him, or he can never use it again. Either way, the game play is not largely affected.

sounding passwords. Game platforms are very much included in Weisenfeld's "new technology of race"⁴⁵³, not only for the cinematic nature of contemporary video games, but because they occupy a similar space I the American Imaginary as messengers of cultural discourses. They extend the narrative of hoodoo's disposability by allowing the consumer to literally control the interaction of the hero with the practice, and enable them to decide how useful both the practitioners and the practice really are in the imaginary landscape.

In both of these mediums, Black bodies and hoodoo are decentralized from their nuanced and complex origins and distorted into forms most easily recognizable and consumed by the American Imaginary. They are evidence that hoodoo is dreamed up by the dominant culture⁴⁵⁴, and are ultimately disposable and infinitely controllable. These representations of hoodoo carry forth damaging narratives about Black bodies as well; that they are either docile *magical Negroes* whose only purpose is to teach utilitarian magical practices to white heroes, or deviant *voodoo girls* who are mere sites of conquest.

There is a significant difference between mainstream video games, like *Risen 2* and *Dead Island*, and interactive porn games like *Voodoo Girl*. Porn scholar, Diana Pozo⁴⁵⁵ alerted me to this relatively contemporary hoodoo commodity. While there are rarely concrete creation dates or information sets about interactive porn games, *Voodoo Girl* has been floating around on the Internet since 2002. Similar to

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⁴⁵⁴ In *Embodying Blackness*, Harvey Young notes "when popular connotations of Blackness are mapped across or internalized within Black people, the result is the creation of the Black body. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles a real one. It is the Black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of a racializing projection." 7

⁴⁵⁵ A scholar in the Film and Media Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara

mainstream game worlds, the consumer is encouraged to navigate a digital landscape through a controlled protagonist and dictate what actions and interactions take place. Specific to interactive porn games, however, is that they are constructed with the ultimate goal of providing sexual gratification to the player. The player has to utilize extremely specific *Hoodoo* phrases and terms in order to be granted entry to the *voodoo girl's* apartment, and ultimately, her body. This medium is constructed to fulfill a very specific form of fantasy, where the consumer is allowed to and encouraged to sexually dominate the practitioner in a variety of very explicit ways. The player, through the proper application of *Hoodoo* terms and hoodoo artifacts, performs nine different sexual acts on the practitioner.⁴⁵⁶ Although the gameplay involves terms specific to *Hoodoo*⁴⁵⁷, there is no recognition by the game designers that it is an actual faith practice. Instead, in game play, the player encounters hoodoo items like voodoo dolls and chicken bones that they must navigate. In interactive porn games, the controller bears explicit witness to the ways in which hoodoo and fantasies of sexual and racial domination play out. During *levels* where the player must discover the proper way to sexually access the *voodoo girl* with a voodoo doll, or chicken bone, they are recreating and entrenching the historic and stereotypical narratives that the American Imaginary is invested in.

While video games, interactive porn games, and movies differ in audience and modes of accessibility, they are all manifestations of the American Imaginary's indulgence in creating and consuming its domination fantasies around the faith. In

⁴⁵⁶ I use the term *on* rather than *with* to denote the one directional application of power that plays out in these interactions.

⁴⁵⁷ Like *hounsins* and *mambo*, which are male and female priest of Voodoo and *Hoodoo*

all of them, hoodoo and its attached bodies fit into racist caricatures that lend themselves to domination fantasies and revolve around whiteness. With the dominant cultural imaginary the reception site of these artifacts, it is unsurprising that they engage in the narratives that establish whiteness as powerful and present Blackness as disposable and consumable. This is especially true in regards to films, and often goes largely unquestioned, and in some occasions, defended. In *A Skin For Dancing In*, Krywinska argues that the narratives of hoodoo based violence and exploitation are not necessarily racist. Referencing *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, she claims, “there is certainly an exploitation of otherness in the film which has a white hero who does battle with Black magic⁴⁵⁸” but questions if that inclusion makes the film racist. She views the white hero’s mastery of Black magic and bodies as an individual triumph, and does not take into account the colonial, violent, and damaging depictions of the imagined cultural landscape and its inhabitants. The very premise of the story is a colonial one, where the white hero voyages to the Caribbean to study practitioners and learn their magical secrets for American profit.

hoodoo is depicted in these same colonial terms. It is structured as an exotic site that invites tourism, mastery, and domination. That is why, whether it be in movies or video games, the practice is created as a test the white hero must pass, a skill they must learn, or a body they must conquer. After the hero has obtained all of the information or power they need, the practice is quickly disposable. In these digital mediums, it is at a “safe distance, where it cannot touch the

⁴⁵⁸ 168

consumer/reader, but ... incite[s] others to take part in joining them in travel.⁴⁵⁹

The consumer is invited into these digital worlds, where they have ultimate control over a narrative shaped specifically for them about hoodoo and its practitioners. In these mediums, when practitioners and images of the faith are no longer visually, physically⁴⁶⁰, or sexually fulfilling, they are disposed of, either through a visual disappearance from the plot, or through a form of violent punishment, like exile⁴⁶¹, rape/sexual domination⁴⁶², or a graphic death⁴⁶³. These images are consistent with representations of hoodoo in cinematic and digital representations, and in many cases, extend outward to other representations of Black embodiments. In his article, "Cinematic Racism", Matthew Hughey notes that there is an increased body of roles for Black actors to play in movies, but this increased representation comes at a price. He writes, "while African American characters are now more than stereotypes of 'mammies,' 'coons,' and 'bucks' as they currently portray lawyers, doctors, saints and gods, they seem welcome only if they observe certain limits imposed upon them by mainstream, normative conventions."⁴⁶⁴ While there may exist a slightly more diverse body of Black representation in cinema, much of Hughey's argument does not extend itself to the American Imaginary's depictions of hoodoo; the above archetypes are the rule and standard. Even in cases where the loa⁴⁶⁵ of *Hoodoo* are depicted, as is the case in the third season of *American Horror Story*, which depicts the loa Papa Legba, those representations are still tied to the narrative that hoodoo

⁴⁵⁹ Sheller, 136

⁴⁶⁰ in the case of hoodoo in movies

⁴⁶¹ As is the case in the video game *Risen 2*

⁴⁶² As is the case for *Ritual* and *Voodoo Girl*

⁴⁶³ As is the case in *Venom*

⁴⁶⁴ 544

⁴⁶⁵ or gods

is evil and degraded.⁴⁶⁶ The bodies attached to the faith are still presented as dangerous jezebels and *voodoo girls* or meek mammies and *magical Negroes*.

