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# More Than a Misunderstood Religion: Rediscovering Vodou as a Tool of Survival and a Vehicle for Independence in Colonial Haiti

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**MORE THAN A MISUNDERSTOOD RELIGION:**

Rediscovering Vodou as a Tool of Survival and a Vehicle for Independence in Colonial Haiti.

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PSU Global City

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**ABSTRACT:**

The majority of Americans today closely associate the term “Voodoo” with satanism, witchcraft and barbaric sacrifice. Yet, far from these ill-formed depictions and misconceptions—which first took root through the western dominance of 18th century colonial Haiti and have been perpetuated through mediums of popular culture ever since—a closer look at Haitian Vodou will illuminate that the spiritual practice transcends religion alone and should be better recognized as the very mechanism of unity that spurred Afro-Caribbean independence via the Haitian Revolution of 1791. This paper explores not only the ways in which Haitian Vodou has been intentionally demonized throughout history in order to maintain western supremacy, but also scrutinizes Vodou as a product of transnationalism. Attempting to highlight the ways in which the evolving religion has shaped both the inhabitants of New Orleans throughout the twenty and twenty-first centuries, as well as Haitian migrants post-revolution, this essay serves as a framework for rediscovering Vodou as more than a misunderstood religion.

## INTRODUCTION:

In the introduction to her interpretive ethnographic and anthropological novel *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, twenty-first century author Karen McCarthy Brown illustrates with vivid detail the first time she experienced a Vodou possession-performance.<sup>1</sup> It took place in a cramped, brownstone apartment in Brooklyn, New York, where she sat, uncomfortably rigid amidst the diverse members of the ‘Vodou Family’ who were also partaking in and observing the possession occur, and watched as a “heavy-lidded, thick-jowled” woman by the name of Alourdes thrashed around the crowded room. The onlookers—“clients, friends and relatives”—prayed, clapped and sang heatedly around the food-laden table centerpiece, calling forth the spirit who would soon begin to “ride” Aloudres.<sup>2</sup>

McCarthy Brown—a middle class white woman—describes herself as feeling more than a little out of place during the ritual. Little did she know that the experience would ignite a deeply-seeded infatuation with the complexities of Haitian Vodou, and become the jumping off point for a journey in which she would soon commence. Her studies in and around Mama Lola’s world, both in Haiti and New York, ultimately resulted in the publishing of her novel, a work which has so far proved to make one of the most groundbreaking strides towards destigmatizing Haitian Vodou in the public eye. McCarthy Brown addresses this in her introduction of the novel:

In *Mama Lola*, I am most interested in telling rich, textured stories that bring Aloudres and her religion alive. Rather than simply trying to refute the negative stereotypes often associated with Vodou, I have chosen to enter the public discussion of Vodou by another route: constructing a portrait of this religion as it is lived by Aloudres and the people closest to her. My aim is to create an intimate portrait of three-dimensional people who are not stand-ins for an abstraction such as “the Haitian people” but rather deeply religious individuals with particular histories and rich interior lives. (14)

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<sup>1</sup> As a key component to Haitian Vodou, possession-performance is a common ritual in which a Vodou Priest or Priestess will be “mounted” by a saint-like spirit (*loa* or *lwa*) and transcend mortality — even if only for a brief time — thus bridging the gap between the world of the living and the world of the divine. During a possession, the “host” is often supported by surrounding “Vodou family members” so as not to fall over — he or she will have lost consciousness and not have any memory of being “ridden” after the spirit “dismounts.” Stone, L. “Vodou Lives.” *World Policy Journal* 28, no. 4 (2011): 50-59.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley, New York: University of California Press, (1991): 5.

Over the next few years of her life, following the particular ritual described above, McCarthy Brown would come to learn that in order to understand all the complex aspects of Haitian Vodou as a religion and as a way of life, she would have to throw herself in head first and become as intimate with the religious rituals as the actual practitioners were themselves. Only once she had proved herself worthy of acceptance into Mama Lola's Vodou Family Tree was she able to draw together the historical, social and racial connections that are infused throughout the plot of her book.<sup>3</sup>

After undergoing her own personal spiritual transformation, McCarthy Brown was better able to begin to grasp the intricate undertones that surround the Afro-Haitian religion. She writes:

Vodou, the new religion that emerged from the social chaos and agony of Haiti's eighteenth-century slave plantations blended several distinct African religions with French colonial Catholicism...Vodou is the system they have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts.<sup>4</sup>

In the same way that McCarthy Brown sought to explore the complex nature of a vastly unstudied way of life, in the following paper I aim to scrutinize Haitian Vodou through a range of diversified lenses, so as to deconstruct the deeply rooted misconceptions that surround the religion, as well as identify the origins of such stigmatization. In drawing parallels between the repercussions of the African diaspora, the events that produced colonial Haiti and the current portrayal of Vodou's complex spiritual traditions in modern day society and popular culture, I hope to illuminate the vast multi-dimensionalities of Vodou—through a transnational lens—and shed light on the ways that these have been continually disregarded throughout history.

