

# Voodoo Dolls, Charms, And Spells In The Classroom: Teaching, Screening, And Deconstructing The Misrepresentation Of The African Religion


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## ABSTRACT

*“New Orleans voodoo,” also called “créole voodoo,” is an amalgamation of an honoring of the spirits of the dead, a respect for the elderly and the spiritual life, African knowledge of herbs and charms, and European elements of Catholicism. It is a religion of ancestor worship that is unknown to us, and that we are not necessarily exposed to or included in. As such, it is something foreign to our own belief system. Being ignorant about what the religion entails, people in general stigmatize it as something not worthy to discuss, nor to practice. Unfortunately, popular novels like *Voodoo Season* (2006) and *Voodoo Dreams* (1995) by Jowell Parker Rhodes, and especially Hollywood’s production of horror movies such as *White Zombie* (1932), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1987), *Voodoo Dawn* (1998) or *Hoodoo for Voodoo* (2006), do not provide the public with a truthful background of the African, Haitian, or New Orleanean voodoo tradition. All too often these fictional sources fuel the already existing misrepresentations of the religion and represent it as something shadowy, highly secretive, and fearful. This differentiated introduction to New Orleans voodoo via Iain Softley’s film *The Skeleton Key* (2004) exposes students to the major characteristics of the religion, makes them aware of popular culture’s falsified voodoo construct, and teaches them how to deconstruct it. This interactive approach is student centered, appeals to their individual intelligences and learning styles, promotes critical thinking, and trains analytical skills.*

**Keywords:** African and New Orleans voodoo; Marie Laveau; Dr. John; *The Skeleton Key*; popular culture; development of critical and media literacy; Stephen King; multimodal communication

## INTRODUCTION

 Once upon a time, folklorists thought that genuine folk narratives and belief systems circulated only by word of mouth. In recent years, however, especially with the invention of YouTube, on-line music videos, and electronic versions of graphic novels, we cannot deny the importance of popular culture in the transmittance, adaptation, and change of traditional folk material. This is especially true for the African religion of voodoo, which took its own particular form in the New Orleans area.

“New Orleans voodoo,” also called “créole voodoo,” is an amalgamation of African ancestor worship, an honoring of the spirits of the dead, a respect for the elderly and the spiritual life, African knowledge of herbs and charms, and European elements of Catholicism. It came to New Orleans during the period of French colonialism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the African slave trade in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and during the Haitian slave rebellions between 1791 and 1801. “New Orleans voodoo” flourished throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and is still practiced today in and around New Orleans by a small congregation of followers.

Nevertheless, all too often voodoo has been given a negative connotation and has been compared to devil worship, witchcraft, hexing, and conjure. Needless to say, that teaching about voodoo through its representation in popular culture often leads to misunderstandings. In the past, colleagues expressed their surprise and disbelief about topic choice and educational resource in questions, such as “Do you really believe in this hocus-pocus?” or “Really, you teach a segment on voodoo through popular culture?” But why do colleagues utter these questions of disbelief? Does this topic not fulfill the high academic standards we hold at our institutions? Or do colleagues react this way, because popular culture has painted too dark of a picture of voodoo?

Students in my most recent folklore course on “The Haunting of Louisiana” gave the following answers to the question, “What do you associate with voodoo?”: “witchcraft,” “some spiritual belief,” “power to cross and uncross someone,” “group religion,” “fear,” “ghosts,” “charms and spells,” and “voodoo dolls into which you stick needles in order to harm someone.” These questions and terms suggest others, namely: Where does their “knowledge” come from? Why do they associate something evil and harmful with the term?

The answer is simple. Voodoo, more so in the past than in the present has “been extremely secretive” (Tallant, 1984, p. 16) and exclusive. Moreover, it is a religion of ancestor worship that is unknown to us, and that we are not necessarily exposed to or included in. As such, it is something foreign to our own belief system. Being ignorant about what the religion entails, people in general stigmatize it as something not worthy to discuss, nor to practice. It becomes associated with supernatural powers, witchcraft, spirit possession, devil worship, and according to Robert Tallant, even with animal and child sacrifice (see Tallant, 1984, p. 8).

