

A WHOLE LOTTA MUMBO JUMBO: THE PERPETUITY OF VODOU
MISCONCEPTIONS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my late grandfather, Ronald Ohrabka, who is my reason for loving

New Orleans. Thank you for paving the path I wish you got to see.

And I dedicate this to Caleb Coleman, who was simply taken from this earth far too soon.

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ABSTRACT

Vodou, beyond simply a religion, is a living tradition. It is a way of life and a worldview long misunderstood. Vodou, by definition, means “spirit,” and spirit is awareness, understanding, and judgment: all things the religion has never received in good light. Vodou was birthed by slaves and is a fusion of West African Vodun influence and the religious traditions of European slave masters, including the rituals of Roman Catholicism. I propose that the religion, by consequence of both its racial association and the longstanding existence of Black prejudices, never held a chance of being understood. To consider my central argument, one must understand how various historical contexts have always influenced the way we look at—or rather, look down at—the religion. Created by slaves, a word synonymous with subhuman, animal, and property at the time the religion arose, Vodou was never to be accepted by outside observers. In the earliest documents to recount the religion, documents written by white males, Vodou is described as salacious, animalistic, and violent: all traits indicative of the racial discrimination of Black individuals at the time, and all traits which the religion is still misperceived as today. What may be the biggest misconception of the religion is that it has ever been something to fear, though centuries of mistrust and western cinematic culture made sure the world did. Due to a widespread and continued lack of understanding, made most noticeable by media misrepresentations and public and temporary public figure slander among other influences, Vodou misconceptions persist today and will until we are willing to learn from the course of history.

I. AROUND THE SPIRIT WORLD IN 80 PHRASES

An Introduction:

Vodou, beyond simply a religion, is a living tradition. It is a way of life and a worldview long misunderstood. Vodou, by definition, means “spirit,” and spirit is awareness, understanding, and judgment: all things the religion has never received in good light. Vodou is a harmonious fusion of the West African Vodun religion and of Roman Catholicism by the successors of ethnic groups enslaved and transported to colonial Saint-Domingue (Haiti as we know it today), and it is in part Christianized by Roman Catholic missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (McAlister 2022). It was birthed by slaves to break free from Spanish and French rule and to give them something to believe in other than what was forced. Vodou is consequently a product of pain and of suffering, offering as an escape to both. As best explained in her book *Mama Lola*, a firsthand account of Vodou known for fracturing its misguided stereotypes, Karen McCarthy Brown says that “Vodou is the system that [Haitians] have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain...” for a group of people who have seen so much of it (1991). Though born from the purest of intentions, Vodou has been seen as anything but “pure” since its nativity.

I propose that Vodou—an African religion—and a Black religion, by consequence of both its racial association and the longstanding existence of Black prejudices and fears, never held a chance of being understood. Arising from slavery, Vodou was misunderstood from its beginnings, has been both misunderstood and misrepresented throughout history, and—consequently—is still misunderstood today. With a long history of opposition from the outside world, the religion has been consistently

dismissed as archaic, fetishist, and evil because of a race-driven agenda that has stood the test of time: that Black individuals are lesser than white. To consider my central argument and, dare I say, to potentially accept my central argument, one must understand how various historical contexts have always influenced the way we look at—or rather, look down at—the religion. I would be wise to first, however, attempt to instill in my audience an understanding of a religion I argue is misunderstood by so many.

As followers of any religion have always sought solace, followers of Vodou simply desire a better life and a better self, free from the evils of sickness, poverty, and death. The folk religion of Haiti, Vodou is a religion of the people and by the people, long appealing to peasants and low-class individuals, urban proletariat of the republic of Haiti, and esteemed, high-ranking members of society (McAlister 2012). To understand the Vodou religion in its entirety, one must first understand its most basic concepts and inherent truths. The Vodou religion is a democratic one in the sense that every believer has direct and full access to the spirits (lwa) and to the spirit world—a world exactly the same as the human, visible one, though a world only of spirits that are invisible to those not seeking them. Vodou is, however, characterized by varying important actors, listed in order of both significance and divinity: the Vodouisant, priests and priestesses, lwa, and Bondye.