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<sup>3</sup> "I soon realized that my personal involvement in Vodou represented both gains and risks in relation to my work. The potential gains were in depth of understanding. One of the major risks involved losing the important distinction between Vodou interacting with the life of a Haitian and Vodou interacting with my own very different blend of experience, memory, dream, and fantasy...I eventually had to stop relying on a tape recorder, because it was unsuited to the casual rhythms of [Aloudres and my] growing friendship...I have thought many times that academics have overemphasized those things that separate individuals and cultures from one another. For Haitians, one of life's major challenges lies in distinguishing themselves as individuals in the context of an extended family...My aim is to create a portrait of Vodou embedded in the vicissitudes of particular lives." **Brown, Mama Lola: 11-15.**

<sup>4</sup> **Brown. Mama Lola, (1991): 4, 10.**

Duly, unique to the blending of various cultures and traditions from which it arose—with faith-based roots in various ethnic groups of West Africa,<sup>5</sup> and influences from French and Roman catholicism—not only is Haitian Vodou a symptom of the African Diaspora, but it is also a product of seventeenth century colonialism, globalization, and transnationalism, and thus acts as an expression of the congealment of diverse peoples, cultures and traditions within the global arena.<sup>6</sup> “Vodou arrived in Haiti with the slaves,” writes award-winning photojournalist Les Stone in his portfolio titled *Vodou Lives*.<sup>7</sup> “For more than five centuries it has thrived, giving cultural and spiritual comfort to generations as they survived wars, revolutions, and natural disasters. Vodou...has guided its followers through slavery and the transition to life as free men and women.”

And yet, through history, remnants of the colonialist depiction of Vodou—which, as will be illustrated through this paper, initially sought to ensure European supremacy—have been continually perpetuated through American popular culture, resulting in a wildly misconstrued conception of the syncretic religion as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the very elements of New Orleans Voodoo that have been advertised through media overtime, were infact created exclusively as a means of profit by colonizers and those plagued by the same mentality, and are in actuality far from authentic. Nevertheless, counter to these demoralizing depictions, Haitian Vodou has indeed acted as a crucial survival tool and vehicle for independence for Afro-Caribbeans from

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<sup>5</sup> Because the “Slave coast (from which European colonizers largely drew) was a mosaic of many different peoples”(26), the roots of Haitian Vodou take place in numerous West African ethnic groups (including the Bantus (Congolese), the Fons and Yorubas), most commonly from Angola, Nigeria, Togo and Dahomey. **Pierre, Roland. "Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case." *Sociological Analysis* 38, no. 1 (1977): 25-36.**

<sup>6</sup> “The Voodoo religion appears to be the expression of the racial and cultural resistance of an oppressed class of people within a hostile society,” writes Roland Pierre, in his article, Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case, when considering the development of Haitian Vodou in context to the slavery of colonial Haiti. “Wherever political expression is completely suppressed, the pressure within the oppressed people will always out out in their religious expression” (25). Pierre’s piece calls largely for the “decolonization” of the stigmas surrounding Haitian Vodou in the American public eye. In doing so, Pierre asserts that practitioners of Vodou will be given breathing room from the “Christian ideas which have been imposed on the people of the Caribbean area” (26).

<sup>7</sup> **Stone, L. "Vodou Lives." (2011): 52.**

<sup>8</sup> “This distinctive religion has played a pivotal role historically in sustaining the African cultural continuum and in promoting Haitian liberation from colonial domination...In stark contrast to this social scientific depiction of *vodun* as a potent cultural force, however, voodoo (as it is often called in the U.S.) has been imbued with overtly negative imagery by white Europeans and Americans for the better part of the last several centuries”. **Bartkowski, John P. "Claims-Making and Typifications of Voodoo as a Deviant Religion: Hex, Lies, and Videotape." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 559.**

the seventeenth century to present day, and should thus be recognized as the complex and transnational new-world religion that it is.

### **UNDERSTANDING VODOU:**

In comparison to more cross-culturally recognized religions such as Catholicism, Judaism and Islam, the average American citizen's depth of understanding of Haitian Vodou, as a multidimensional and complex religion, is wildly superficial. The reasons behind this lack of knowledge will become steadily apparent throughout the paper, but in efforts to shed light on some of the basic structural components of the religion upfront, I aim to provide a brief but well-rounded breakdown of Vodou in following.

By definition, Haitian Vodou is recognized as a syncretic religion practiced chiefly in and around Haiti and the Afro-Creole diaspora.<sup>9</sup> With roots in spiritual traditions and socio-cultural practices of various ethnic groups in West Africa, which were brought to the new world via slave ships by European colonizers, the religion was also highly influenced—by means of brutal force—by French and Roman-catholic belief systems. “In the Antilles, the policy of the masters was to force their slaves to give up their culture (language, work methods, religion) and to assimilate to a new one,” writes author Ronald Pierre in his article *Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case*.<sup>10</sup> Such syncretism—as illustrated by Pierre—can be identified in the structure of worship of Haitian Vodou, and a strong transnational relationship between elements of African and European religions can be mutually identified within the foundations of Vodou itself.