Moreover, images of evil looking voodoo dolls or smiling skulls on Google, popular novels like *Voodoo Season* (2006) and *Voodoo Dreams* (1995) by Jowell Parker Rhodes, and especially Hollywood’s production of horror movies such as *White Zombie* (1932), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1987), *Voodoo Dawn* (1998) or *Hoodoo for Voodoo* (2006), fuel the already existing misperceptions of the religion. Neither one of these sources of popular culture provides the viewer with a truthful background of the African, Haitian, or New Orleanian voodoo tradition. However, all of these sources portray voodoo as something shadowy, highly secretive, and fearful.

Even though Iain Softley’s movie *The Skeleton Key* (2004) follows the Hollywood tradition by falsely connecting religion with supernatural terror and body switching, the film differs from its predecessors in the way that, for the first time in Hollywood history, a film clearly articulates and illustrates characteristics that are representative for voodoo in general, and for New Orleans voodoo in particular.

This being said, I will illustrate how I used popular culture in general, and the film *The Skeleton Key*, in particular when teaching a unit about voodoo in my folklore class, “The Haunting of Louisiana” in Spring 2011. This unit, consisting of three 75 minutes class periods, however, can be integrated into any folklore, religion, or American Southern Literature course. By using popular culture as a teaching tool, I achieved five goals:

- First, via the use of the YouTube movie trailer of *The Skeleton Key*, I use a popular medium to make students aware of foreign cultural, religious, and folkloristic values that they otherwise might dismiss.
- Second, through the discussion of the movie trailer, students learn about the voodoo religion, its history, belief system, common rituals.
- Third, through the discussion of individual film scenes, popular graphic art, and a study of Dr. John’s song “Marie Laveau” (2004) students learn about New Orleans unique brand of voodoo—Creole voodoo—and its connection with Catholicism.
- Fourth, students understand the difference between voodoo and hoodoo.
- Fifth, through a guided discussion of selected film scenes of *The Skeleton Key*, students gain cultural knowledge, develop their media literacy, and learn how to assess and to deconstruct Hollywood’s created and falsified voodoo construct.

**PART I: INTRODUCTION TO VOODOO**

In order to give all students a voice at the beginning of this unit and to get a feeling for their preexisting knowledge about the topic, I started with 5 minutes of free writing addressing the question, “What do you associate with voodoo?” This individualized approach of the topic allowed students to collect and organize their ideas and understanding of the term ‘voodoo.’ In a following period of group brainstorming of the same question, students communicated their ideas that are represented in the mind-map below. Chart 1 illustrates the manifold and contradictory description of what my students associated with the term ‘voodoo’ at the beginning of this unit.

