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BLACK RELIGION AND 'BLACK MAGIC': PREJUDICE AND PROJECTION IN IMAGES OF AFRICAN-DERIVED RELIGIONS

Joseph M. Murphy

The title of the paper is an evocative way to speak of a disjunction of images. 'Black religion' connotes a system of behaviour embodying the highest aspirations of peoples of African descent. 'Black magic' connotes the expression of the lowest impulses of human vindictiveness and greed. This paper explores the persistent tendency to depict black religion through images of black magic. It is concerned with how these images are constructed and it speculates on the reasons for their remarkable tenacity. It is asserted that images of black religions as cults of violence and licence serve social and psychological functions for those who support these images. These images reinforce social boundaries of otherness and displace impulses of lust, anger and violence away from their sources.

By speaking of 'black religion' I am particularly concerned with religions of African derivation practised in the Americas and I will focus on the most fertile source of images of African-derived religions, Haitian *vodun*. By speaking of 'black magic' I am referring somewhat facetiously to the images of African-derived religions created by outsiders, and written or filmed for large audiences, presumably also of outsiders. These are the 'popular' images of *vodun* and other African-derived religions, supported by and recognizable to mass audiences of readers and filmgoers.

An image is a reduction of data into a form or a frame that is understandable and communicable to a particular community. Any verbal or pictorial representation of African-derived religions must reduce them to forms recognizable to certain people. All presentations of these religions—whether they are created by believers, scholars, journalists, novelists or film makers—are reductions of the reality which they seek to communicate.¹

A preliminary review of even a part of this material reveals a serious disjunction in the content and tone of these images. Usually observers who have spent time among devotees of African-derived religions, attended their

rites and learned their languages, have portrayed these religions as what I have called 'black religion', complex systems of social, psychological and spiritual communication. On the other hand, writers and film makers who have little, if any, direct experience of these religions, have portrayed them as 'black magic', wild and violent expressions of human malevolence. Observers familiar with African-derived religions can attest to energetic dances, spontaneous and enthusiastic calls to worship, or loud and complex percussive music. Yet it requires a commitment to a special set of images to describe these actions by such adjectives as 'frenzied', 'crazed', or 'unrelenting'. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of works of popular fiction and reportage in print and film have depicted African-derived religions in these terms. The rather startling similarity of these images suggests both textual dependence and that important psychological and social functions are being worked out.

What underlies nearly every image of African-derived religions in print and film is that it is made by an outsider: someone who cannot say 'we' when referring to devotees, 'my' and 'mine' when discussing the religion that is being imaged.² This critical hermeneutic stance is the starting point to speak of the disjunction between 'black religion' and 'black magic'. In both categories of images, devotees are depicted as 'them'. Images of 'black religion' show that 'they' are related to 'us' by means of comparative categories of belief and ritual expression. Images of 'black magic', for both their creators and their audiences, show 'them' to be menacingly alien to 'us'. Images of 'black religion' invite 'us' to compare; those of 'black magic' to contrast.

What interests the observer awakened to this contrast is the 'hermeneutic of deceit'. If the first and perhaps the last task of hermeneutics is self-understanding, then the construction of the very idea of 'them', and the contrast it affords to 'us', are invaluable 'deceptive' clues to who 'we' are. I would like to proceed by examining some of the history of this construction of 'their' religions and offer some examples from the literature on Haitian *vodun*.

The idea that 'their' magic can be contrasted to 'our' religion is a very old one in Western history. The contrast and disjunction become apparent when the 'them' being libelled has proven to be 'us', and thus the fictive self-revelation of the libel can be readily seen. Most Christians have heard of the libels that Roman writers made against Christian communities in the second and third centuries of the common era. Around 200 CE a Christian lawyer named Minucius Felix summarized the anti-Christian charges of a notable pagan, Marcus Cornelius Fronto. A brief quotation will suffice:

Now the story about the initiation of young novices is as much to be detested as it is well known. An infant covered over with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites; this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the

meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirdly, they eagerly divide its limbs.

On a solemn day they assemble at the mothers, people of every sex and every age, fellowship has grown warm, and the fervour of drunkenness . . . the connection of abominations of fate (Bento, 1984, p. 56).