Derived from the French concept of *Bon Dieu* (meaning “Good God”) Vodou practitioners believe in one almighty creator called *Bondye*. As with the legacy of Yoruban God Olorun, or Oludomare, with whom the Haitian *Bondye* is closely linked, this supreme being does not interact with human affairs, and thus remains the ultimate symbol of all things that are unreachably divine. However, as a means of seeking a connection outside of mortal life, Vodouisants identify as “servants of the spirits” and largely attain their connection to the greater, intangible forces of the divine realm through supposedly smaller, subservient spirits to *Bondye*,

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley, New York: University of California Press, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre, Roland. "Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case." (1977): 29.

called *lwa* or *loa*. Quite similar to the idea of Catholic saints, there are a vast number of *lwa* present in Vodou practice, each one having their own name, characterization and personality.<sup>11</sup>

As is kindred to the overarching nature of Haitian Vodou, the personalities of said *lwa* range in temperament from benevolent to quite harsh, each commanding a different aspect of life that proves vital to Haitian ritual. These fluctuating personalities also reflect the complex dynamics of life as marked by the Haitian experience over time, and unadulteratedly capture a well-rounded scope of emotion from joy sorrow, pain, excitement and everything in between.<sup>12</sup>

Although Vodou practitioners view their connectedness with *lwa* as a sacred and unparalleled privilege, the deeply-traditional rituals (like that of Aloudres' in *Mama Lola*) in which a priest or priestess actually connects with a divine spirit—known commonly as a “possession-performance”—have long since been the target of fearful criticism by non-practitioners throughout history. Accordingly, despite the crucial role possession-performance plays in Vodou religious practice, the rituals have been thoroughly distorted through history by white colonists who initially sought to demonize and deconstruct the African slave population from within pre-Haitian Revolution. Thus, it can be derived that European catholic and Afro-Haitian religious syncretization boasted an immense amount of inherent tension. Author Ronald Pierre asserts that “this ‘civil’ syncretism is not in any way a fusion, nor a synthesis nor an amalgam, but only a white mask put on over black skin.” He elaborates in saying:

The Voodoo has kept its religious originality in spite of the catholic cloak which circumstances have obliged it to raise in front of its cultural face and in spite of the

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<sup>11</sup> For example Azaka, Ougou, Kouzinn, Ezili, Danbala and Pape Gede are the main *lwa* that McCarthy Brown focuses on in *Mama Lola*. Azaka is a “peasant farmer spirit” and thus reminds practitioners of their roots and need for family. Ougou by comparison represents taking risks, asserting oneself and managing anger when dealing with “officials and bureaucracies.” One of the most complex *lwa*, Ezili encompasses surrounding women’s relationships with men and their roles as mothers. Danbala — the serpent spirit — symbolizing preserving one’s heritage while Papa Gede is more of a trickster, the “guardian of sexuality and guardian of children,” largely representing healing and transformation. **Brown, *Mama Lola*, (1991): 16.**

<sup>12</sup> This kind of well-rounded mentality seems to require a certain depth of thinking that colonizers sought to sterilize. Overtime, the western ideals of the dominant culture have proved to permeate almost all aspects of American life and thus initiate a very “black and white” style of thinking, which in turn stamps the nuance and complexities of deeper, more spiritual thought out all together. This is not an accident, but rather a colonized tactic of conformity and superiority that continues to segregate modern-day white America from the rest of the melting pot. Osbey, Brenda Marie. 2011. “Why We Can't Talk to You About Voodoo”. *The Southern Literary Journal* 43 (2). University of North Carolina Press: 1–11.



Christian ingredients which it uses, by reinterpreting them, so as to reinforce its magical effectiveness.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Haitian Vodou practitioners have lived up to their legacy of resilience in fighting to maintain the connection to their West African roots are arguably more prominent than the religious influence from Europe. And even still, centuries after the Haitian Revolution, Vodou has struggled to gain full recognition as an independently thriving religion and escape the demonic shadows cast by catholic colonists.<sup>14</sup>

### **DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN FORMS OF VODOU:**

In her anthropological article, *Yoruba Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Vodou*, author Ina J. Fandrich asserts that Vodou as a religion has many different forms and spellings, each holding a distinct meaning that derives from a slightly different place of origin.<sup>15</sup> “Few people know that Vodou is the mystical bonafide popular religion of Haiti and developed under the yoke of slavery as an assertion of resistance,” she writes. “Even fewer people understand that Haitian Vodou and Voodoo (or Voudou) in Louisiana are not the same but different, though related, traditions.” The reason for this, claims Fandrich, is deeply rooted in the history of colonial Haiti, both pre and post Haitian Revolution (1791-1804).

Although the majority of today’s scholars and practitioners of the religion use “Vodou” as the more accepted orthography in English (as this notation more closely resembles the Nigerian spiritual lineage of “*Vodun*” from which it is in part derived), the most commonly referenced form of the religion is written and pronounced “Voodoo.” However, as supported in Fandrich’s in-depth assertion concerning the discrepancies between these two distinct variations

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre, Roland. "Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case." (1977): 29.

<sup>14</sup> Richman, Karen E. "Peasants, Migrants and the Discovery of African Traditions: Ritual and Social Change in Lowland Haiti." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37, no. 3 (2007): 371-97.