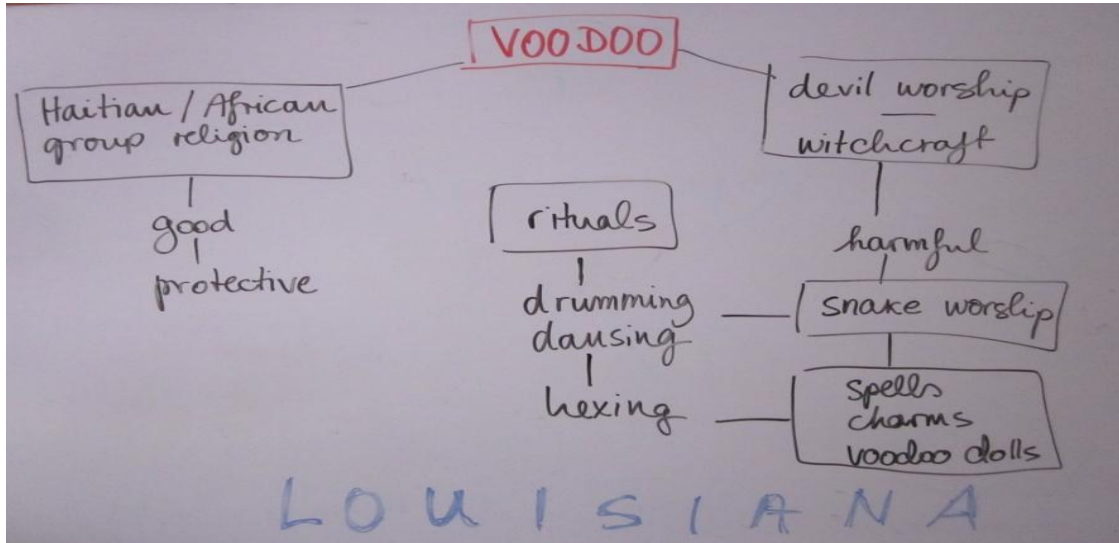


Chart 1

As soon as the students fell silent, I gave another impulse and showed the two-minute YouTube trailer (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiugxNeXj2Y>) of the 2004 horror movie *The Skeleton Key*. By doing so, I introduced Hollywood’s fear inspiring representation of the African religion and provided a nourishing ground for the discussion of some important characteristics of the religion such as: the importance of candles, color symbolism, herbs, the calling of the spirits, the procedure of cleansing, sacrifice, and the use of voodoo dolls.

This visual introduction to the topic was helpful in two ways. First, it allowed me to complete the initial word map and to make the students aware of the necessity of deconstructing Hollywood’s falsified misconception of the voodoo religion. Second, the fast moving shots had a more appealing effect on the increasingly visual and media oriented student of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than a purely folkloric or religious introduction to or outline of the topic. Using the YouTube video facilitated setting the hook for this unit and helped to motivate students for a later academic study and discussion of the religion.

After the screening, I collected new ideas from the class and completed the students’ mind-map by adding additional information and by connecting certain characteristics with each other (see Chart 2). Even though the resulting mind-map listed important characteristics of the voodoo religion, this illustration shows clearly that the class was entrapped in Hollywood’s voodoo construct that needed to be understood and dissolved.

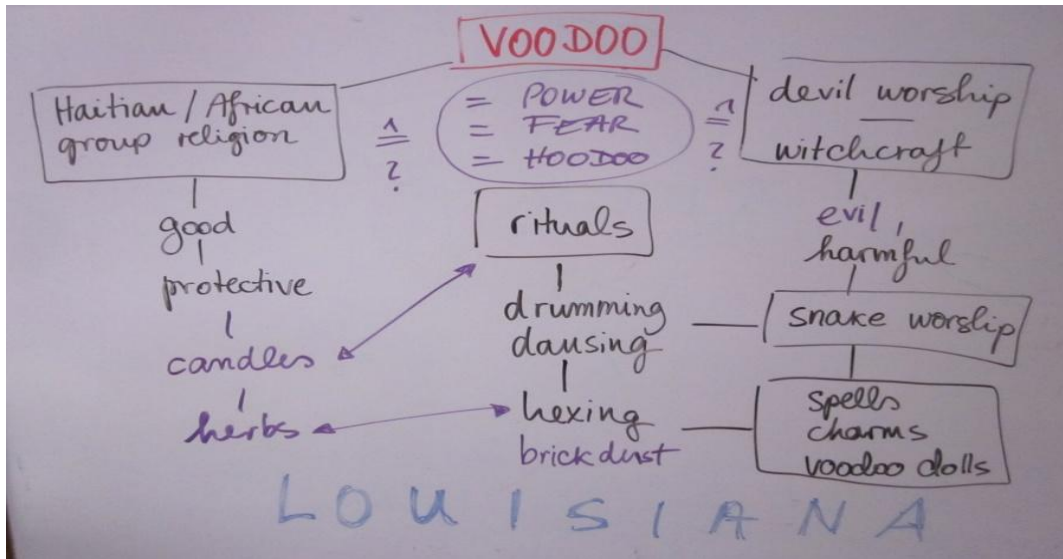


Chart 2

In the next step, I contrasted the students’ mostly unrefined knowledge about voodoo with an excerpt taken from Carolyn Morrow Long’s biography on *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess. The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. This five page excerpt (pp. 93-97) provided students with a general overview of the religion’s African cultural heritage and its emergence in North America due to the slave trade. It introduced the reader to the religion’s supreme deity—the *Bondyé*—and to its spiritual entities called *lwas*, who can be defined as “representations of heavenly bodies, stars, and planets” (Rigaud, 1985, p. 80) and who function “as intermediaries between human beings and the highest god” (Long, 2007, p. 94). After five minutes of silent reading, I chose individual references from the mind-map as well as passages from the text to outline and discuss the history and development of voodoo, its prominent beliefs, the function of some of its most important *lwas*, as well as its rituals of cleansing, (herbal) healing, dancing, and ancestor worship.