Since the repulsive 'them' of the Roman Christian through the vagaries of history, Fronto invites us to inquire into his motivations of Christianity.

Similar charges have been placed again in different places and different historical periods. Accusations against Jews included ritual blood.³ Nearly every description of 'savagery' by Europeans from the Age of Discovery in reports of incest, human sacrifice, and cannibalism, these things never happen, but rather ask if characteristic of other people. People believe why do 'we' wish to believe this of 'them'?

When we turn to outsiders' images of 'them', a number of images of Haitian *vodun* make up the name 'voodoo' in the popular mind is a kind of 'black magic' and all of us in the field wage a barely successful war against 'voodoo' as 'black religion'. Nearly fifty years ago Leyburn wrote:

In spite of detailed reports of anthropologists, his notion that voodoo is Negro superstition is to 'hoodoo' (a variation of the same word), correcting long-held but incorrect or one-sided views, they end rather by inventing a new word, or for precise usage, and so preserve the confusion.

While I have been arguing that the scholarly image as the popular one of 'voodoo', it is the popular images that interest and disturb me. In the risk of preserving confusion I will use these popular images in the pages that follow.

When I began the research for this paper, it was widespread. George Bush could capture public attention with 'voodoo economics' and rely on the public's belief in magic to discredit the economic policies of the Clinton administration. This witchcraft accusation did not im-

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On a solemn day they assemble at the feast, with all their children, sisters,
mothers, people of every sex and every age. There, after much feasting, when the
fellowship has grown warm, and the fervour of incestuous lust has grown hot with
drunkenness . . . the connection of abominable lust involve them in the uncertainty
of fate (Bento, 1984, p. 56).

Since the repulsive 'them' of the Roman has become the virtuous 'us' of the
Christian through the vagaries of history, the malicious misrepresentation of
Fronto invites us to inquire into his motivations for constructing such an image
of Christianity.

Similar charges have been placed against different categories of 'them' in
different places and different historical periods. Late medieval and Reformation
accusations against Jews included ritual murder and ritual uses of human
blood.³ Nearly every description of 'savage' communities encountered by
Europeans from the Age of Discovery into the nineteenth century included
reports of incest, human sacrifice, and cannibalism.⁴ I do not mean to say that
these things never happen, but rather ask why people wish to see these acts as
characteristic of other people. People believe what they want to believe, but
why do 'we' wish to believe this of 'them'?

When we turn to outsiders' images of African-derived religions, the sheer
number of images of Haitian *vodun* make it a worthy case study. The very
name 'voodoo' in the popular mind is a kind of generic term for 'black magic'
and all of us in the field wage a barely successful struggle for our students to see
'voodoo' as 'black religion'. Nearly fifty years ago the historian of Haiti, James
Leyburn wrote:

In spite of detailed reports of anthropologists, the average American clings firmly to
his notion that voodoo is Negro superstition chiefly concerned with charms or spells
to 'hoodoo' (a variation of the same word) an enemy. Scientists rarely succeed in
correcting long-held but incorrect or one-sided impressions of the meaning of terms;
they end rather by inventing a new word, or else continue the generally losing fight
for precise usage, and so preserve the confusion (Leyburn, 1941, p. 113).

While I have been arguing that the scholarly image of *vodun* is as much an
image as the popular one of 'voodoo', it is the similarity and tenacity of the
popular images that interest and disturb me and that I wish to understand. At
the risk of preserving confusion I will use the term 'voodoo' when referring to
these popular images in the pages that follow.⁵

When I began the research for this paper I knew that images of voodoo were
widespread. George Bush could capture precious sound bites by references to
'voodoo economics' and rely on the public's recognition of images of irrational
magic to discredit the economic policies of his erstwhile opponent. The failure
of this witchcraft accusation did not impede the career of the accuser and

perhaps secured it. What I did not realize was the vast number of writings on voodoo that it takes to generate such a well-recognized image. I underestimated what might be hundreds of works that describe or purport to describe voodoo ceremonies. Short of a form-critical study of textual dependencies, I can offer a short history of the images of voodoo in four parts.