<sup>15</sup> “We have at least four different meanings for this term: (a) Usually spelled V-o-d-u-n, it refers to the traditional religion of the Fon and Ewe people residing in today's Republic of Benin, the former kingdom of Dahomey, West Africa; (b) spelled Vodou, it is the popular syncretic Afro-Creole religion of Haiti; (c) commonly spelled Voodoo (in the 19th century usually spelled Voudou), it addresses the Afro-Creole counterculture religion of southern Louisiana; (d) but as mentioned above, Voodoo is also the common term in American English for any African-derived magical or religious beliefs and practices, often associated with black magic and witchcraft.”  
**Fandrich, I. J. "Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou And New Orleans Voodoo." *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (2007): 780.**

of the Afro-Creole religion, the more commonly recognized *Voodoo* has developed a “derogatory” and negative connotation over time through the false adoption and dramatization of Voodoo’s more marketable qualities (i.e. Voodoo dolls).<sup>16</sup>

Such stereotypes, Fandrich argues, have continually been perpetuated by popular culture throughout the centuries (the root of which I will explore in more depth later on). Thus, Haitian practitioners and scholars largely avoid referencing this form of the religion when referencing Haitian religious practice at large. Rather, their adoption of “Vodou” as the correct terminology has evolved in efforts to corral society’s attention back to the religion’s West African roots. Fandrich states that this mentality of “re-africanization”—which closely resembles the idea behind “pan-africanism,” the black nationalist trademark of organizations such as Nation of Islam<sup>17</sup>—appealed to Vodou practitioners “as an attractive solution for becoming ‘whole’ again after 500 years of oppression and displacement.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, particularly for practitioners in America, the residual power dynamics surrounding Vodou in the United States align expertly with the effects of displacement that have come to be commonplace in transnational exchanges: they are treated as neither fully part of the dominant culture nor are they fully accepted into the cultures from which their methods of worship originated.

### **VODOU’S ROLE IN HISTORY AND THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION:**

In his comparative study entitled *Vodou and History*, author Laurent Dubois asserts that Vodou has deep roots in the historical past, not only in Africa and Haiti, but in the entire Western Hemisphere.<sup>19</sup> He writes, “The religion itself, far from being the antithesis of ‘modernity’ that it has often been posed to be, in fact provides a window into the profound aftereffects of the

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<sup>16</sup> Louisiana, or New Orleans, *Voodoo* is widely known for the misinformed, stereotypical representation of the religion through “sticking pins in Voodoo dolls”, demonic possession and obsession with ‘Zombis,’ which inevitably often stand as the first train of thought when an American individual hears the term “Voodoo”. This, research shows, is directly correlated to the continuation of a “colonialist mindset” that has institutionally survived throughout many governmental systems post-Haitian Revolution, and abuses overly-dramatized portrayals of Voodoo art as a means of making profit.

<sup>17</sup> Thylefors, Markel. ““Modernizing God” in Haitian Vodou? Reflections on Olowoum and Reafricanization in Haiti.” *Anthropos* 103, no. 1 (2008): 113-25.

<sup>18</sup> Fandrich, I. J. “Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou And New Orleans Voodoo.” (2007): 777.

<sup>19</sup> Dubois, Laurent. “Vodou and History.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1 (2001): 99.

processes of enslavement, migration, production and cultural confrontation that have shaped today's Americas.”

In efforts to provide contextual understanding for the arc of Haitian Vodou as a new-world religion, I will next outline a basic timeline for the religion through its origin journey across the Atlantic and eventually its dispersal throughout the Americas. This history begins even before the French colonization of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>20</sup>

- *1517*: roughly 4,000 slaves were imported from the West African coast to what would soon become the French colony of Saint-Domingue on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. Throughout remaining sixteenth century and into the seventeenth (roughly 1681-85) a massive slave trade flourished between Africa and the Caribbean Islands.<sup>21</sup>
- *Between 1664 and 1789*: a growing importation of slaves created large imbalance between white and black populations; by 1789, census shows that the Class of Whites was roughly 30,826, whereas the Class of slaves was 620,000. Even despite the slave population vastly outnumbering the whites, the colonizers maintained power through internally destructive tactics.<sup>22</sup>
- *Between 1685 and 1791*: Afro-Atlantic religions in the Western Hemisphere struggled to survive as the French colonists pushed the christianization of the slaves. Vodou in colonial Saint-Domingue could only be practiced in the utmost secretive conditions.<sup>23</sup> And yet, Haitians continued to assemble and revive their African rooted-traditions through dance, song and ritual.<sup>24</sup> “It was an escape from their daily realities,” writes

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<sup>20</sup> **Laguerre, Michael. "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti." *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1973): 36-50.**

<sup>21</sup> A surviving census poll taken in May of 1681 showed; class of free people: 4,336; Class of slaves: 2,312. Compare this to a census poll conducted in 1753, which indicated: Class of Whites: 12,799, Class of Slaves: 165,859 — this data shows an obvious and heavy increase in the black and mixed population of the Caribbean Islands between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. **Laguerre, "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti."(1973): 37.**

<sup>22</sup> “The slave as a human being did not interest the colonist. He existed in the eyes of the colonist as a tool for work...Colonists divided the slaves to maintain control...In order to avoid being called savages and to shun the derision of the Creoles, many slaves willingly accepted baptism...Unbaptized Africans were called *Cheveux* (Horses)” **Laguerre, "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti." (1973): 38, 39.**