Whereas the first half of the course addressed students’ visual, auditory, and interpersonal intelligences, the second half focused more on their verbal and linguistic intelligence. To facilitate the learning process of the visual learners who “prefer to read and visualize information” and for the sensory/sequential learners who “prefer to encounter new information by means of a step-by-step, ordered presentation” (Shrum, 2009, p. 353), I provided an overview of the most important facts according to the following outline in Chart 3:

<b>Voodoo: An Introduction</b>	
1.	the history of voodoo,
2.	meaning of the term “voodoo” also spelled “vodou” or “vodu,”
3.	the religion’s most important beliefs, → animistic faith → cult of ancestry worship → belief in a supreme deity, the <i>Bondyé</i> , and its spiritual “helpers” → <i>lwas</i> , e.g., <i>Papa Legba</i> , <i>Danbhalah</i> , <i>Erzulie</i> , <i>Baron Samedi</i>
4.	<i>lwas</i> and their representations: altars and <i>vèvès</i> ,
5.	rituals, → cleansing → dancing, drumming, and worshipping → offering → healing and praying

Chart 3

As a consequence, this second half of the lesson switched from a student-centered to a more teacher-centered instruction, which was mainly characterized by a seminar style teacher-student interaction. I concluded the first lesson by discussing the following photos, which I had taken at a local voodoo ceremony in Fall 2009.



**Photo 1: Entrance To The Voodoo Temple Showing A Drawing Of The Vèvè Of Papa Legba, The Guarding Of The Crossroads, As Well As Of Baron Samedi, The Lwa Of The Dead**



**Photo 2: An Altar Of The Ancestors Inside The Voodoo Temple Displaying Candles, Pictures, And Offerings**



**Photo 3: Voodoo Priestess Drawing Vèvès Of The Crossroads**



**Photo 4: Complete Vèvès Of The Crossroads And The Guédés, The Lwas Of The Dead**

Via the discussion of these photos, I was able to support and illustrate the preceding academic outline of the religion's most important features, and correct the students' first impressions of the voodoo religion and Hollywood's misrepresentation of the same in the YouTube trailer. Moreover, I was able to show the accurate representation of the vèvès on the temple's ground. The introduction to these corn meal drawings representing the astral forces of the *lwas* was important for two reasons: First, these drawings play an important role in any voodoo ceremony. Only through the drawings of the vèvès, the *lwas* descend to earth (see Rigaud, 1985, p. 80). Second, in regard to the movie *The Skeleton Key*, it is imperative to discuss these ritual drawings and their connection to the *lwas* as Hollywood attaches a supernatural function of protection to them.

I am, however, aware that not every teacher has this resource. Thus, I propose two options for how to conclude this first lesson on voodoo, depending on how engaged the particular group of students is. If the students are engaged in discussion and pose questions that further the ongoing dialogue about voodoo, I recommend to have them learn by questioning, listening, responding, and evaluating each other's and the teacher's remarks. "As I state in my article "How to Use the Pop-Screen in Literary Studies," discussions are a very valuable teaching tool as it forces the students to interact and to communicate their understanding of a topic, situation, or fact to others." "It is

an activity that fosters the student's "independent thinking and self-confidence to present their opinions" (Reuber, 2010, p. 27) to others and strengthens their interpersonal skills of communication."

If the group is less lively and engaged, the teacher might provide the students with additional authentic input by showing a five minute documentary about the origins of voodoo produced by *The History Channel*. The DVD's chapter "African Origins" (01:16-04:28) allows for the consolidation of the material presented, which then can be accessed through controlled question-answer exercises. In both cases, the last five minutes of this first class period should be reserved for the discussion of the following two questions assessing the students' learning process:

- 1) How can we complement, change, or correct our first impressions?
- 2) How does the YouTube video trailer of "The Skeleton Key" represent the religion?

As homework, students are asked to read chapter 3, "Voodoo," in Kalila Smith's *New Orleans Ghosts, Voodoo, and Vampires. Journey into Darkness* and Troy Taylor's on-line article "Voodoo in New Orleans & The Legacy of Marie Laveau."