Vodouisants:

A Vodouisant is a practitioner of the Vodou religion. To a Vodouisant, Vodou exists only to *sevi lwa*,¹ or to “serve the spirits.” In fact, Vodou *serviteurs*² have historically not objectified the religion as such, but rather gave a name to the action they were long doing (Ramsey 2013). Paralleled with Christianity, the religion and its followers acknowledge a single Godhead, Bondye, as creator of all. Unlike the Christian God, however, Bondye is not Almighty but distant, giving some of its power to a pantheon of lesser deities who Vodouisants also serve, the lwa (Pfeifer 2016). A Vodouisant has no room in their worldview for skepticism; they blindly serve the lwa, Bondye, and find Vodou truths to be self-evident (Desmangles 1992). A Vodouisant believes that everyone and everything is a manifestation of Bondye and the lwa, and that their power is forever active through devotion of life (Desmangles 1992). The relationship between practitioners of the religion and the lwa is mutually beneficial. Vodou followers ask of it what people have always asked of any religion: “a basis for daily living, remedy for ills, help in times of hardships, satisfaction of needs, and hope” (Michel 1996). In return for these services, followers lead a life learning to conform to Vodou ideals through participation in rituals, offerings to lwa, and widespread teaching of the religion (Michel 1996). A Vodouisant is likely to offer gifts of food or even animals for sacrifice to the lwa. Common Vodou ritual activities include spoken prayer and traditional dancing and singing. Believers are granted access to the spirit world only through lwa possession during Vodou ceremonies (Michel 1996).

¹ Vodouisants will serve the spirits through offering prayers and performing devotional rites. In return, they ask for health, longevity, and favor.
McAlister, Elizabeth A. "Vodou". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Apr. 2022.

² A French word translating to “servant” in English.

Priests & Priestesses:

In Vodou, there does exist authority. An *oungan*³ is a priest, and a *manbo*⁴ is a priestess of the religion. Like the West African influences before them, oungan and manbo are leaders within their Vodou temple, leading their followers in rituals, and known for their work in healing. An oungan or manbo becomes as such through a series of initiation rituals and training in which they learn Vodou spirits (lwa) by name, pantheon, and symbol (Brown 2001). Oungan and manbo training is a life-long process, however, and their learning never ends. A priest or priestess is typically “called into power,” sometimes through lwa possession and other times through spirit revelation in dreams or visits from the lwa (Brown 2001). This is akin to the Holy Spirit speaking to or entering one of Christian faith, which may be for the purpose of passing on a special message or calling one to a “*power greater than [themselves]*.”⁵ The idea of being “called into power” by some greater or divine force is an idea we have historically seen in both religious and cultural customs across the world.

The Vodou initiation ceremony is simply to strengthen the oungan or manbo’s *knesans* (knowledge), which in turn reveals their priestly power or lack thereof (Brown 2001). Should one excel in initiation, becoming a Vodou priest or priestess, their *knesans*

³ Also spelled “houngan,” an ougan is a male priest of the Vodou religion. The term “oungan” is derived from the Fon word “hounnongan.” Similar to that of their West African heritage, oungans lead others in temple.

Rhodes, Monica L. "oungan". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2 Nov. 2016.

⁴ Also spelled “mambo,” a manbo is a female counterpart to the oungan. She, too, can derive her title from a Fon word, “nanbo,” meaning “mother of magic.”

McAlister, Elizabeth A. "Vodou". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Apr. 2022.

⁵ “A power greater than ourselves” is a phrase that typically references the Christian God or other supreme being, hence my use for the phrase above. This is a phrase commonly used in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as well as other self-recovery programs.

Rice, John S. "A Power Greater than Ourselves: The Commodification of Alcoholism." (1989).

allows them to be a mediator between the seen and unseen worlds. An oungan or manbo communicates with spirits in the same way a Voudouisant does—through song, dance, and offering. They monitor spirit possession and serve as an important facilitator of the religion. Vodou priests and priestesses can be possessed by lwa themselves in addition to monitoring lwa possession of others.

Lwa:

Lwa (also spelled loa and sounding just as it is spelled), as previously mentioned, are products of Bondye. Lwa are the spirits of ancestors and serve as the “in between” for the powerful god and human beings. They are “mythological divine entities,” created to help govern both the spirits in the visible world and the spirits in the invisible world (Desmangles 1992). The Vodou religion acknowledges the world we see but more so the one we do not. While humans are the spirits who populate the visible world, *lwa* (spirits), *mystè* (mysteries), *anvizib* (the invisibles), *zanj* (angels), and the spirits of ancestors and the recently deceased occupy the unseen world (McAlister 2022).

To a follower of Vodou, lwa harbor infinite wisdom and are the cause for all of life’s circumstances, both good and bad (Michel 1996). No life event occurs without the influence of the lwa. Many lwa embody an aspect of life for which they are responsible. For example, one searching for love may pray to Èzili Freda, who is known as the “*lwa* of Love” (Mazama 2002). A Vodou practitioner, priest, or priestess may connect and identify with certain lwa at varying points in their life, sometimes for reasons known and, at other times, unknown. An orphaned practitioner who has never known love, for instance, may find motherly love in Èzili Freda, holding her in such high esteem, seeing her in dreams at times most needed, and hearing her words of encouragement in rituals

and dance. In a less obvious association, a houngan complacent in life may receive messages from Gede, the lwa of death, and as a result is worried for his longevity.