The most influential, if not the sole, source of written information on Haitian voodoo until the time of the Marine Occupation of the country in 1915, is the Martiniquean traveller and encyclopaedist, Mederic Louis Elie Moreau de St Méry. It is his account of voodoo, published in 1797 that forms the prologue for modern images of voodoo. He writes:

The [Voodoo] King and Queen take their places at one end of the room. Nearby is a species of altar on which is a chest containing the snake where every member can see it through the bars. When they have ascertained that no one has entered the precincts out of curiosity, the ceremony is started. It begins with the worship of the adder, through protestations of loyalty to its cult and being submissive to its orders. . . Then follow the rites which anyone in his delirium can imagine, anything that is most horrible, to render the ceremony more impressive emotionally.

For each of these invocations he receives, the Vaudoux King mediates. The Spirit acts in him. Suddenly he takes the chest containing the adder, places it on the ground, and makes the Vaudoux Queen stand on it. Once the sacred refuge is under her feet, this new pythoness that she is, is possessed by God. She shakes, her whole body is convulsed, and the oracle speaks through her mouth.

After that comes the dance of the Vaudoux. . . Each makes movements, in which the upper part of the body, the head and shoulders, seem to be dislocated. The Queen above all is the prey to the most violent agitations. . . Fainting and raptures take over some of them and a sort of fury some of the others, but for all there is a nervous trembling which they cannot master. They spin around ceaselessly. And there are some in this species of bacchanal who tear their clothing and even bite their flesh. Others who are only deprived of their senses and have fallen in their tracks are taken, even while dancing, into the darkness of a neighboring room, where a disgusting prostitution exercises a most hideous empire.

The contagion is so strong that Whites found spying on the mysteries of this sect and touched by one of the cultists discovering them, have sometimes started to dance and have had to go so far as to pay the Vaudoux Queen to put an end to their torment.

In order to quiet the alarms which this mysterious cult of Vaudoux causes in the Colony, they affect to dance it in public, to the sound of the drums and of rhythmic handclapping. They even have this followed by a dinner where people eat nothing but poultry. But I assure you that this is only one more calculation to evade the watchfulness of the magistrates and the better to guarantee the success of this dark cabal.

In a word, nothing is more dangerous . . . than this cult of Vaudoux. It can be made into a terrible weapon—this extravagant idea that the ministers of this alleged god know all and can do anything (Moreau de St Méry, 1958, pp. 65–9).⁶

Here are images of wild and frenzied dancing, suggestive references to serpent worship, hints at meals other than of fowl, loss of reason, illicit

sexuality, terror, and finally threats to violence, and, equally significant, fear of ceremonies. Perhaps it is Moreau de St Méry's 'delirium' to imagine the rites which has been passed on through generations.

These elements of 'voodooography' are central to later in the work of English diplomat Spenser St John's *Worship and Cannibalism*. Over 70 pages of his 390-page portrait of voodoo is devoted to 'Worship and Cannibalism'. He writes of the 'box on the ground, the serpent acting as a focus for worshippers falling into 'fainting fits', by the 'apartment'. 'Here,' he writes, 'in the odious and disgusting prostitution' (St John, 1889, p. 10). His account of voodoo is 'freely taken' from Moreau de St Méry to indicate whether he has observed any of the rites. It becomes clear that during his visit he saw *vodun* but an empty *houmfor* shown him by the priest.

He retails a story told by a French priest who attended a ceremony the description of which was in form and in content. The terrified cleric fled the scene. His account takes up Moreau de St Méry's highly charged image of frenzied and dangerous excess, a 'human sacrifice', and St John describes those who are satisfied with only the flesh. 'They require the offering of the 'goat without horns'.

To corroborate the French priest's account, St John quotes an American journalist who also witnessed the ceremony seen by the curé. In this case he and a companion stole their white hands and faces, stolen to the scene, boxed serpent, frenzied dancing, and human sacrifice from the scene, alive to tell their account.

The elements present in Moreau de St Méry's account in St John and made yet more 'other'. Cannibalism, together with rites 'of the lowest degree of voodoo from a dangerous yet compelling character of outrage'.⁸ St John's association of voodoo with its commercial potential for writers ever after. The history of voodoo images, their steady coming to the images in the popular mind, a 'consolidation'.