Consumption

When the larger consumer culture creates and indulges in artifacts that that utilize hoodoo archetypes and perpetuate physical and sexual domination fantasies, it is constructing and perpetuating very specific cultural narratives. The commodities are the expression of a cultural desire to depict and embody hoodoo and its attached bodies in ways that render them inherently consumable and constructed. Katrina Hazzard-Donald explores a historic manifestation of this phenomenon in an examination of marketeers from the 19th century who obtained cursory knowledge of hoodoo through theft, bribery, and begging in order to sell it to an eager, consumptive audience. Referencing a 19th century economy of hoodoo wares, she writes

Created by outsiders, marketeered Hoodoo exhibits none of the aforementioned characteristics exhibited by the old tradition. ... Marketeers distorted old tradition Hoodoo into a profitable business for themselves. Some marketeers purchased Hoodoo information from Blacks who frequently were not conjurers and who often distorted information and gave incomplete or incorrect recipes. ... It inundated the Hoodoo market with unauthentic supplies and spells that they often created to financially exploit African Americans and the old Black belt hoodoo belief system.⁴⁶⁷

Contemporary artifacts⁴⁶⁸ and media representations⁴⁶⁹ engage in the same kind of racial and religious theft that 19th century marketeers engaged in. Both historically and currently, the cultural fascination with appropriating and controlling hoodoo is

⁴⁶⁶ In *American Horror Story: Coven*, Papa Legba is depicted as a crack addict.

⁴⁶⁷ Hazzard-Donald, 16

⁴⁶⁸ Including the vast majority of the texts written about in this dissertation

⁴⁶⁹ Like films and video games

bound to a desire to make a profit off of Black bodies and cultural practices. Digital representations of hoodoo rely heavily on the same archetypes and images peddled by 19th marketeers. Then and now, hoodoo was presented as a site of “commodification of Black culture by whites [that] in now way challenges white supremacy⁴⁷⁰”. Rather, “it takes the form of making Blackness ‘the spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream culture.’”⁴⁷¹ The representations of hoodoo now echo the domination narratives created by the white supremacist culture of the 19th century that depicted the practice as something that justified and necessitated extra legal terrorism and violence. These images and stories blend in with the colonial tourism work explored by Sheller. *The Skeleton Key* and *Voodoo Girl* function as contemporary travel tales, where they allow the American Imaginary to slip into, and dominate what they imagine Black bodies and practices to be. The colonial rhetoric of travel/domination literature still takes hold in these spaces. There is a delicate balance of proximity at play in this space; hoodoo must be close enough to be accessible, and its bodies able to be dominated, but must be distant enough not to be dangerous. For example, in *The Skeleton Key*, hoodoo is a hidden away system of powerful magic that lurks just below the surface of the imaginary landscape. It is something that white bodies can dabble in, and even use, but becomes dangerous to them when they believe in it. In other mediums, like *Dead Island* or *Risen 2*, the practice is boiled to down to entertainment and utility; in *Dead Island*, it appears as a catchy song that runs through out the entire game play, to link hoodoo to flesh eating zombies and degraded bodies of Color. In *Risen 2*, it is

⁴⁷⁰ hooks 14

⁴⁷¹ ibid

accessible at the tap of a button and can conjure up spectral monkeys to do the white hero's bidding. In *Voodoo Girl*, Hoodoo is equated with hoodoo and sexual conquest of practitioner's bodies.

Victimization

While the vast majority of commodities that depict hoodoo are steeped in narratives of sexual and physical domination, there is one additional representation that infrequently emerges within the discourse: one of victimization. While in all of the hoodoo artifacts, white heroes and protagonists are initially victims of evil hoodoo practitioners⁴⁷², the arc most commonly ends with the white hero as dominant and victorious. The movie *Venom* is a textbook example of this arc; it is set in a colonial, Caribbean landscape where a white protagonist, Wesley, is stricken and partially zombified by an unknown, evil practitioner. The *white witch* character, Alice, comes both to the island and to Wesley's aid. She uses both science and hoodoo to defeat the *voodoo girl* who has attacked Wesley and emerges triumphant. She is rewarded with a marriage to the rich protagonist, and with ownership of the big island house.⁴⁷³ The *voodoo girl*, on the other hand, is punished for her attack on white protagonist with both zombification and perpetual rape. This is the traditional hoodoo narrative, where the consumer is able to witness both triumphant whiteness, and the sexual and cultural conquest of hoodoo and the bodies of its practitioners.

⁴⁷² Where the evil practitioner attacks, hurts, or attempts to subdue the white hero by use of evil hoodoo magic. This is the case in *Venom*, where a zombie terrorizes and kills several townspeople (although 90 percent of the film's Black population was killed first before the zombie sought out white victims), *The Skeleton Key*, where "Ben" is stricken by Violet's magic, and *Ritual*, where Wesley is stricken with possession and zombification. It is an act of Black, hoodoo based violence that spurs the white hero into action, causes them to master the practice, and use it to dominate their landscape.

⁴⁷³ And its Caribbean servants

This arc is abandoned however, in the horror film *The Skeleton Key*. Although Caroline, the *white witch* character, learns an effective hoodoo spell from Mama Cynthia, the *magical Negro* of the film, a much more powerful Black practitioner who has possessed the body of a white woman ultimately defeats her. Visually, the consumer is instructed through the victory of Mama Cecile⁴⁷⁴ to think of hoodoo as a corrupting force that damages all of the white bodies it touches. *The Skeleton Key* seeks to serve as a cinematic warning to the larger American Imaginary that there is a great deal of danger in too much proximity to hoodoo. The *white witch* is punished for her use of hoodoo in ways very similar to the punishment of the *voodoo girl* in *Venom*. Both are trapped inside of helpless, broken bodies with no will, agency, or safety.