<sup>23</sup> “The Voodoo cult at this time was a secret cult, because of the breakdown of all familial and clan organization and the prohibition of public meetings organized by the slaves...”**Laguerre, "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti." (1973): 38, 39.**

<sup>24</sup> Laguerre writes, “Although the colonists could have control over the material life, they did not have control over the religious symbols and religious life of the slaves...slaves did not forget to offer sacrifices nor to pray

Laguette. It became more than just a religion. “The political messianic significance of Voodoo was a unifying factor in the struggles for liberation...Prophets arose who presented themselves as messengers of Voodoo spirits and whose mission was to liberate Africans from the domination of the colonists.”<sup>25</sup>

- *1751*: Vodou ceremony in Bois-Caiman<sup>26</sup> where “the slaves resolved to exterminate the Whites” (Laguette, 43). Thus, many historians agree that “it was Voodoo indeed that allowed the slaves to unify and motivate their activities against the colonists.”
- *1791 — 1804*: Starting in 1791 and culminating in 1804, the Haitian Revolution — globally recognized as the first and only successful slave revolt in history — saw the rise to freedom of roughly 500,000 slaves. Though commonly unrecognized, Vodou appears to have been at the root of the revolt.

To the ends illustrated in the historical context above, the practice of Haitian Vodou has proved to “transcend religion” throughout history. “It is a deeply embedded part of the Haitian psyche,” writes photojournalist Les Stone, “a survival mechanism, and a catalyst of revolutionary politics.” Thus, as both central to the survival and independent advancement of the Afro-Haitian diaspora, (politically, economically, culturally and spiritually) from the sixteenth century to present day by means of fostering a larger coherency between a historically oppressed group of people, Vodou is widely recognized by practitioners as “an experience” that creates a symbiosis between the body and soul, the tangible and the intangible, the living, the undead and the divine.<sup>27</sup>

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to the gods of their ancestors.” In this regard, historians synthesized that “Colonial Voodoo was mostly...a form of resistance to the white assimilation” (48).

<sup>25</sup> **Laguette, "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti." (1973): 43, 45.**

<sup>26</sup> Notably the site of the first Vodou ceremony specifically aimed towards planning the major slave insurrection that would ignite the Haitian Revolution. This first hand account from the Haitian historian Dorsainvil gives insight into another such meeting that took place on August 14, 1791:

...When all were gathered, a storm exploded. In a few moments a torrential rain fell and the trees of the forest danced under the pressure of the wind. In the middle of this terrific hubbub, adepts, immobilized and seized with a sacred terror, saw a very old Black woman standing up. She sang, danced, and whirled a big knife around her head. All eyes were magnetized on her. A black pig was introduced and with a vivid gesture the inspired priestess thrust her knife into the animal's body. Blood gushed out. This they took and distributed to all, who drank and pledged to execute the orders of Boukman (a Vodou spirit). (Laguette, 44)

<sup>27</sup> **Stone, L. "Vodou Lives." World Policy Journal 28, no. 4 (2011): 52.**

## NEW ORLEANS VODOO AND TRANSNATIONALISM; 1809 TO PRESENT DAY:

Throughout his book entitled *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950*, author Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof studies the cultural exchanges that occurred when Dominican migrants flocked to New York City in the mid twentieth century. In scrutinizing both the ways in which the Dominican migrants were impacted, as well as the changes detected in the existing New York neighborhoods after their arrival, Hoffnung-Garskof ultimately comes to define the relatively recently coined term ‘transnationalism’ to be a sort of symbiotic relationship that can, in some cases, encompass any or all three concepts of mutualism (two organisms working together to benefit each other), commensalism (one organism benefits while the other remains indifferent) and parasitism (one organism benefiting at the other’s expense).<sup>28</sup> More simply, the study of transnationalism is the study of ways in which a select migrant group influences the specific area they migrated to, as well as the ways in which the existing inhabitants and culture influenced the migrants and their homelands.<sup>29</sup> Through such a process, the migrant group tends to enter a state of limbo, where they no longer fully belong to their culture of origin—as they grow to adopt new cultural practices that are not mirrored at home—nor are they fully accepted into whichever culture they entered. Thus, both Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo are prime examples of transnational relationships at work. Having already explored much of the origins behind Haitian Vodou as a product of the forced interaction between West African religions and European catholicism, what follows is a brief but zeroed-in analysis of New Orleans Voodoo through the lens of urban transnationalism.

In 1809, shortly following the end of the Haitian Revolution, over 10,000 Haitian refugees migrated in droves to New Orleans, Louisiana. Because it was a place that had been previously colonized by the French and already held a large population of West African slaves, who also shared ties to Yoruban culture, various social and cultural norms resembled those in St. Domingue, and Haitian migrants began to infuse rapidly into the fabric of the city upon arrival.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Merriam-Webster. Accessed February 25, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Matory, J. Lorand. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the African-brazilian Candomble*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005. Accessed February 08, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Martinie, Louis, Rev. "New Orleans Voodoo." New Orleans Voodoo. Accessed February 25, 2016., "New Orleans Voodoo's African Origins." New Orleans Voodoo's African Origins. Accessed February 25, 2016.