## PART II: NEW ORLEANS VOODOO HOODOO

The second 75 minutes class period focused on what priestess Anise Alvarado calls "New Orleans Voodoo Hoodoo" or "Creole Voodoo" (2009, p. 6). It concentrated on the unit's third and fourth objective: Students learning about New Orleans unique brand of voodoo—Creole voodoo— its pairing "of African gods with Christian saints" (Thornton, 1988, p. 267), its inclusion of herbal healing, and of African magic.

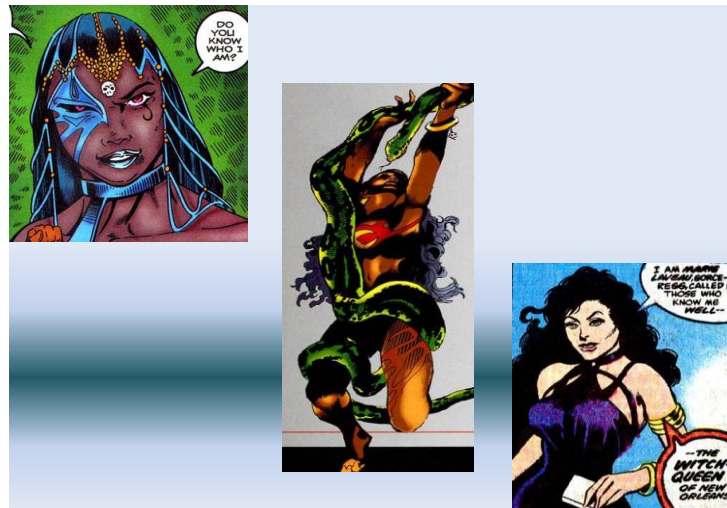
"A general discussion of Kalila Smith's and Troy Taylor's texts initiated my teacher-student exchange about the main characteristics of New Orleans's particular "brand" of voodoo: a religion that is loyal to its African and Haitian origins in honoring the ancestors, calling the *lwes* and making offerings to the spirits but at the same time is innovative by blending these roots with European Catholicism and spiritualism as well as with "African American folk magic that operates independent of the gods" (Anderson, 2008, 42). According to Anderson "there can be little doubt that hoodoo and voodoo were [actually] not separated before the late nineteenth century" (43), indicating that the two terms might have been used interchangeably, and that magic and spells were used as part of both, the African religion and the folk-magic."

This particular brand of New Orleans' voodoo is linked to the city's most popular and legendary voodoo queen, Marie Laveau, who, despite her attraction to and practice of voodoo, never abandoned her Catholic roots but rather combined voodoo *lwes* and catholic saints (see Smith, 2007, p. 122). Even though she was a very religious woman, according to Troy Taylor, Marie Laveau "was the source of hundreds of tales of terror and wonder in New Orleans" (online). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, her reputation and celebrated voodoo tradition "were perceived as irresistibly scary and enticingly erotic" (Long, 2007, p. xxxi). As a free mulatto, whose ancestry remains unknown<sup>1</sup>, whose first husband Jacques Paris disappeared and presumably died "in one of the fatal yellow fever epidemics" (Long, 2007, p. 50), whose second husband, Christophe Glapion, gave her 13 children, Marie Laveau—mother, hairdresser, devoted catholic, and powerful voodoo queen—is of course subject to speculation. But does this sensational perception of a woman and of a religion justify the creation of popular culture's (and in particular Hollywood's) all too often falsified voodoo construct in general and demonization of Marie Laveau in particular?

Popular culture takes great liberty in the representation of Marie Laveau as a "mythic and magical figure" (Long, 2007, xxxv). While disregarding her social engagement and later devotion to community and charitable work, popular novels, songs, and films always stress the influence and power Marie Laveau exercised over her fellow citizens. Since power means something positive for some and something negative, yet evil, for others, Marie Laveau soon became a woman with the most contradictory set of characteristics and values, much like New Orleans voodoo itself.

Spiritual power and insight sought through the communication with the ancestors and the different kind of *lwes*, often only achieved by undergoing great suffering and loss, has become tainted with derogative watchwords

such as witchcraft, hexing, and devil worship. These attitudes are graphically expressed in the pop-art representations of Marie Laveau, showing her as a threatening dark power dancing with a snake and defining her as “the witch queen of New Orleans” (see Image 1).