The Skeleton Key functions as a horror film for the American Imagination because it turns all of the traditional conventions of hoodoo and heroes on its head. Where the victimization of whiteness is temporary, and the hero is triumphant in the end, in *The Skeleton Key*, hoodoo is triumphant⁴⁷⁵, whiteness is subverted⁴⁷⁶, and *Magical Negroes* are not in place to save the white heroes. In short, *The Skeleton Key* is a cinematic representation of all of the American Imaginary's truest fears about hoodoo. That not only is it a powerful system of magic⁴⁷⁷, but it is able to overpower whiteness. The film conjures up the historic terror that colonizers held of hoodoo

⁴⁷⁴ Who resides in the body of Violet, the elderly white "practitioner"

⁴⁷⁵ Cecile is successful in stealing Caroline's body, just as Justify is able to steal Luke's body.

⁴⁷⁶ Cecile and Justify are able to successfully and perpetually hide and embody white bodies through the act of possessing them.

⁴⁷⁷ Religion is not a component of hoodoo in *The Skeleton Key*

practices being successful⁴⁷⁸ and situates them in a contemporary landscape. The tangible setting is coupled with an admonishment against “going native” and adopting hoodoo practices. Where other horror films⁴⁷⁹, the white protagonist is rewarded for appropriating hoodoo practices and successfully wielding them, Caroline⁴⁸⁰ is ultimately punished⁴⁸¹ for practicing and believing in the magical practice. In this text, hoodoo is simply dangerous to white bodies, and *magical negroes* are not to be trusted. The idea of whiteness itself is subverted; Cecile and Justify, both Black practitioners, are able to possess and hide in the bodies of white victims.⁴⁸² Not only could hoodoo retain its power over all white bodies in the film,⁴⁸³ but Black practitioners are able to hide inside of white respectability.

The Artifacts

The Skeleton Key

As it is the exception that proves the rule, the 2005 movie, *The Skeleton Key*, is a complex site that combines standard hoodoo archetypes with a complicated representation of white victimization⁴⁸⁴. To summarize, in the film, Caroline⁴⁸⁵ answers an advertisement for a hospice worker at an isolated house in the Louisiana bayou. Ben, an elderly white man and owner of the house, is stricken with

⁴⁷⁸ “American fear and abhorrence of Voodoo increased with reports of the successful slave revolt in the French colony of Saint-Dominique (1791-1804), which ended with the creation of the Black republic of Haiti. Legend has it that the rebels fought with such courage and ferocity because they believed their Vodou deities made them invulnerable.” Long 88.

⁴⁷⁹ See footnote cxxxiii.

⁴⁸⁰ In *The Skeleton Key*

⁴⁸¹ She has her body stolen by Cecile through a magical possession/body theft ritual.

⁴⁸² “When it goes unmentioned, whiteness is positioned as a default category, the center of the assumed norm on which everything else is based. Under this conception, white is also defined more through what it is not rather than it *is*.” Benshoff 55.

⁴⁸³ Especially the body of Caroline, the white protagonist

⁴⁸⁴ 2005. Also, note that *The Skeleton Key* is also examined in “Playacting at Catching the Spirit”, the dissertation chapter on possession.

⁴⁸⁵ Who is the film’s *white witch* character

immobility, and his wife, Violet⁴⁸⁶, requested help. As Caroline settles in, she breaks into a “hoodoo room” in the attic, and coerces Violet to recount a story of hoodoo magic, racial domination, and ultimately a lynching that took place in the house. As she continues to intrude in unwelcome spaces in the house, and enter into conflicts of power with Violet⁴⁸⁷, she ultimately becomes convinced that Violet, with the help of her lawyer, Luke⁴⁸⁸, have placed a spell on Ben and intend to do the same to her. She then intrudes into a hoodoo shop in the French Quarter, where she has a kindly Black woman⁴⁸⁹ teach her a spell to cure Ben. While her spell is successful, she is interrupted by Violet, who restricts her access to Ben. The power struggle between Caroline and Violet continues to escalate, until Caroline⁴⁹⁰ uses hoodoo spells to keep Violet from entering her room. In an attempt to take Ben from the house, Caroline poisons Violet, but is kept from driving off of the property by a Violet’s magic. Leaving Ben on the property, Caroline runs to Luke, who subdues her and returns her to Violet. After another clash of dueling hoodoo tricks and practices, Violet uses an “ultimate conjure of sacrifice”⁴⁹¹ to possess Caroline’s body. The film reveals that Ben and Violet where in reality the slave family that practiced hoodoo in the house several generations ago. Using their magic, they were able to possess the

⁴⁸⁶ Who the view ultimately learns is Mama Cecile, a powerful Black practitioner who has possessed the body of Violet and uses it to lure in other victims to possess.

⁴⁸⁷ She breaks Violet’s rule of “no mirrors”, she breaks into the attic room, and steals several artifacts from inside of it, and she walks into the house of African American practitioners without permission, and rifles through their things, despite being told not to.

⁴⁸⁸ Luke’s body is possessed by Papa Justify, the husband of Mama Cecile

⁴⁸⁹ who is a modern representation of the Mammy figure. She is a large Black woman, with a head scarf, and a soothing voice, who eagerly and gently rushes to the aid of Caroline. She affectionately calls Caroline “child” and is eager to help her, despite Caroline’s disrespect of items in the shop (she picks up objects and puts them down, ignoring their potential for power and importance).

⁴⁹⁰ who still maintains that she does not believe in hoodoo

⁴⁹¹ The Skeleton Key

bodies the homeowner's children. Hoodoo magic allowed them to possess the bodies of others⁴⁹² and continue living on, if in white bodies.