Soon, a cultural exchange between the Haitian migrants and the mixture of existing Afro-Atlantic and white European New Orleanians began to take place, the results of which would prove to socially, spiritually and economically alter all three groups immensely—in different ways.

Because Africans were already residing in Louisiana prior to the arrival of the Haitian refugees, a sort of religious counterculture was established that resembled Vodou yet seemed to be devoid of the “spiritual complexity” that its Caribbean cousin was able to maintain towards African divinities. Thus, when Haitian migrants attempted to practice Vodou once in antebellum New Orleans, the significantly higher “White-to-Black population ratio” imposed a “stricter social system” through which the religion’s strong ties to African tradition rapidly disintegrated.<sup>31</sup> Gradually, Haitian Vodou and the already-existing form of Louisiana Voodoo were forced to merge, and because New Orleans’ African population was predominantly Kongolese, the culture’s “strong affinity with the spirits of the dead” moved to the forefront of religious practice and celebration.<sup>32</sup>

With the large influx of Haitian refugees in 1809, New Orleanian Voodoo intensified and existing practitioners flourished because of the newfound community. But this was relatively short lived. White New Orleanians started to feel threatened by the “exotic” practices of Afro-Caribbean ritual, and in order to maintain superiority, they quickly saw an opportunity to capitalize on the religion.

Vodou quickly became a mere source of profit. Highlighting specific elements and rituals they deemed “black magic”, the white colonizers rapidly tokenized sacred aspects of both Vodou and Voodoo, and word about the marketable culture soon became a tourist attraction for whites across America. As a result, New Orleans’ economy boomed, but racial tensions in the city rose and the atmosphere became increasingly segregated. Today, New Orleans Voodoo practitioners are largely attempting to capitalize on or profit from the religion; the cultural practices of origin

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<sup>31</sup> Fandrich, I. J. "Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou And New Orleans Voodoo." *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (2007): 775-91.

<sup>32</sup> Unlike Haitian Vodouisants, Voodoo practitioners in New Orleans was more centered around “spirits of the dead.” The almighty God figure was called *Li Grand Zombi*, which is etymologically derived from the Kongo Bantu name for God, *nzambi*. Fandrich, I. J. "Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou And New Orleans Voodoo." 775-91.

have become less and less recognized in the mainstream public eye. In her article, “Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo,” author Ina J. Fandrich asserts that, “Until very recently, persisting racist assumptions about African history and culture prevented American scholars from recognizing the regional variations of Africa’s rich cultural traditions and unique migration patterns of African nations and ethnic groups in the history of the transatlantic slave trade and in the formation of African New World diaspora communities.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Fandrich writes, American popular culture continues to deepen the stigmas around Afro-centric religions and systematically discriminate against the “Afro-Caribbean and circum-Caribbean world.”

### MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE<sup>34</sup>:

Over the centuries, Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo have continued to be viewed through a distorted lens that focuses on the more complex, demonic-appearing rituals that are in fact instrumental to the religion’s structure, and rather simply act as a practitioner's way of connecting with the divine realms. Fandrich asserts that Hollywood’s film industry has played a large role in the widespread misrepresentation of Vodou ritual. She asserts that “this vilification process” has been continued through the production of “big-screen pictures promoting gross stereotypes. Consequently,” says Fandrich, “most Americans to this day surmise Voodoo to be a particularly vicious form of witchcraft”, as modern depictions of such rituals, however, have continually been dramatized in portrayal through countless mainstream films including but not limited to: *The Skeleton Key* (2005), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), *Angel Heart* (1987) and even children’s movies such as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).<sup>35</sup>

In many of these films, besides the largely misguided cinematic representation, a quick Internet Movie DataBase (IMDB) search for the film’s plot summary will more than suffice for

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<sup>33</sup> Fandrich, I. J. "Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou And New Orleans Voodoo." 787.

<sup>34</sup> One base-level misconception of Haitian Vodou depicts cruel animal sacrifice. However, “even the most casual observer can recognize that Vodou carefully integrates sacrifice, ritual, dance, and song into a complex cultural and spiritual hybrid,” writes photojournalist Les Stone as a counter to this notion. Vodou sacrifices are done meticulously, each movement linked to a certain meaning or *lwa*.

<sup>35</sup> Other films that perpetuate a misrepresentation of Vodou religious practice include, *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997), *Child’s Play* (1988) and *Live and Let Die* (1973).

discovering the inaccurate depictions of Voodoo/Vodou present in Hollywood, and thus America at large. For *the Skeleton Key*, the plot summary reads as follows (emphasis has been added to point out the common misrepresentation relating to Voodoo):

...After acquiring a skeleton key, Caroline makes her way into a secret room within the attic where she discovers *hair, blood, bones, spells, and other instruments for practicing hoodoo*. Violet says she has never been in the secret room, but that the items probably belonged to the original owners' *two house workers*, who practiced *black magic* and were *lynched* as a result.