A work of fiction opens this phase of writing. Davis wrote an adventure story, entitled *Without Horns*. Haiti had been occupied by

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Source of written information on the Occupation of the country in cyclopaedist, Mederic Louis Elie voodoo, published in 1797 that forms. He writes:

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planning, suggestive references to the loss of fowl, loss of reason, illicit

sexuality, terror, and finally threats to whites in the form of revolutionary violence, and, equally significant, fear of psychic compulsion to join in the ceremonies. Perhaps it is Moreau de St Méry's invitation to 'anyone in his delirium' to imagine the rites which has been most faithfully taken up by later generations.

These elements of 'voodoography' are crystallized nearly one hundred years later in the work of English diplomat Spenser St John who in 1889 devoted over 70 pages of his 390-page portrait of Haiti to the subject of 'Vaudoux Worship and Cannibalism'. He writes of the adoration of a serpent taken from a box on the ground, the serpent acting as an oracle for the congregation, worshippers falling into 'fainting fits', being 'dragged into a neighboring apartment'. 'Here,' he writes, 'in the obscurity is too often the scene of disgusting prostitution' (St John, 1889, p. 199). While he admits that his account of voodoo is 'freely taken' from Moreau de St Méry, nowhere does he indicate whether he has observed any of the things which he purports to describe. It becomes clear that during his time in Haiti he has seen nothing of *vodun* but an empty *houmfor* shown him by a Catholic priest.

He retails a story told by a French priest at a dinner party in which the priest attended a ceremony the description of which matches Moreau de St Méry in form and in content. The terrified cleric flees the scene in panic. The priest's account takes up Moreau de St Méry's hint of heinous meats, by adding to the image of frenzied and dangerous excess, a sacrifice of a 'goat without horns'. This is a human sacrifice, and St John divides the voodoo community into those who are satisfied with only the flesh and blood of animals and those that require the offering of the 'goat without horns' (St John, 1889, p. 191).

To corroborate the French priest's account, St John relies on an anonymous American journalist who also witnessed 'hideous practices' similar to those seen by the curé. In this case he and a colleague are said to have blackened their white hands and faces, stolen to the fringes of a *houmfor*, witnessed the boxed serpent, frenzied dancing, and human sacrifice. Terrified, they fled from the scene, alive to tell their account in the *New York World*.⁷

The elements present in Moreau de St Méry's image of voodoo are solidified in St John and made yet more 'other'. Charges of ritual murder and cannibalism, together with rites 'of the lowest debauchery', transform the image of voodoo from a dangerous yet compelling dance into a sensational and horrific outrage.⁸ St John's association of voodoo with horror proved to have enormous commercial potential for writers ever after.⁹ As we move to the third part of our history of voodoo images, their steady commercial success indicates a fixing of the images in the popular mind, a 'consolidation of discourse' about voodoo.

A work of fiction opens this phase of writing on voodoo. In 1925, one Beale Davis wrote an adventure story, entitled none too enigmatically, *The Goat Without Horns*. Haiti had been occupied by American Marines since 1915 and

numerous Americans were returning with St John-like stories of voodoo. I have abridged this description of our white hero coming upon a voodoo ceremony:

Then, unexpectedly close at hand, he saw it through an opening among the trees. With an involuntary exclamation of amazement, Blaine crouched in the tangled undergrowth and watched. This was not ordinary dance, of that he was sure.

Resinous torches, some stuck in the ground along the edge of the clearing, others fastened to the boles of the encircling palms, cast a thick red glow over the scene. A canopy of heavy black smoke hovered overhead, blotting out the stars.

The throb of numerous tom-toms reverberated in the air. . . The stench of raw tafia and sweating human bodies was heavy in the air.

Amid this glare and stink and sound, macabre figures shuffled in and out in an African ghost dance. Men and women, some half naked, some stark, advanced and retreated to the beat of the drums. All danced singly, grimacing and posturing with nauseating vileness.

. . . They formed a weaving circle, their sweating bronze bodies gleaming where the red glare of the torches touched swelling muscles and rounded flesh.

. . . A white goat, his terror-glazed eyes glittering, appeared from somewhere and dashed frantically about . . . The chanting became a delirious wail . . . a knife flashed, poised and then plunged swiftly down. A gurgling bleat, and the goat, blood spurting with every heart-beat, stumbled blindly around the re-made circle.