One of the staples of *The Skeleton Key*⁴⁹³ is the idea of invisible Black bodies. The movie engages in a skillful balancing act in terms of how hoodoo is racialized. Throughout the film, the practice is presented as something that is inherently Black. It was first represented as practiced by Cecil and Justify, who were servants. After Caroline steals from their attic room, it is her singular Black friend, Jill, who tells her where to find a hoodoo shop in the French Quarter, which is manned by a smiling Black woman who is eager to help her. Black bodies are strewn throughout the film as background filler that has hoodoo attached; Caroline encounters practitioners who run a gas station, and later intrudes upon the matriarch of a family who is listening to conjure records. Every Black body represented in the film is a practitioner, except for Jill, who guides Caroline to other Black people who do practice. Despite the practice being rooted in Black bodies in the film, Blackness is largely invisible. The two main practitioners of the film⁴⁹⁴, have their Blackness ultimately hidden, as they are forced to inhabit white bodies. Cecil and Justify's habitation in white bodies is a crucial narrative in the film. After Violet/Cecil takes Caroline's body, she complains to Justify/Luke that "I told you I wanted a Black one this time"⁴⁹⁵, he replies, "Beggars can't be choosers. I think it suits you beautifully."⁴⁹⁶ Despite her desire to inhabit a Black body to practice hoodoo, Cecil

⁴⁹² this act of possession and the forms of body trading briefly mentioned here will be explored in the chapter on possession

⁴⁹³ in addition to a confusing plot

⁴⁹⁴ Cecil and Justify

⁴⁹⁵ *The Skeleton Key*

⁴⁹⁶ *The Skeleton Key*.

was denied and forced to inhabit Caroline. Blackness is not presented as a medium through which hoodoo is successfully practiced in the film, and her inhabitation of Caroline is understood by the consumer as a victory.

There is a singular investment in presenting Black bodies and hoodoo in *The Skeleton Key* as invisible, stereotypical, and controllable. The three most prominent racialized characters, Cecil/Violet⁴⁹⁷, Jill, Mama Cynthia, who runs the shop Caroline intrudes upon, fulfill the American Imaginary's self constructed narratives about the ways in which Black women's bodies and hoodoo intersect. Both Jill and the Mama Cynthia simultaneously play out the American Imaginary's scripts for *the mammy* and *the Magical Negro*. Although Mama Cynthia physically embodies the mammy narrative⁴⁹⁸ both she and Jill are presented as helpful, servile, and willing to teach Caroline or direct her to the hoodoo practices she desires. Janelle Hobson, in her work *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, examines the ways in which Black women's bodies are represented by the larger white culture in very specific ways that are tied to narratives of racial domination and hyper sexualization. In *The Skeleton Key*, these two characters pull directly from the American Imaginary's iconography of Black bodies that has historically and perpetually cast "Black women as simplistic stereotypes"⁴⁹⁹. "Subsequently, these stereotypes, manufactured as 'controlling images' in systems of power distort the ways in which Black women see themselves and each other. They also create the process of 'un-mirroring,' in which the struggles for Black female subjectivity

⁴⁹⁷ although she inhabits a white body space,

⁴⁹⁸ including the plump cheeks and wrapped head,

⁴⁹⁹ Hobson, 14-5

constantly grate against the distorted images of the dominant culture.⁵⁰⁰ The characters of Jill and the nameless hoodoo helper become bound to and distort the way hoodoo is envisioned by the American Imaginary. Through this viewing, the practice becomes a buffet of magic and domination practices and the Black bodies attached to them are present only to help white bodies gain mastery.

Venom

While not as commercially successful as *The Skeleton Key*, *Venom* is more explicit in its racialized representations of hoodoo and the imagined link between the practice and elements of horror and violence. Set in a small town in Louisiana, the movie opens with an elderly Black woman⁵⁰¹ digging up a suitcase in the middle of the night. The audience discovers that the woman is considered to be the town's resident "witch doctor"⁵⁰², and that the suitcase she is digging up contains cursed snakes filled with the souls of rapists and murderers⁵⁰³. The mambo/old woman is quickly killed in a car accident⁵⁰⁴ souls inside of the snakes later possess a truck

⁵⁰⁰ Hobson 14-15

⁵⁰¹ She is dressed in the traditional white dress of a mambo. A mambo can be understood as a priestess. She is wearing a red sash that represents ties to the loa Shango

⁵⁰² *Venom*

⁵⁰³ There is a vèvè for Damballah carved on the inside of the suitcase. This indicates that the film did a great deal of cultural and religious research to find and reproduce an accurate vèvè for the purposes of the film, but chose to disregard the religious and cultural significance of the marker in favor of adding an exotic prop to the film. Although Damballah is represented by a snake, the loa is not a conglomeration of evil souls forced into snake bodies, nor is that a narrative that is associated with any religious aspect of the faith. In Hoodoo and other diasporic faiths, Damballah does not have specific dealings with trapped souls or the dead. There is no reason, outside of the representation of a snake, for the inclusion of a vèvè of Damballah in that scene.

⁵⁰⁴ The white protagonist and her boyfriend are fighting in the middle of a two lane bridge. The boyfriend parks the car in the middle of the bridge and they get out to fight by the rail. The grandmother swerves to avoid hitting both them and the car, and her car goes into the lake. The resident outcast/truck driver tries to save the old woman, but is unsuccessful. He becomes trapped in her car as it goes over the bridge, where the suitcase bursts open and the possessed snakes inside bite him.

driver. The driver then becomes a zombie and goes on a murder spree throughout the town.

The white protagonist, her boyfriend, and her friends gather at the house of the old woman they killed in the car accident. Her granddaughter⁵⁰⁵, CeCe, lets the group of teenagers into the house, and then teaches the protagonist how to work hoodoo magic in an attempt to stop the zombie that is terrorizing and murdering the town's inhabitants. CeCe manages to make a voodoo doll in an attempt to stop the zombie, but it breaks into the house to stop her. The zombie is initially intent on attacking the white protagonist, but CeCe quickly throws her a magical hoodoo charm of protection⁵⁰⁶. Weakened from the loss of protection, CeCe attempts to use the voodoo doll to stop the zombie, but she is quickly overpowered and killed by it. For the rest of the film, the zombie goes on to dispatch the rest of the white protagonist's friends. He collects and drags their bodies to an underground crypt⁵⁰⁷ and performs evil, hoodoo magic over them⁵⁰⁸. The protagonist follows the zombie to his lair and attempts to kill him by setting him on fire. When this fails, she keeps the monster at bay with CeCe's charm until she can lure it to the surface. When the zombie emerges out of the crypt and begins to chase the protagonist, she forsakes her hoodoo charm and simply, and repeatedly runs over the zombie with a truck.