**Image 1**

Since students nowadays are familiar with graphic art through their frequent exposure to comic books, as well as video and computer games, these provocative images served as a great visual stimulus in class. Students not only described the artistic representation of New Orleans’ most famous voodoo queen with ease but also connected the artist’s chosen symbolism to the characteristics of the voodoo religion. Chart 4 illustrates a combination of the determined symbols (on the left), students’ interpretation of the symbols (in the middle), and my additional remarks (on the right).

Depending on the interests and learning styles of the students, I suggest to complement this initial discussion of New Orleans’ voodoo queen either by a partial screening of the documentary *New Orleans Voodoo Queen* (30:20-36:32) produced by the *History Channel* or by playing the psychedelic rock song “Marie Laveau” (2004) composed by Malcolm John Rebennack, alias Dr. John, and its accompanying video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lb8DIC3utYE>) (00:06:45). Since I had several music lovers in my last course on “The Haunting of Louisiana,” I chose the latter.

In the following post-listening / post-viewing activity, students discussed first in pairs, then in a group, Dr. John’s representation of Marie Laveau. By exchanging the ideas of how to understand Dr. John’s presentation of New Orleans’s voodoo queen, everybody was involved in the four classroom activities contributing to learning: listening/seeing, understanding, evaluating, presenting. More importantly, through the presentation of individual comments, every student was “connecting to the material and lesson” (Yerigan, 2008, p. 19).

Provoked by the lyrics and the video, students addressed the juxtaposition of Catholic faith and voodoo, the importance of suffering and prayer, of offerings, of African root work, and the use of charms and spells for the New Orleans’ voodoo tradition. Students also stressed Marie Laveau’s influence on and power over all members of society: the poor, the rich, and even the legal representatives of the city.



Chart 4

Symbol	Student comment	Teacher Remarks
different skin colors	reference to Marie Laveau’s cultural background.	Laveau was a free woman of color; daughter of the free man of color Charles Laveau Trudeau and a black woman Marguerite.
red and white eyes	reference to the good vs. bad side of voodoo  reference to New Orleans voodoo hoodoo = créole voodoo	<i>rada</i> and <i>petwo lwas</i>  Whereas <i>rada lwas</i> personify the healing aspects of voodoo, the often violent <i>petwo lwas</i> represent spell work.
skull on her forehead and on her bracelet	reference to the <i>Guédés</i> , the <i>lwas</i> of the dead	The <i>lwas</i> of the dead and the cemeteries find often representation through a black cross, skull, shovel, and pickax. Baron Samedi is the main <i>lwa</i> of the dead.
snake	representation of rebirth dance with the snake as a representation of power	Li Grand Zombi, a large python snake that personifies the serpent god <i>Danbhalah</i> , als spelled <i>Damballa</i> , “a spirit that speaks through the snake” (Long, 2007, p. 116)  He is among one of the most important <i>lwa</i> representing rebirth, connection between the realm of the living and the dead.  The dance with the snake “symbolizes the unity between our world and the world beyond” (Smith, 2007, 116) and is still a voodoo ritual in New Orleans.
super-hero bras “Witch Queen”	reference to her power and spiritual strength  reference to her magic power and prophetic dreams,  voodoo as witchcraft, hexing, and conjure	She prepared and sold gris-gris bags. “Gris-gris, a general term for magic, came from the Mandingo tribe” (Anderson, 2007, p. 28). Hence, the term is a cultural remain of the West Africans who found their way to the United States during the period of colonization and slave trade.
black and purple dress		Black and purple are the colors to honor the ancestors and the <i>guédés</i> .

Even though Dr. John’s song and its accompanying video do not leave the listener or viewer with the impression that Marie Laveau’s magic was harmful, the sources’ frequent allusion to her use of charms and gris-gris misled two of my former students to believe that she was practicing witchcraft. Here, it is important to differentiate between European witchcraft, African black magic, and root and spell work, of which the latter plays an important role in what Anise Alvarado defines as “New Orleans Voodoo Hoodoo” (2009, p. 6) -- a combination of religious worship and of magic. Through discussion and clarification, all students in my class finally understood that New Orleans voodoo should be perceived as a very particular form of voodoo, namely as a religion that is a “complex blend of multiple African religions and Christianity,” as well as of “African American folk magic that operates independent of the gods, communal ceremonies, and other religious trappings of Voodoo” (Anderson, 2008, p. 33; 42). In this respect, Jeffrey E. Anderson might be right when calling Marie Laveau not only a voodoo queen, but also a conjurer, a hoodoo doctor (see Anderson, 2007, p. 98). It is essential that students understand the notion of New Orleans voodoo hoodoo, prior to watching Iain Softley’s film *The Skeleton Key* for the next class meeting.