There are more than 1,000 lwa in Vodou, grouped into 17 pantheons (Mazama 2002). Though scholars often recognize the other families of division as significant, the Rada and Petwo pantheons are arguably the most significant lwa (Mazama 2002). Lwa, like human beings, possess both good and bad within them, at times simultaneously. The lwa belonging to Rada are more often associated with placid demeanor and charitable attitude but hold much potential for vengeance should they become displeased (Mazama 2002). In disparity, lwa belonging to Petwo are often aggressive and even menacing, yet they too are capable of opposing qualities (Mazama 2002).

Similar to the way a follower of Christ is overtaken by the Holy Spirit, lwa can possess, “mount,” or “ride” a follower of Vodou. This invasion of the self by a lwa results in “the temporary displacement of one’s own personality by the envisaged mythological personality of the lwa” (Michel 1996). During this experience, a believer engages with the spirit world directly, making possession an essential spiritual achievement that also aids in increasing one’s credibility within the religion (Michel 1996). Lwa are said to pass on prophecies, messages, or even warnings during possession. Spirit riding is a way of the living communicating with the dead—equally, the dead communicating with the living.

Bondye:

As previously mentioned, the Vodou religion is strongly influenced by Roman Catholicism and almost prides itself on its strong associations. Vodou, co-opting Christianity’s creator God, acknowledges Bondye (Thylefors 2002). “Bondye” stems

from the French word “Bon Dieu,” meaning “Good Lord.” Many authors and experts alike regard Bondye as a distant, yet still all-powerful Godhead. Vodou practitioners, with much of their focus on the lwa, may acknowledge several gods and harbor multiple interpretations of the true god, Bondye. Vodouisants rarely discuss the details of God, and Godhead structures may vary from region to region, some Vodou-practicing areas acknowledging two *dye* (gods), others maybe none (Thylefors 2002). The Vodou worldview is “open-ended and flexible—not least when approaching less experience near and more abstract issues, such as the nature of God” (Thylefors 2002). The religion acknowledges that, as human spirits, there are things that cannot be understood about the world we do not experience. Bondye, though the god may take on a different form to every follower, heads the religion as most divine.

Distinctions of the Religion:

Vodou consists of several uncommon practices that—even more so to westernized populations—are all too easily misunderstood and, in turn, mistrusted. For instance, unlike other traditional religions, Vodou does not acknowledge a concept for before life, nor after. This means there is no concept of Eden or Heaven as it is known in Christianity (Michel 1996). This, too, means there is no concept of Hell, which is the eternal damnation of one in their afterlife because of their unrighteous actions while living. To many followers of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and any other religion that acknowledges the concept of a Hell, failure to acknowledge this sort of abode for the eternally damned may be seen as failure to take accountability for one’s actions—failure to accept consequences. This nonexistence of Hell serves as yet another reason for the God-fearing to believe Vodou to be evil in its nature. Vodou focuses on the here and

now, absolving those who follow it from punishment for their unrighteous lives.

Believers are simply to lead righteous lives of their own accord: an inconceivable concept to one who believes they will be held accountable before God after their last breath.

A second distinction that is a point of controversy to many is that Vodou has no dogma, and its teachings vary per region. This means the religion has no overarching novel claiming to be the word of any god, no distinct set of “rules” or requirements for those who wish to follow, and no distinct, centralized place of worship. It has no lone leader and no person that speaks on behalf of the rest. In short, Vodou barely passes for a structured religion whatsoever: an idea that is near threatening to the pious of any organized religion. Though very few aspects of Vodou directly oppose **Abrahamic religions**⁶ thoughts and beliefs, Vodou is much unlike the most practiced religions in the world. Followers of Christianity—the single most prevalent religion in the world—believe Jesus to have said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (American Standard Version, *Holy Bible*. John 14:6). It should come as no surprise, then, that for reasons other than a race-driven agenda, the Vodou religion is not to be accepted. To a follower of Christ, nothing but the word of Jesus is to be.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, spirit possession is a deep-rooted concept of Haitian Vodou. It is a concept existent in many different cultures and religions, often seen as a positive experience or reward for the righteous; though, when one discusses spirit possession in the Vodou religion specifically, it is now associated with zombification—

⁶ When one references the Abrahamic religions, they are *usually* thinking of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There are in fact more Abrahamic religions, though the three mentioned being the main three.
Abulafia, Anna S. “The Abrahamic religions”. *The British Library*, 23 Sept. 2019.

with horror and with evil, death-defying practices. Consider for instance the Christian concept in some denominations of speaking in tongues: a process by which the Holy Spirit enters one's body and directs their every internal thought and spoken word. This is seen by many Christians and others alike as a beautiful process that ultimately improves one's life and their sense of spirituality. Christianity has long been considered a "white man's religion" by followers and dissenters of the religion alike, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that spirit possession is portrayed in such a positive light in the Christian faith when the same concept, though applied through a Black religion, is seen as horror.