⁵⁰⁵ And friend of the white protagonist

⁵⁰⁶ The charm CeCe was wearing was a magical charm given to her by her grandmother/mambo. The charm protected CeCe from the zombie and other evil magic.

⁵⁰⁷ Which given the sea level, is not plausible for Louisiana

⁵⁰⁸ The underground crypt is lit with candles, and the zombie uses the blood and body parts of his victims to draw snakes and lines over the walls and tombs. As the movie has constructed hoodoo as an evil magic practice or the entire film, the audience is meant to draw connections between the blood drawn snakes and hoodoo.

The movie ends with the protagonist alive and victorious and the zombie severely dismembered⁵⁰⁹.

While there are several Black actors in *Venom*, they all fill predictable roles, and ultimately die predictable deaths. The mambo/grandmother in the opening scene serves as the introductory magical Black woman. Her white dress and necklace of a snake's skull set up the film's depiction of her as a witch doctor; her late night unearthing in the swamp encourages the consumer to view her as devious and secretive. Her death, while easily preventable, is the cause for horror that was unleashed upon the town. With her role as a plague bringer fulfilled, she was no longer necessary to the plot and was disposed of. Two Black police officers⁵¹⁰ exist in the movie only long enough to remind the viewers that the now dead magical Black woman was closely attached to hoodoo and that she was isolated in the community, and to describe the marking on the inside of her suitcase as a vevé, to more firmly link her and the practice. After the officers establish Black authenticity for the hoodoo based plot lines of the movie, they too are killed, this time by the zombie created by dark magics. Finally, CeCe, the granddaughter of the first magical Black woman dons her mantle⁵¹¹. She attempts to destroy the zombie using "good" hoodoo and manages to not only teach the protagonist how to use it, but she gives

⁵⁰⁹ During the end credits of the show, possessed snakes slither out of the dismembered torso. This act happens when the protagonist has gone to safety. The snakes attack the camera/screen rather than attempt to follow the heroine. Her victory is complete, and the presence of snakes is only there to allude to a yet drafted sequel.

⁵¹⁰ Returning to Hughey in *Cinematic Racism*, there are more expanded roles possible for contemporary Black actors. In *Venom*, there are two Black police officers, but they are represented as incompetent and murdered early in the film.

⁵¹¹ It is not rare to have two or more *Magical Negroes* in horror movies. The multiple embodiments are shown to represent both sides of the constructed binary around this role. The representations, both in body and in action, are strikingly different. Where one is old and devious, one is young and beautiful. One is always present to attempt to undo the damage (to white protagonists) done by the other.

away her own protection, given to her by her grandmother. CeCe, both physically and in action⁵¹² represents the representation of “good” practitioners found in controllable mediums like video games. Her willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of teaching and protecting the white protagonist is a narrative that many videogames rely on to progress the game play and story.

Dead Island and Risen 2

While elements of hoodoo have long been present in video games⁵¹³, there has been a recent, digital fascination with the practice and the various ways in which the American Imaginary can control it. For the last three years, at least one game annually has prominently featured hoodoo in its plots⁵¹⁴. In each of these mediums, the consumer/player is encouraged to master and control practitioners⁵¹⁵. Although hoodoo is not a continual plot device in *Dead Rising*, its presence does heavily influence the way in which the American Imaginary is encouraged to consume the practice.

In the opening of *Dead Island*, the player is dropped into a club/resort space where a “voodoo rapper” Sam B⁵¹⁶ is performing the opening song of the game, “Who Do You Voodoo, Bitch?” Set on an exotic and fictional island, the digital bodies

⁵¹² Through her actions in teaching the protagonist hoodoo and sacrificing herself to protect her.

⁵¹³ For example, *Shadow Man*, released in 1999 for the Nintendo 64 (where a man named Michael LeRoi is implanted with a magical mask by a hoodoo priestess named Mama Nettie. He is then compelled to fight crime and ultimately stop an undead/immortal Jack the Ripper who has the ability to travel between the worlds of the living and the dead.) and *Voodoo Vince*, released in 2003 for the Xbox (about a voodoo doll that has been lost in the French Quarter, who is trying to return to his owner, Mama Charmaine)

⁵¹⁴ *Dead Island*⁵¹⁴, *Risen 2*⁵¹⁴, *Assassin's Creed*, *Dead Island: Riptide*⁵¹⁴.

⁵¹⁵ This idea is extremely visible in the game *Risen 2*. A detailed deconstruction of the game play and the ways in which hoodoo is controlled in this medium is available in the chapter pertaining to possession.

⁵¹⁶ who is depicted in the manner of the loa Baron Samedi. This representation is discussed further in the chapter on possession

that perform the serving and entertaining roles are bodies of Colour, and the bodies consuming this entertainment,⁵¹⁷ are white. Sam B is described by the game lore as being from New Orleans, and using his childhood experience on the streets of New Orleans as inspiration for this song. The song is highly indicative of the historic narrative that surrounds Hoodoo in the American imaginary. The song contains all for the images most closely associated with Hoodoo and Voodoo in the American Imaginary, including “shrunk heads,” allusions to Voodoo dolls⁵¹⁸, cannibals, zombies, drinking blood, ghouls, and damaging bodies.