**PART III: HOLLYWOOD’S VOODOO HOODOO – “THE SKELETON KEY”**

This last 75 minutes segment of the unit focused on the discussion of Iain Softley’s film “The Skeleton Key” (2005) and on the understanding of Hollywood’s created and falsified voodoo construct. It centered on the following two questions:

- How is voodoo represented throughout the film?
- What constitutes Hollywood’s voodoo construct in *The Skeleton Key*?

The lesson started with a free-writing activity addressing the film’s general representation of voodoo. The question “How is voodoo represented throughout the film?” served as an initial impulse that gave each learner a

chance to organize his/her train of thought and to connect already learned material to the popular medium. This individual “reading” of the film was then complemented by a ten minute presentation and open discussion of the student’s associations, which forced them “to communicate their findings [expectations, and predictions] in a variety of ways, to themselves and others” (Haworth, 2004, p. 69).<sup>2</sup>

Without hesitation, my students commented on for example the explicit differentiation between voodoo and hoodoo, conjure practices, rituals of dancing, chanting, and spiritual communication as well as possession, the attempt of cleansing, uncrossing, and herbal healing, and the film’s general allusions to charms, spells, and brick dust as a means of protection. Even though many important observations were made, I continued with the in-class screenings and follow-up discussions of the following selected scenes and represented topics: scene 8 (00:38:40-00:40:37), scene 9 (00:41:48-00:48:36), scene 10 (00:52:08-00:55:14), scene 11 (00:55:15-00:01:00:17), and 12 (01:00:18-01:01:03) as they visualize the following points of interest.

Scene 8:	Rituals: chanting, calling the spirits, seeking support in the spiritual life
Scene 9:	Rituals: chanting, dancing, spiritual communication, hexing, conjure Spiritual and soul possession Soul switching Hoodoo: African magic
Scene 10:	Charms and spells: gofer dust, brick dust, candles, oils, root work Rituals: crossing and uncrossing, herbal protection Superstition Voodoo shop
Scene 11:	Cleansing, uncrossing; herbal healing; magic baths
Scene 12:	Voodoo dolls as objects of horror

I did so for the following reasons: First, the screening and discussion of individual scenes helped to refresh the students’ memory and to assess the student’s understanding of characteristics of the voodoo religion in general, and of New Orleans voodoo hoodoo in particular. Second, students learned how to support their ideas and arguments with cinematographic facts. Third, the discussion of the individual scenes provoked the class to move forward to the second question constituting this last unit segment: What constitutes Hollywood’s voodoo construct in *The Skeleton Key*? In order to restrain students “from uncritical acceptance of [popular culture]” (Foertsch, 2006, p. 212) and to obtain a deeper awareness and understanding of Hollywood’s falsified voodoo construct, it was essential to address this question, as the film misrepresents the voodoo religion and its traditions.

Since Papa Justify’s song in Scene 8 contrasts the notions of voodoo and hoodoo, the question of how do we need to understand and interpret the lyrics of Justify’s song seems inevitable. Is he seeking spiritual help? Is he seeking consolation in a higher power? Or are his (secretive) words spells that cause social, racial, and spiritual revolt? The elaboration of these questions in relation to Papa Justify’s and Mama Cecile’s “crime” presented to the viewer in Scene 9 caused a heated discourse in class. Students argued that it was the white man’s notion of racial and economic superiority as well as his fear caused by ignorance and prejudices that first, led to a misreading of the ritual in the attic as something evil, and then to the hanging of the black servants. Whereas my students understood the nature of this ritual as religious, Hollywood portrayed the communication with the spiritual world as something mysterious and fearful, something that can only take place in the hidden corners of a house’s attic, and something that should be suppressed.