The word "zombi(e)" has long been associated with the Vodou religion, presumably for over a century before the world understood the word "zombie" to mean "the living dead." It is believed that "the word 'zombi' was [first] used in Moreau de Saint-Méry's 1790s work titled *A Civilization that Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, as a 'Creole word that means spirit'" (Murphy 2016). Further binding "zombi" with the religion nearly 100 years later, George W. Cable wrote in his 1886 essay, "Creole Slave Songs," the word "zombi" when describing "The Voodooos" (Murphy 2016). Neither of these works acknowledged a "zombi" as one who is both living and dead, but only as a concept associated with "voodoo." It was not until 1929 when William Seabrook brought together the living dead and the word "zombie, "positioning it within Vodou and Haiti" (Murphy 2016). And in 1932, with the production of Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*, "zombies" became horror; therefore, Vodou became horror to mass cinema audiences. The connection had been made.

By this point, I have explained the Vodou religion in terms of its basic meaning, structure, and adopted truths, my hope being that a widespread understanding of the religion may lead to a widespread tolerance for it. I will now discuss a history of Vodou's misunderstanding and hate in attempts to show how the religion was seemingly predetermined to fail. Vodou was created by slaves: a word synonymous with subhuman, animal, and property at the time the religion arose. And if a Black man was subhuman, his thoughts and beliefs, at best, were insignificant to a white man. Vodou was never to be accepted from its creation. As a second point of discussion, by the time the religion was first documented over a century later, racism and racial anxieties had largely influenced its misunderstanding, and Vodou was presented as something to fear—which may be the largest misconception of the religion to date. As a third point, I flash forward about 135 years later to discuss the point at which Vodou—which has always been seen with horror—actually becomes horror to Westernized cinematic audiences. Vodou has a proven history of adversity, never able to catch a break. And as Winston Churchill once wrote, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

II. SEEING VODOU'S HISTORY IN BLACK & WHITE

Arising From Slavery:

It is believed that Vodou roots can be traced back over 6,000 years, which makes the religion one of the longest-standing traditions ever known. The Haitian Vodou we see today, though, is a direct result of one of the most inhumane events in human history to date—the Transatlantic slave trade. The binds of slavery dehumanized the African people, leaving them only as property to their masters. Practicing the traditional, Afro-Haitian religion was a way of metaphorically escaping the chains, though they physically

remained. Vodou rituals, prayers, and gatherings were for slaves a means of exercising their miniscule sense of freedom.

As Vodou was created by “subhuman,” Black slaves, the religion was largely dismissed by white slave masters. In fact, in colonial Haiti, Vodou practices and religious practices alike were once considered harmless and a sort of “safety net” for slaves being traded (Ramsey 2013). The religion’s slave creators came from all different areas of the world, meaning their ethnicities, values, traditions, and even spoken languages varied. The only thing its creators all shared was a desire for freedom. To the white population of colonial Haiti, who already viewed slaves as incompetent, these barriers in communication and understanding would surely impede the religion’s overall success. As the white population saw the Black as having no power, their religion was, too, powerless. White individuals and the world would soon discover in a rude awakening, however, that Vodou was indeed not powerless. It was a source of incredible communality among people who had little commonality.

The widespread dismissal of Vodou as insignificant by Roman Catholic slave masters shifted as colonial farmers and those in powerful positions came to see religious practices as “empowering collective forms of resistance” and, thus, a threat to themselves and to their perceived natural order (Ramsey 2013). When Vodouisants were punished and beaten for exercising what was then not their God-given right, this sparked an underground adoption of the religion, characterized by secret practices, rituals, silent prayers, and motivated by a festering desire for freedom. Slave owners sought to Christianize their slaves, but instead of ridding the slaves of their traditional, African-influenced beliefs, owners aided in fusing their Roman Catholic ideals with the

previously adopted ones, making Vodou the syncretistic religion it is still today.