The song also positions itself along the more dangerous line of plastic Hoodoo, where small pieces of authentic representation are inserted within the artifact. The name mentions both Papa Shango and Baron Samedi, two prominent loa, in the second verse. Sam B positions himself along side these loa, calling out from his name to theirs, and even modeling his name after Baron Samedi and dressing similar to the loa. These sorts of mentions of authentic markers associated with the faith are highly problematic for several reasons. The first is that it proves that there was some form of research conducted. Rather they researched the appearance characteristics, and roles of several loa and decided to link these two to the song.⁵¹⁹

The song positions Black bodies, and his own as a practitioner, along problematic racial, sexual, and violent axis. The song overtly ties *Hoodoo* to hyper

⁵¹⁷ like the projected consumer of the video game

⁵¹⁸ “been pricked to the chest of a bitch well fed” *Dead Island*

⁵¹⁹ It is also problematic, because if a lay person Googled these words they did not know, they would come upon things like this: (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baron_Samedi) which give descriptions closed to Sam B’s and give just enough information to tie the loa to the violent images in the song.

violence and desecration of bodies. The song is invested in enacting violence against people both to kill them, and to destroy the corpse afterward. It situates Black bodies that engage in *Hoodoo* as dangerous bodies that are hyper violent and will cannibalize when they are finished murdering. It also hyper sexualizes both Black bodies and hoodoo. With the line “Stable of corpse bitches, I’m a pimp of the dead”, the historic narratives of zombification for the purposes of sexual gratification⁵²⁰ are dredged up. Not only can hoodoo turn bodies into sexual slaves for the gratification of Black bodies, but Black men serve as pimps and sexual predators.⁵²¹

In terms of dominating and controlling practitioners, one of the “perk” elements of the game is to control Sam B to fight zombies. If left idle, his character will start singing and whistling his hit song⁵²², or talking about his upbringing full of anger and violence. Although the game is marketed to the stereotypical video game audience⁵²³, the vast majority of the player characters are digital people of Color. The actual gameplay allows you to play as either Sam B⁵²⁴, Xian, a Chinese spy on the island, Logan, an American football player, or Purna, an “Australian Aboriginal”⁵²⁵ disgraced police officer who works as a “sexy bodyguard” for rich

⁵²⁰ See *White Zombie and I Walked With A Zombie*

⁵²¹ The song also pulls upon the cultural/historic narrative of the “hilarious” Black neighbor, whose role as honest social commentary is overlooked in favour of cultural commodification. (http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/05/07/charles_ramsey_amanda_berry_rescuer_becomes_internet_meme_video.html) The lyrics “hide your kids, grab your wife, better get outta sight” are directly tied to Antoine Dodson’s now “meme-ified” interview. In all three of these cases, representations of the Black body is modified, commodified, and pushed into plastic forms of representation.

⁵²² *Who Do You Voodoo, Bitch?*

⁵²³ upper middle class white males, aged 16-25

⁵²⁴ who in the game is dressed in a long coat, very similar to Baron Samedi’s clothing, occasionally with the top hat and glasses

⁵²⁵ that is the gameplay description of her racialized status.

men.” While the game lets the player choose from an almost unheard of 3 people of Color main characters to play as, each of the racialized bodies are highly sexualized and presented as exotic others. The game play mechanics encourage the consumer to embody Sam B; they can control his actions, make him sing his Voodoo song, don his *voodoo top hat*, and force him to engage in acts of violence. The violent nature of the game, combined with Sam B’s frequent and highly vocal ties to hoodoo mirror the American Imagination’s perception that hoodoo is also highly violent, controllable, and constructed for entertainment.

Although *Risen 2* is examined as a cultural artifact at other points in the dissertation, the NPC⁵²⁶ of Chani deserves special mention. In gameplay, she is both a highly skilled practitioner of hoodoo and the daughter of the village chief. Over the course of the game, the white protagonist exploits both her and the other practitioners in her village to gain access to their ancestors and learn hoodoo magic. He eventually employs the hoodoo that Chani teaches him to save her village from a monster.⁵²⁷ The white protagonist is hailed as a hero, and Chani is exiled from her village, gods, and community for teaching him hoodoo. Chani disappears from the game at this point, and the hero is able to continue on to other levels. Although he now has complete mastery over hoodoo, he can choose whether or not to ever use the magic skill further in the game. The indigenous bodies, their ancestors/loa and Chani become optional and disposable. Chani’s character is very similar to CeCe⁵²⁸; her presence in the story is only a plot device to train and protect the white

⁵²⁶ Non playable character

⁵²⁷ This act continues in the vein of white savior narratives where indigenous people are not able to save themselves and the final heroic act must be employed by a white outsider.

⁵²⁸ From the film *Venom*

protagonist. Once her usefulness as a teacher comes to an end, she disappears from the narrative, and the focus goes back to the white hero.

Voodoo Girl

While the above artifacts situated in entirely widely accessible, consumable mediums, the plot lines and purposes behind their creations straddle multiple genres. Instead of regarding it solely for its narratives steeped in the appropriation of Hoodoo, *The Skeleton Key* also functions as a gothic horror movie that uses the landscape⁵²⁹ and the fear of aging as major drivers of the story. *Dead Island* can argue that it is simply a zombie survival/horror game, and that the narratives of hoodoo woven throughout the game play are simply to add color⁵³⁰ and background for the characters. Arguments can be made for both of these artifacts that they are not solely driven by the American Imaginary's desire to consume and represent hoodoo in a specific, damning light. This is not the case for the interactive porn game, *Voodoo Girl*; it is a medium created specifically for sexual gratification, and the game play perpetuates and indulges the consumer in colonialist, racist, and domination based narratives regarding hoodoo and Black women's bodies.

The game *Voodoo Girl* is specifically crafted to feed into the consumptive desires of the American Imagination. It starts with a disembodied arm of a white male knocking on an apartment door. The *voodoo girl*, a Black woman with a heavy "ethnic" accent, clothed in a red head wrap, human skull earrings, green bandeau top, and scarf skirt opens the door and engages the invisible white player in conversation. The in-game accent is a recognizable cultural mainstay. It is the same

⁵²⁹ a landscape also bound to the American Imaginary's perceptions of hoodoo

⁵³⁰ especially given the racial make up of the majority of the playable characters

“Jamaican” accent that is employed in movies and video games when the creators require a Black character to either practice hoodoo, smoke/sell pot or in any other way depict a form of exotic Blackness that does not align itself with the hyper-violent spectrum of Black depiction. When this accent is present in cultural mediums, for example J.B.⁵³¹ in *Venom* and King Willie and his *Jamaican Voodoo Posse* in *Predator 2*. Characters with this accent are always depicted as disposable bodies that are there for physical utility or comic relief to the main protagonist.