Voodoo’s spiritual and healing aspect is apparent in Scene 11, when Caroline attempts to uncross her patient Ben and to free him from his condition. In this particular scene, the viewer is confronted with the following elements of the voodoo religion:

- The ritual of cleansing, magic baths, and herbal protection against evil spirits.
- The ritual of calling the spirits for protection and help.
- The use of the candle in form of the cross representing the crossroads and the integration of catholic symbols and beliefs into the African religion.
- The use of rum to enrich the vitality of the spiritual power.

Even though most of my students judged Hollywood's representation of the voodoo religion in Scene 11 positively, three out of my 14 students expressed their disapproval. They remarked that the director made it seem as if everybody can call on the spirits, seek their consolation, and uncross and free a crossed man without even knowing or believing in the ritual. Furthermore, they questioned the procedure of things. In the film, Caroline is able to perform herbal healing without being a priestess herself. Moreover, she conducts the ritual of cleansing and functions as a medium between the spiritual and mundane world without undergoing cleansing herself.

Through the discussion of Scene 11, students were engaged in different activities that promoted learning through hearing, seeing, and teaching. As Tanya Yerigan states in her article "Getting Active in the Classroom," "people generally remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they hear and see, and 90% of what they teach" (2008, p. 19). This shows that students remember and learn most when they are engaged and contribute "to the learning environment" (Yerigan, 2008, p. 19). In case students do not expose the film's inconsistencies, the teacher should direct the students to these misrepresentations either in the form of a controlled question-answer exercise or the technique of the Socratic seminar.

The screening and discussion of Scene 12 (01:00:18-01:01:03) also provides the instructor with the opportunity to correct the misperception of voodoo dolls as the harbinger of bad luck and malevolent practices that can easily attack your soul. As Voodoo Priestess Mambo Racine Sans Bout states in her interview with the History Channel, "sticking pins into dolls that represent our enemies, [...] has nothing to do with reality!" In Hollywood movies, however, and especially in *The Skeleton Key*, the image of the voodoo doll is used to inspire fear and terror in the observer. Kate Hudson's, alias Caroline Ellis's, manifest dream content, as once defined by Sigmund Freud, is enriched with fear inspiring images of conjure, voodoo rituals, black magic, and the power of voodoo dolls. Having only been exposed to the voodoo religion through Hollywood, she is unable to comprehend the African religion that in New Orleans took on its one form. Caroline's (un)consciously repressed fear of the unknown returns in the form of a self-explanatory nightmare, in which she becomes the object of conjure. In her dream, she turns into a lifeless object that is played with and used by the evil female hoodooer, Gena Rowlands, alias Violet Devereaux. At this point, Hollywood consolidates once more the hoodoo voodoo construct that the film business has been creating since the early 1940s. It is a construct that has nothing to do with reality, but that for the general public is difficult to disentangle.

The unit closed with an assignment addressing Bloom's highest defined level of student learning: creation. Students were asked to revisit the material studied in class and to elaborate in detail in form of a final essay on the following question: "If you were the director of this movie, which changes would you make in order to deconstruct Hollywood's falsified voodoo construct?" This question not only brought the unit full circle, but also served as a form of summative assessment as it measured what the students had grasped (see Brown, 2004, p. 6). Reading the students' final papers showed clearly that they no longer believed in voodoo being "an underworld practice" focusing on "hurting others, through negative energy and rituals" (Lorberbaum 1). Their proposed changes to the movie expressed their understanding and appreciation of the religion, its prominent beliefs and common rituals, and opposed Hollywood's misrepresentation of the religion as something "evil and wicked" (Tom 4).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Whereas her grandmother Catherine Henry was an American born free woman of color of African descent, the ancestry of her great-grandfather remains unknown. "He may have been African-born, he may have been a Louisiana Creole, and there is even the possibility that he was an Indian," states Carolyn Morrow Long in her historical account of Marie Laveau (p. 9).

<sup>2</sup> Whereas free-writing is an intrapersonal activity that allows a personal approach to the subject, as well as the reactivation and consolidation of the student's knowledge and comprehension of a particular subject, the presentation of the individual thoughts has to be understood as an interpersonal activity that fosters students' independent thinking and self-confidence. Both activities assess the student's learning process in an intra and interpersonal way. As such, the combination of both performance tasks reflects the first three levels of Bloom's hierarchical structure of the students' thinking and learning skills comprising knowledge, understanding, and application.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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