Proselytizing the Vodouist slaves did not deter their sense of rebellion, however, but maybe even added to it. In the eyes of many, Vodou was the greatest catalyst of the Haitian Revolution.

The Transatlantic slave trade's most undying legacy is racism. Black individuals were the subject of such pain, suffering, and torture that their entire existence became dehumanized—and for the unforeseeable future. Slavery is a cultural trauma that will never lose its relevancy to the Black community, who is still a subject of racial inequality today simply because racism has never died. The Black religion of Vodou was disregarded until it became feared, and it is in a human's nature to repudiate something they fear.

Vodou's Earliest Documentation:

Though Vodou's roots stem continents and are nearly untraceable, Vodou was certainly apparent at a time it was thought to be first recounted in the 1790s. A man—a white man—by the name of Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry published a work titled *A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti* in which he would forever alter the reputation of the Vodou religion, maybe without even knowing he would. Saint-Méry's work is a collection of his observations of the wealthiest French colony just a few years before the birth of the Republic of Haiti in 1804; much of his commenting, however, regards slavery and the Black community of Saint Domingue, meaning in turn that Vodou was a focus of much of his argumentation. Saint-Méry, a Frenchman, was a slave owner himself, and his work is insensitive, nay discriminatory toward Black individuals by nature. This is reflected in his interpretation

of Vodou and its sort of “hold” or influence Saint-Méry claimed it had over the Black community: a hold that the white one should soon learn to fear.

Perhaps Saint-Méry, writing prior to the French Revolution, could not possibly know just how accurate he would be in his observations of slaves in the richest slave colony at the time he was writing about them. In recounting a “voodoo ceremony,” Saint-Méry says that “Most slaves ask for the ability to direct the thoughts of their masters” (Moreau & Spencer 1985). The Frenchman's audience could have read this and understood the hurt and mental anguish Saint-Méry must have been describing the slaves to feel; the world, too, could have understood Saint-Méry's words to be a warning—a warning that the Black desire to reverse the roles and to rule the white. Saint-Méry is likely to have meant the latter, considering that *A Civilization That Perished* expresses Saint-Méry's racial anxieties for those of African descent and the Black people of then Saint-Domingue who had ties to them, and his audience—susceptible to the same racial anxieties and African suspicions—is likely to have heeded his warning for what he intended it to be; his audience likely adopted his belief that Vodou is a “diabolical spectacle” (Moreau & Spencer 1985).

Saint-Méry's claims impose that the Vodou influence on slave behavior was to be feared. What Saint-Méry was likely not to have known, however, was that the Haitian Revolution would occur not 10 years of pent-up, politically and racially motivated frustrations later. This event would serve as the only successful slave revolt in history, and it still is to this day. Saint-Méry, though his warning was not heeded by French colonial Saint-Domingue and therefore ineffective in preventing one of the earliest examples of grand scale, Black success, was effective in invoking widespread fear of the

Vodou religion. Upon 1804, when slaves had proven successful in revolt, the fear intensified. What Saint-Méry saw in Saint-Domingue was seemingly right; when the slave community was not under direct supervision of their slave masters, they were devising plans for freedom and for rebellion, fueled by the communality that Vodou provided to the slaves of Saint-Domingue. And to an American slave owner, if successful, Black revolt happened there, could it not happen in the United States slave system, too?

White Zombie:

It was only a matter of time before Western culture would utilize a religion that has always been seen as horrifying for a basis of the horror movie genre. And in 1932, Western society saw what is likely the most popular and cited example of this: Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*. Dubbed "a classic," *White Zombie* is the first movie to exhibit the walking dead: a concept so popular in westernized culture today that I *actually* just referenced a smashing television—and, allegedly, soon-to-be movie—series in mentioning "The Walking Dead." It is also widely regarded as the film that introduced "voodoo" to cinematic audiences. In the film, Bela Lugosi stars as an evil "voodoo" priest, 'Murder' Legendre, who turns a girl named Madeline Parker into the walking undead. This does not begin as an act of malicious intent, as a Mr. Charles Beaumont, a character madly in love with the soon-to-be-married-to-someone-else Madeline Parker, requests whatever "voodoo magic" means to get Madeline to be his. 1932, the year of the movie's release, marks the end of a 19-year occupation of Haiti by the United States military primarily for the reasons of maintaining American control and business and military influences in Haiti. What an appropriate time and political climate it was for

Victor Halperin, an American individual, to direct a movie highly indicative of American regard for Haiti as a flawed republic only successful in promoting the Black to overthrow the white.