At this point in the game an instructor figure, a white woman clothed in an unbuttoned white blouse and high slit Black skirt appears. She encourages the player to hit the *voodoo girl* with the “dead stuff”⁵³². The player then informs the woman that he is a *hounsis*, or a voodoo priest, enquires if she has “any chicken bones lying around”, and offers to engage her in a “spirit quest”.⁵³³ With rhetorical access to terms like *hounsis*, *mambo* and *houngan*⁵³⁴, it is evident that the creators engaged in a great deal of research regarding the religious aspects of hoodoo. There is an evident understanding of the ways in which these terms function within a specifically religious context, and the only way to progress in the game play is to use them properly. If the player does not select the proper, hoodoo grounded answers, *voodoo girl* threatens the player by saying, “you are lucky I don’t stick needles in you”, referencing turning him into a voodoo doll. While the average consumer would most likely click on whatever sounded “exotic”, porn studies

⁵³¹ played by actor, Gabriel Casseus

⁵³² www.funny-games.biz/seduce-voodoo-girl.html.

⁵³³ www.funny-games.biz/seduce-voodoo-girl.html

⁵³⁴ during the section of the game where the white protagonist engages the voodoo girl in conversation to gain access to her apartment, he claims that he has been an houngan (what can be described as a priest of the faith) since he was a child.

scholar, Diana Pozo⁵³⁵, accessed Wikipedia to discover the meaning of the words. While this is illogical during game play that is constructed for immediate sexual gratification, it is not unreasonable to assume that players would at the very least Google search the correct answer to expedite game play. This brief game-play interaction steeped in the religious rhetoric of hoodoo is the only instance where either the digital body of the *voodoo girl* or the practice of hoodoo is treated as viable.

After the consumer engages in successful⁵³⁶ utilized, the player is granted access to the *voodoo girl's* apartment. Standing in front of a large white pentagram on the floor⁵³⁷, *voodoo girl* encourages the player to disrobe her. After she is denuded⁵³⁸, the player is encouraged by the white female “instructor” to find items to pleasure her with. In the subsequent portions of the game play, the consumer directs the *voodoo girl* to engage in masturbation with a voodoo doll, a chicken bone, and a magical, Black candle. During all of the player directed encounters, *voodoo girl* makes moans of pleasure that reference religious possession, like “I can feel my spirit soar”⁵³⁹. The game play ends in *voodoo girl* engaging the white protagonist in various sexual acts, each accompanied with references to him “putting her into a trance”⁵⁴⁰ or him taming her spirit.

⁵³⁵ Who served as the layman game tester

⁵³⁶ where religious Hoodoo terms are properly

⁵³⁷ drawn in white and decorated with candles at the point. The pentagram is not a symbol that is utilized in Hoodoo or any of the other diasporic faith systems. Rather, it is present in the game scenery to make a mental connection for the consumer between hoodoo and demonic and deviant practices. It is also worth noting that the pentagram drawn in Voodoo Girl is not the pentacle associated with evil.

⁵³⁸ and performs player controlled oral sex on the white protagonist

⁵³⁹ www.funny-games.biz/seduce-voodoo-girl.html.

⁵⁴⁰ *ibid*

While the purpose of porn-games is steeped in sexual gratification, *Voodoo Girl* specifically engages in the narratives that hypersexualized and misrepresent the faith as violent and used only for entertainment consumption. The white protagonist⁵⁴¹ appropriates the religious rhetoric of the faith, and combines it with the American Imagination's perception of hoodoo artifacts, like the chicken bone and voodoo doll, to cultural and sexually dominate a Black woman's ⁵⁴² body. Racial and cultural domination function as the subtext for this game; this is troubled by the inclusion of religiously and culturally accurate hoodoo rhetoric in the early part of the game. It's presence as the sexual and cultural gatekeeper encourages consumers to learn just enough about representations of hoodoo to be granted.

⁵⁴¹ encouraged by a white, female instructor

⁵⁴² digital

Closing Down The hoodoo Shop



Figure 4: Goods purchased from Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo

In the summer of 2013, I flew on down to New Orleans to see the sites, imbibe in some hoodoo related “research” drinks, and talk to practitioners. On the plane, I told my research assistant stories about all of the things we would encounter in all of the “authentic” shops we would visit on Bourbon Street. In preparation for the trip, we watched *The Skeleton Key* and *Venom*. We made a map of all the places that served *voodoo* themed food and drinks. We charted our paths between various hoodoo shops along the Quarter. Lugging along a recorder, camera, and an extra, empty suitcase, I was fully prepared to bring all sorts of hoodoo home. But like many tourist who visit New Orleans, I was ultimately surprised by what I encountered. Amidst the collecting of hoodoo artifacts, like voodoo dolls hung from nooses and “authentic” hoodoo soaps, I had two striking encounters with *Hoodoo* that stood in striking contrast to my work.

The first two days of my trip were filled with New Orleans tourism; I took a visit to *Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo* and *Reverend Zombie's House of Voodoo*, and bought all of the artifacts my stipend would allow.⁵⁴³ The third night, while I was cataloging the afternoon's finds, a storm rolled in. From my room on the 29th floor, I watched a thunderstorm flash over the river. When the lightning illuminated the collection of commodities on my floor, and the thunder rumbled over the water, I heard the voice of Shango. As the storm washed over me, I had time to reflect on the faith of *Hoodoo* and how it is so divorced from the Sippy cups, soaps, and noose hung dolls that I would be bringing home. The second incident was with an interview with K, a practitioner who worked at *Voodoo Authentica*. During our interview, we sat at a cozy table in the back of the shop, nestled between a soft couch and bottles of incense and ingredients. While I had interviewed several practitioners there⁵⁴⁴, my discussion with K felt especially affirming. When I commented on her blue/green nail polish, her eyes lit up; I noticed that her nails were done in devotion to the loa Yemaya. From that point, her smiles and conversation poured out like water. When I asked her about her relationship to tourists and laymen, as she is a practitioner working in a shop off of Bourbon Street, she told me, "I kind of tip toe up to see how much an explanation I'm going to give you."⁵⁴⁵ She had very clear boundaries about what she was going to tell people as a practitioner; she would

⁵⁴³ This includes a voodoo doll Sippy cup.