Not only do the connections drawn in the film summary above tie in with U.S. popular culture's gross stereotyping of the way in and with which materials Vodou is traditionally practiced (suggesting its likeness to "witchcraft") but the very story line—claiming that the "original...house workers" were "lynched" for practicing "black magic"—is a direct perpetuation of white European colonists' attempt to dominate over people of black Afro-ethnicities.

Duly, it is because of this continual and misguided perpetuation of colonial Europe's view of Haitian Vodou throughout popular culture today that the religion remains to be connected with satanism, witchcraft, zombies and other "evil" depictions of "black magic" in the majority of the general public's eye.<sup>36</sup>

It is also sadly unsurprising therefore, that such vilification and stereotyping has historically even taken root in the American government. In his case study entitled *Claims-Making and Typifications of Voodoo as a Deviant Religion: Hex, Lies, and Videotape*, John P. Bartkowski systematically breaks down the ways in which "this particular typification of voodoo emerged during and after the U.S. invasion of Panama, in which claims emanating from the U.S. military strategically highlighted the apparently exotic religious commitments of Manuel Noriega." In short, Noriega—the military dictator for Panama from 1983 to 1989—was framed by the Bush administration and U.S. military officials to be a devout practitioner of *Voodoo*, and thus a malevolent threat to those around him.<sup>37</sup> Claims made in the most

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<sup>36</sup> "U.S. popular culture has long portrayed voodoo as 'black magic,' that is, African witchcraft primarily concerned with casting spells — or placing 'hexes' — upon those individuals unfortunate enough to have fallen out of favor with this religion's devotees." **Bartkowski, John P. "Claims-Making and Typifications of Voodoo as a Deviant Religion: Hex, Lies, and Videotape." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 562.**

<sup>37</sup> **Bartkowski, "Claims-Making and Typifications of Voodoo as a Deviant Religion, (1998): 563.**



stereotypical way possible regarding Noriega's supposed "witch house" teeming with "voodoo artifacts", was released in press reports across the country through credible news sources such as the *Chicago Tribune* (1989) and both the *Los Angeles* (1990) and *New York Times* (1990). After being falsely convicted of drug trafficking, Noriega was denied bond at a prosecution trial in 1991 because he supposedly "placed voodoo curses on the trial judge and U.S. Attorney." As if this example weren't enough proof of the strategic colonial mindset concerning Vodou at work in America's very own government and military<sup>38</sup>, Bartkowski also introduces president George Bush's coining of the term "voodoo economics" when referring to his opponent, Ronald Reagan's proposed economic plan. The phrase quickly gained momentum and was recycled by various news sources and congressional leaders.<sup>39</sup> Bartkowski synthesizes that:

Bush had effectively seized upon and reinforced popular images of voodoo as a set of superstitious beliefs used by its adherents in a manipulative, deceptive fashion. However, the ramification of the memorable phrase would extend well beyond the Republican race for the White House during the late 1970's...The negative cultural perception upon which the phrase "voodoo economics" was originally based — namely, the notion that voodoo is tantamount to superstition and deception — has remained intact throughout this process. (34)

In both the cases of Manuel Noriega's faulty prosecution and Bush's coining of "voodoo economics," a historical parallel can be drawn between the little change in America's overall perception of Vodou as a religion from colonial Haiti to present day.

In reality, Haitian Vodou—and the spirits who serve as central aspects of the spiritual traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora—are much more three-dimensional than they "have historically been employed [,] to emphasize cultural and racial difference in a most unflattering manner."<sup>40</sup> In taking a closer look at the identities of many of the spirits themselves, one would find that woven within his or her [spirit] identity resides the foundations of issues with a larger

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<sup>38</sup> "People have an easier time dealing with people than with policies and governments," asserted David Kertzer, a professor of ritual in politics. "So we make the enemy a person and identify that person with the devil. The more we identify the enemy as the devil the more we become the savior." (Said in relation to Noriega's allegations).

<sup>39</sup> Such as Senate Democratic Minority Leader Tom Daschle, who likened the term "voodoo economics" to deceit, trickery and closed-door conspiracies when referring to the Republican plan.

<sup>40</sup> **Bartkowski, John P. "Claims-Making and Typifications of Voodoo as a Deviant Religion: Hex, Lies, and Videotape." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 565.**

social implication than exists exclusively in the realm of Vodou. One such greater implication is the racial and gender-related divide that has survived through history and still deeply plagues modern day society.<sup>41</sup>

### IN CONCLUSION; VODOU IN PRESENT DAY:

As Bartkowski points out in his abstract to *Claims-Making and Typifications*, “...remarkably little scholarship has examined the nature, scope and source of these [negative] perceptions...about Voodoo in U.S. cultural discourse.”<sup>42</sup> Yet in present day America, many Vodou-practicing communities exist in a few key, major cities around the United States (namely New York, Louisiana, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Baltimore). While these tight-knit groups operate largely in an “underground” fashion, making them difficult to identify to the untrained eye, Vodou as both an ethnographic and anthropological study is gradually becoming a larger topic of study among historians and scholars.<sup>43</sup>

This path has been largely paved not only by McCarthy Brown, but also Maya Deren, a woman who—like McCarthy Brown—was accepted and initiated into Haitian Vodou after diving head first into her fieldwork surrounding the religion. Deren’s book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, provides a fluid and detailed narrative that also works to delineate the “Haitian cult of Voudoun” through an intimate look at the the inner workings of Vodou worship.