A mere few minutes into *White Zombie*, the audience is introduced to these creatures who appear in Haiti and are both living and dead. At the six-minute mark is a judgment—a white man’s judgment—of Haiti and its people. In meeting main character Neil Parker for the first time, Dr. Bruner, a Haitian missionary of 30 years, tells a frightened Neil who has seen the walking dead that “Haiti is full of nonsense and superstition.” He says that those in Haiti are “always mixed up with a lot of mysteries that will turn your hair gray.” Considering the historical context surrounding the movie, Dr. Bruner’s lines express a blatant distrust for Haitian culture, which is inclusive of Haiti’s folk religion of Vodou. Dr. Bruner’s statements were in accordance with widespread American superstition of Haiti in and around 1932. It is important to note, too, the message Halperin is sending to his audience in portraying the zombies of *White Zombie* as slaves. As mentioned earlier in my work, by 1929, the world understood from popular literature that both the living dead were called “zombies,” and that zombies were associated with Haitian Vodou. Now, the world understood from popular cinematic experience that these terrifying abominations of nature—these “zombies”—are to represent slaves. ‘Murder’ Legendre—a white man—turns his zombies into his personal indentured servants who he does not respect nor care for. Zombies in this movie—again, representative of Black slaves—serve as only a means to an end for Legendre and his evil plans. This is synonymous with Halperin’s view that the only means a Black individual offers is for personal gain of a white individual.

White Zombie, a cinematic example of many of the world's "firsts," is, too, the earliest exhibition in films of the fictitious notion that dolls are used for the purpose of causing pain in the Vodou religion. 'Murder' Legendre constructs a doll representation of Madeline for purpose of first killing her and later controlling her, neither purpose reflective of what a doll may potentially be used for in reality of the religion. The making and use of dolls in Vodou has long been a common practice of the religion, though the uses of the dolls vary greatly from region to region and from practitioner to practitioner. A Vodou doll is generally used for the purpose of messages. If a Vodouisant wishes to communicate with lwa or the dead, they may turn to a doll, strategically making it and placing it somewhere in hopes of getting answers. This could be a practitioner's way of speaking with their beloved deceased, seeking advice, and gaining clarity.

Often depicted as harmful, dark magic, Vodou dolls are used for quite the opposite purpose of inflicting both emotional and physical pain; they often assist in healing. Though when it is time to kill Madeline, 'Murder' Legendre holds the figurine of her right above a direct flame—an action that in turn burns Madeline's insides until the point of her timely death, or un-death, really. Madeline's doll and 'Murder' Legendre's use of it for malicious intents are recurring aspects of *White Zombie*. Hence, the untrue notion that a priest, nay practitioner of Vodou, even, utilizes dolls for reason of hurting others spread throughout westernized, popular culture. The concept of a portable figurine that at least in part resembles a human is something we have seen in various religions and cultures all across the time in which human nature has existed. It may not come as a surprise, however, that the common western perspective—based largely upon a fear and

abhorring of Black individuals—is that a Black-influenced religion would normalize the evil and devilish practice of hurting others.

III: WHY VODOU MISUNDERSTANDINGS PERSIST TODAY

The Media & Public Figures:

I argue that the Vodou religion is still widely misunderstood today in part because of mediatization as well as public and temporary public figure influence. While Vodou misunderstandings are nowhere near new, I attribute a longstanding, widespread misunderstanding of the religion to a primary human source of both information and misinformation in the twenty-first century: the mass media. There is prejudice of Vodou in the simple misspelling of the religion as “voodoo,” the misspelling signifying an imagined religion of evil and sorcery and being “an outlet for the expression of racist anxieties” as scholar Adam McGee argues in his first of several works regarding the religion. The only exception to McGee’s argument is that the Voodoo practiced and prevalent in New Orleans—as separate from the “voodoo” that is an imagined religion—is indeed a valid but separate reconstruction of Haitian Vodou (2012). Only in the case of referencing Voodoo as practiced in New Orleans is it permissible to spell the religion as “voodoo,” yet “voodoo” has been the most common spelling one finds in Anglophone popular culture, even when referencing only Vodou as practiced in Haiti (McGee 2012).

As someone soon to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in journalism and a long-established affinity for the particular industry, I have long been taught to regard the Associated Press (AP) as the quintessential organization of accuracy and integrity. The AP Stylebook, a product of the Associated Press, is—after all—*the* guide for journalistic writing, and it is something a journalist lives, breathes, and abides by should they be

striving for political and grammatical correctness and consistency, all of which are things the Associated Press both prides itself on having and preaches the importance of having to others. The AP Stylebook in fact claims that “the spelling *voodoo* has come to be seen as pejorative” in Haiti and the Haitian community abroad, and that the particular spelling “**should be avoided**” (2022). AP does provide a concession to their rule, a rule the same as McGee’s, stating that “the spelling *Voodoo* is commonly used and acceptable when referring to the religion as practiced in Louisiana.”