⁵⁴⁴ All of the employees at this shop were practitioners. This is the only location that I discovered during my research travel where this was the case. In all other locations, none of the employees identified themselves as practitioners.

⁵⁴⁵ K Interview.

gage their investment, their willingness to listen, and her own personal energy level before telling them of the faith.

These two occurrences during my research trip frame the dissertation, and look forward to my future projects. This dissertation is an attempt to do some of the leg work for practitioners like K, who do not need to shoulder the burden of undoing public perception around *Hoodoo* on their own. My privilege as an academic grants me the opportunity to combine my scholarly platform with my personal and familial investment as a practitioner. I have access to resources that everyday worshipers do not, and this work seeks to reflect that.

While this project focused specially on the damaging representations of hoodoo in the American Imaginary, there exists a great variety of *Hoodoo* artifacts that are beginning to emerge. For example, the John Jennings and Damian Duffy graphic novel, *The Hole*, presents the larger culture with a nuanced read of *Hoodoo*, hoodoo, commodity culture, and popular consumption. The feature film, *Oya: Rise of the Orishas*, is currently filming and shows promise regarding complex and multifaceted representations of loa and the ways they interact with their worshipers and the larger world. There also is a large web presence on Tumblr and Pinterest, people who use these digital landscapes to more fully represent their practices, the faith and the loa. This dissertation is the start of career that wants to give voice to all of these marginalized bodies and identities. I start here with the popular culture's misrepresentations in order to destabilize their position as the only representations possible for hoodoo. My future work will examine *Hoodoo* artifacts, and the

performances that practitioners can engage around them. I will spend my career telling these stories.

Glossary

American Imaginary- the collection of popular culture narratives, artifacts, and performances that are largely disseminated by the hegemonic discourse. While it is created and focused on the geographic continent of North America, it has a global reach; it presents itself in movies, video games, comic books, food objects, etc. While there is no singular, complete identity that makes up the American Imaginary, the dissertation uses the term to describe the narratives and artifacts that are steeped in specific racist, colonialist, and irreligious discourses.

Ancestors- cultural and familial ancestors that are included in the loa

Bokor- a sorcerer that practices dark magic and attempts to serve the loa

Conjure woman is traditionally depicted as an elderly woman on the outskirts of a community that is skilled in the practice of hoodoo, Voodoo, and forms of indigenous medicine, folk healing, and/or midwifery. In these women, the perceived lines between medicine and magic are blurred

Ellegua- the loa that watches the crossroads. He is the loa that opens the doors between the living and non-living worlds and his help is needed to direct ones path.

Erzuile- a loa associated with love, relationships, sex, and motherhood

Hoodoo- a distinctly American religious system with Afro-Diasporic roots. It has religious ritual practices, loa, and worship styles that are similar to Voodoo, Vodou, and Candomblé, but has been modeled by American racism, cultural practices, and cultural economies.

hoodoo- the result of the popular culture's fascination with *Hoodoo*, and its insistence on narratives of racism, misogynoir, and religious and cultural colonialism. hoodoo is a system of evil magic that includes rampaging zombies, practitioners in skull bikinis, and voodoo dolls. The practice only does harm and is associated fully with evil, but has no loa. It is not a religious system, but is rather a popular culture representation of savage black bodies, godless magical practices, and sexual and racialized deviance.

Hounsis- a male *priest* of Voodoo, Vodou, Hoodoo

Loa (lwa)- in *Hoodoo*, the loa are the deities that practitioners communicate with during acts of possession, supplication, and worship. These spirits can consist of blood (family members that have passed on) or communal (important cultural and religious figures, like Zora Neale Hurston) ancestors. There are also set, universally acknowledged and worshiped loa like Papa Legba, (the loa of crossroads, and communication) Damballah, or Yemaya. Each of these loa has a specific *vévé* that both calls and identifies them.

Horse- the body of a practitioner that has consented to, and is engaged in an act of possession. The practitioner is referred to as a horse, because their body is being ridden and controlled by the loa that possesses them.

Mambo- a female *priest* of Voodoo, Vodou, Hoodoo

Performative Crash Site- the violent, theoretical collision point where performative constructs, (like race, gender, sexuality, or religion) intersect. The metaphor of a car crash situates each embodiment as a vehicle, the roadway as the body of an individual, and the collision site as the ways in which their embodiments manifest themselves. One element that is central to the performative crash site is the idea of spectacle, audience, and intent. To continue with the metaphor of a car crash, there is very often an audience for these sites of collision. Spectators are always eager to see how “bad” the crash is, and what the outcome if the wreckage will be.

Predatourism- a predatory system of tourism, employed by the American Imaginary, that preys directly on Black bodies by constructing misrepresentations of them, forces them into imagined landscapes, and uses these misrepresentations for actual financial and cultural profit. Predatourism takes place solely in imagined landscapes, (like movie scenes or video games) that still may or may not employ actual (real) Black bodies to act them out. It forces these actors into stereotypical,

racist, and colonialist roles that perpetuate the narratives created and held by the American Imaginary.

Possession- a religious act in which a practitioner communicates with and opens their physical body to a loa. The loa is specifically called through the drawing of their vévé, through acts of supplication to Legba to communicate between the worlds, and through acts of sacrifice specific to the loa. Possession is grounded in consent; both the horse and the loa have to consent to the interaction. During the possession act, the loa takes over the body and the consciousness of the horse, and imparts wisdom, advice, and guidance to the practitioners present. During this act, the loa may engage in actions, dances, and rituals characteristic to their personalities.

Witch Doctors- the magical figure in hoodoo that enacts evil magic and violent possession

Vévé- it is symbol that identifies a loa and an evocative marker that calls them during acts of worship and possession. Each vévé is distinct and recognizable as belong to a singular deity.

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