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<sup>41</sup> In addition to the symbiosis of body and soul that Vodou ritual seeks through the connection with various divine spirits, the identities and personalities of the spirits themselves hold tremendous complexity centered around issues that commonly arise in present day society. McCarthy Brown analyzes and explores these complicated dynamics in *Mama Lola*. In reference to two spirits, she writes: “In the tension between Freda and Danto, Haitians explore questions of race as well as those of class and gender” (256). To illustrate this, she elaborates:

Freda is a white woman and, as a result, a privileged woman who has the power to draw to herself both men and wealth. She marries, and her status as wife and partner is legal and public. It has financial and social solidity. Danto is black, ‘black, black, black,’ and, as a result, she is poor and must work hard. Danto does not marry. The men in her life are as poor as she is, and they cannot be counted on. But Danto is fertile. Her best hope for security and care in her old age lies with her children, especially her girl children. (256)

<sup>42</sup> Bartkowski, John P. "Claims-Making and Typifications of Voodoo as a Deviant Religion: Hex, Lies, and Videotape." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 559.

<sup>43</sup> Dutton, Wendy. "The Problem of Invisibility: Voodoo and Zora Neale Hurston." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 2 (1993): 131-52.

The photographs of Les Stone's *Vodou Lives* Portfolio for the World Policy Journal set Vodou into a present-day context.<sup>44</sup> Stone says he was unsurprised to find that, shortly following the recent Haitian earthquake, which killed roughly 316,000 people and rendered over another million homeless, Vodou seemed to be the glue to hold everyone together. "As an amalgam of the temporal and spiritual realm, [Vodou] experienced a strong revival after the cataclysmic earthquake in January 2010...As Haitians struggled to grapple with the countless, sudden deaths of so many friends and family, many found solace in the Vodou notion that those who died today will return in some form tomorrow."

When comparing this to the way that the slaves of seventeenth century colonial Haiti turned to Vodou as a means of finding answers to life's unanswerable questions, it seems that the religion, for all intents and purposes, is far more deeply engrained in the Afro-Atlantic descendants than any European colonizer of the time period was comfortable admitting.

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In attempts to deconstruct some of the deeply rooted misconceptions of Haitian Vodou as it has been presented to society for centuries, throughout this paper I have chosen to break down the religion into various sub-sections so as to scrutinize it not just through the typical, European-colonialist lense, but rather through one which is more overtly apt towards a world historiographical and transnational perspective. In recognizing Haitian Vodou as not only a phenomenon born out of the tumultuous and amplified cross-cultural interactions of globalization and colonialism in seventeenth century Haiti, but also largely as the expression of the congealment of diverse peoples, cultures and traditions within this global arena, we are able to discern that it was indeed a symptom of the African diaspora and duly a religion that white, European colonists sought to exterminate.

Furthermore, in summary of the main points of this essay, a closer look at Haitian Vodou as not just a misunderstood syncretic, new-world religion, but rather an entire way of life, reveals that the spiritual practice has served as both a survival tool and vehicle for independence pre, and post, Haitian Revolution.

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<sup>44</sup> See photographic attachment at the end of the bibliography for images from Les Stone's "Vodou Lives."

In reality, Vodou serves as a “center of unity and solidarity” amongst much of the African diaspora of the Western Hemisphere, and it has acted as a “training ground for leadership” that continued to be a high-functioning “religion of the masses” after emancipation and independence.<sup>45</sup>

Consequently, if society at all wishes to move forward in scrutinizing Haitian Vodou not through the distorted lens that has for so long been perpetuated by American popular culture, but instead through an appreciative and curious lens similar to Karen McCarthy Brown’s approach in exploring the world of Mama Lola, it is critical that we as a society—through means of deeper education in anthropological, ethnographic and religious fields of study—work avidly to “decolonize” our perception of Afro-Atlantic religions, such as Vodou and Voodoo.<sup>46</sup> This, however, will be no easy feat. Many hold firm in predicting that if such a widespread “decolonization” of Vodou through the public eye isn’t achieved, the effects could quickly become reminiscent of past history. “The intense search for going beyond the human condition has made the Voodoo a Messianism and it is not surprising that it has been the very root from which sprang up the slave revolt in 1791 which culminated in the Haitian independence in 1804,” writes Ronald Pierre in his ethnographic study, *Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case*. “Voodoo today has been domesticated and commercialized. Should it happen that it finds again a less compromised Voodoo clergy it will not be an opium any more. Rather, it will be a help for liberation once again and with it, once again, ‘1791’ may well recur.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Laguerre, Michael. "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti." *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1973): 48-49..

<sup>46</sup> “Nine out of ten laypersons, asked for their first association with witchcraft, reply ‘voodoo,’ according to Lucy Mair’s (1969) prominent cross-cultural study of witchcraft.” Fandrich, "Yoruba Influences On Haitian Vodou And New Orleans Voodoo," (2007): 789.

<sup>47</sup> Pierre, Roland. "Caribbean Religion: The Voodoo Case." (1977): 35.

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**Les Stone Photography, "Vodou Lives"**

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