So many news publications other than the Associated Press—national and domestic ones alike—pride themselves on having no prejudice, and on being politically correct. Take the organizations known internationally that are typically rated amongst the organizations trusted most, like The New York Times or the BBC, for instance. These publications, both avid followers of the AP Stylebook, both vying for unbiasedness, both incorrectly refer to Vodou as its imagined counterpart. Headlines of “voodoo” *this* and “voodoo” *that* litter these media outlets that Americans widely regard as reputable, though these media outlets are not referencing Louisiana voodoo in the slightest. And if the media outlets that America widely trusts the most are publishing “voodoo” when they really mean Vodou, overwhelming the reader with all negative connotations of the imagined religion, they are setting the framework for the lesser trusted publications, for businesses, for individuals, for everyone to follow. They are perpetuating the lie that is “voodoo” and all racist anxieties that come along with it. Should journalists—historically dubbed the “watchdogs of our society” for providing the world with accurate and protective information—cannot get it right, who will?

According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2021, an estimated “36 percent [of those] in the United States have a ‘great deal’ or ‘fair amount’ of trust in mass media,” and that is a historic low, reflecting the second lowest percentage of Americans’ trust in the mass media on record. Suffice it to say, typically, a large chunk of Americans trusts what a news organization publishes to be correct. Should a publication start by getting a simple spelling wrong, could we not trust, too, that the subsequent information provided on that subject could also be wrong? But let us say we do not assume such, and instead one who reads an article published by this misrepresenting news outlet then adopts this view of Vodou as having all the negative connotations associated with the imagined religion of “voodoo.” Then, in true, human nature fashion, this misinformation is spread to a friend, or maybe 100. The power the media holds over us all is astounding, yet disregarded.

The media, to all intents and purposes of my work, is inclusive of both public and temporary public figures. So, this is to say that the influence of both public and temporary public figures does affect Vodou’s continued discrimination and misunderstanding today. This has happened many times over Vodou’s span of existence, that is, a public or temporary public figure verbally shaming the religion, and several times has it been an outburst worth attributing to Vodou’s widespread mistrust. “Vodou is frequently invoked as a cause of Haiti’s continued impoverishment,” or as some would call it, “bad luck” (McGee 2012). While many scholarly arguments have been published for purpose of disproving this fallacy, other figures of similar credibility have attempted to tarnish this finding, likely in part influenced by racial anxieties and the racial agenda I discuss in a prior chapter. Let us take, for instance, the 2010 trending topic of Haiti swearing a pact with the devil.

On January 12, 2010, a large-scale earthquake struck near the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, devastating much of the nation. Haiti—though it is no stranger to devastation—had not experienced an earthquake of such enormity since the eighteenth century (Pallardy 2022). According to the Haitian government’s official count, over 300,000 were killed, over 1 million were left without a home, and nearly every member of the nation succumbed to ensuing chaos, making this “the worst disaster in the history of the Americas” still to date (McAlister 2012). The earthquake, which scientists have long determined is attributable to a contractional deformation along the Léogâne fault, was at first a mystery (Pallardy 2022); and on January 13, 2010 (a day after the earthquake struck), “Reverend Pat Robertson, an influential voice in the American Evangelical Fundamentalist movement,” appeared on a syndicated news show and attempted to change the minds of millions” (McAlister 2012):

“Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III, or whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, we will serve you if you’ll get us free from the prince...true story...so the devil said OK, it’s a deal. And they kicked the French out. Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after another.”

—Reverend Pat Robertson, 2011

This “true story” that Robertson spoke of—a story of Haitians swearing a pact with the devil—is in reference to *Bwa Kayiman* (Bois Caïman), a place where slaves would gather for Vodou or other religious ceremonies and the place attributed with sparking the Haitian Revolution. With the eventual rise of American neo-evangelicalism, what was once a radical display of both freedom and nationalism to a Haitian slave was

now seen an act of destruction and of Satanism through the white, Christian point of view. And though many scholars, religious officials, media outlets, and individuals alike thought Robertson's remarks to be incorrect, his "story" was not a new one to the public. Prior to broadcasting his statements to millions, Robertson had become affiliated with a branch of Christianity called the Spiritual Mapping movement, which had been working adamantly for 20 years prior to promote the very story Robertson spoke of (McAlister 2012). This is where Robertson heard the story and learned of the branch's premise, which is a "recent evangelical understanding of world history as an ongoing battle between the devil and God" (McAlister 2012). This "battle," though fought spiritually, is done on the earth, and to an advocate of Spiritual Mapping, "God has opened up the present time as a new opportunity for Christians to become warriors in this cosmic battle...act[ing] as intercessors and spiritual warriors 'on assignment' to fight the devil" (McAlister 2012). A warrior's duties may include banishing the devil's demons, "reclaiming" the earth and its peoples for Jesus, and undoing the devil's pacts, much like the one the movement claims that Haitian slaves made with the devil at Bois Caïman (McAlister 2012).

As the story goes, it was during one of the many nighttime gatherings at Bois Caïman on August 14, 1791, when several hundred slaves from various ethnic groups "united under a leader named Boukman and vowed to fight the French who ruled the colony and used forced labor to fuel the sugar industry" (McAlister 2012). These nighttime meetings were typically secret in nature as the slaves wished to use the element of surprise to their advantage in revolting against the white slave owners of then Saint-Domingue. Documents regarding Haitian history recount that two weeks after pledging to

overthrow French rule, slaves rebelled by setting fire to the aforementioned sugar plantations and started the infamous Haitian Revolution. It was in part from this religio-political motivation and stance of unity first expressed at Bois Caïman that allowed Haiti to become the first independent Black republic in the Americas (McAlister 2012).

It was not until the 1990s when a large evangelical presence in Haiti rewrote the story of Bois Caïman with a new, Christian narrative. Elizabeth McAlister, author of “From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan: The Evangelical Rewriting of Haitian History,” best and quickly explains the Christian-Vodou dilemma that lies within: “The enslaved Africans appealed to their ancestral gods and not to Jesus Christ, and since the African gods are pagan gods, they must have been demonic forces—in effect, devils.” Thus, followers of the Spiritual Mapping movement and followers of neo-evangelicalism alike disproved of the “pact with the devil” that allowed the Haitian slaves to break free from French rule, in turn disproving of the Vodou religion as a whole. Reverend Robertson’s delivery of fallacious and derogatory statements is far from the only example of a temporary public figure skewing public attitudes toward the Haitian Vodou religion; it is an example that likely aided in creating Black tensions of the religion, however, which is a notable point of contention to my argument that Vodou is misunderstood and mistrusted because of racism. It is, too, an interesting concept for many Black people worldwide to fear a predominantly Black religion.

Feared By Its Own:

As we know from the 19-year, United States occupation of Haiti I discussed in Chapter II as well as the rise in neo-evangelicalism of the 1930s, at least some Haitian attitudes toward Vodou were brought to Haiti by Christian missionaries and bestowed

upon the local population. It is no coincidence that misguided understandings of Haitian Vodou in Haiti, the United States, and various countries coincide with these two events of the 1920s and 1930s. These ideas and attitudes were assimilated into Haitian school of thought and had decades to fester in the minds of Black and white Haitian residents alike when the earthquake of 2010 occurred. After this record-breaking earthquake, and after Reverend Robertson made his uneducated statements, Haitian mobs—inclusive of Black individuals—began murdering Vodou practitioners. The people of Haiti decided to point the finger at Vodou, punishing the religion by killing its practitioners and leaders, and turning their back on their folklore. The cholera epidemic that followed the earthquake of 2010 added even more fuel to this fire, and Haitian mobs—*again*—pointed the finger at the folk religion, lynching Vodou priests in fear they were using their religious powers to spread this infection to all of Haiti. An object of such hate, Vodou has long been feared and blamed by even those whose roots are intertwined with the religion's.

This willingness of Black, Haitian people to kill other Black, Vodou followers may likely be best explained by survey data supporting that Black churches are more likely to report belief in concepts such as the devil, demonic possession, and evil forces (Bader 2017). This 2017 finding is based upon this: what matters “when it comes to predicting beliefs about evil is a person’s social status as measured by education and family income” (Bader). The more educated and economically advantaged that one is, the less likely they are to believe in some sort of supernatural evil; conversely, those that are both generally uneducated and economically disadvantaged are more likely to believe in this evil (Bader 2017). In essence, those at a disadvantage in this material world more often see it in terms of demonic threats. Haiti is a nation long plagued by poverty, a lack

of social infrastructure, and near uncanny natural disaster. With this in consideration, it may be that if Black Haitians have less resources than most, they may be more susceptible to the idea of blaming Vodou: a religion so widely stereotyped as demonic and evil. It may also be that Black individuals in America—who, too, are statistically disadvantaged in both economics and education—are likely to hate a religion falsely associated with ungodliness. If nothing else to share, people of all skin colors find commonality in mistrusting the Vodou religion.

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