Pandemonium. Men and women jostled and fought to be the first to reach it. Black hands plunged deep, searching for the heart, and come out dripping and gory. The mad dance began again. Men with bloody hands reached out and streaked bronze shoulders and pendulous breasts with long wet stains of crimson. The tom-toms boomed deafeningly. Voices howled insanely. Even to Blaine, with generations of civilization behind him, their call was almost irresistible. Every nerve in his body tingled with desire. Unconsciously, his body swayed to their hypnotic beat (Davis, 1925, pp. 189–92).

Blaine, we are relieved to find, does not succumb to desire, but flees the scene in panic, ready to believe that he has narrowly escaped being himself 'the goat without horns'.

This literary formula will be followed by scores if not hundreds of novelists and film makers to come. It sets the stage for the most famous of writers on voodoo, William Buehler Seabrook. *The Magic Island* is said to have sold half a million copies since its publication in 1929 and it has just been reprinted in 1989 by Paragon. My own 1929 copy indicates it to be a Literary Guild selection. Seabrook was a traveller and a journalist who sought to write good books about exotic places. During his trip to Haiti it is clear that he did a good deal of research on voodoo, consulted knowledgeable people and attempted to witness ceremonies. Yet his diligence and insights are harnessed into perpetuating the images developed by St John and Davis. He betrays that he is aware that these images are sensationalized, even aware that they are fiction, yet he chooses to exploit them anyway. In this often-quoted passage, note the odd irony:

And now the literary-traditional white strain had such a one lurked nearby, would have been fiction justified: in the red light of torches whistling, screaming, writhing black bodies, bloated, maddened, drunken, whirled and danced weirdly back as if their necks were broken, wretched couples seizing one another from time to time in fits of furies, into the forest to share and slake their

Every scholarly treatment of voodoo has tended to idealize descriptions. Jean Price-Mars, who maintained that he witnessed much of what he wrote about, is a witness with false piquant details (Shannon). Harold Courlander and Rémy Bastien describe 'mythomania' (Courlander and Bastien, 1967) and demonstrate the falsity of *The Magic Island*. I have examined their motivations in writing it, and in the public's reception, wholeheartedly.

Michael J. Dash, in his excellent survey of voodoo in Seabrook as part of a larger movement of 'secret vital world lost to the West'. With voodoo, others could carry out 'an imaginative pilgrimage to the West—essentially an intellectual *nostalgie*'.

Seabrook has had many imitators since his time, which inspired the images of voodoo on film. I have found over thirty feature films with titles.¹⁰ There are probably many more. In my survey of voodoo images, I want to outline some of the feature films of recent years: 'Angel Heart' and 'The Believers'.

In 'Angel Heart' detective Harold Angel goes on a quest of self-discovery. Clues lead him to Epiphany Proudfoot, youthful mambo to the tune worthy of Beale Davis, Angel comes upon her concealed in the underbrush, parts leaves to see her face as he witnesses black dancers whirl. Proudfoot occupies centre stage as she raises a chickadee with a gleaming straight razor, and lets its blood. She pantomimes copulation and orgasm. The scene.

The film makers have taken a great deal of the elements of voodoo right, while at the same time the tradition of violence and unrestrained sex

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And now the literary-traditional white stranger who spied from hiding in the forest, had such a one lurked nearby, would have seen all the wildest tales of Voodoo fiction justified: in the red light of torches which made the moon turn pale, leaping, screaming, writhing black bodies, blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened, drunken, whirled and danced their dark saturnalia, heads thrown weirdly back as if their necks were broken, white teeth and eyeballs gleaming, while couples seizing one another from time to time fled from the circle, as if pursued by furies, into the forest to share and slake their ecstasy (Seabrook, 1929, p. 42).

Every scholarly treatment of voodoo has criticized Seabrook's sensationalized descriptions. Jean Price-Mars, who might be assumed to know, doubts that he witnessed much of what he wrote about and embellished what he did witness with false piquant details (Shannon, in Price-Mars, 1983, pp. 241-2). Harold Courlander and Rémy Bastien describe *The Magic Island* as a work of 'mythomania' (Courlander and Bastien, 1966, p. 73). My purpose is not to demonstrate the falsity of *The Magic Island*, but to inquire into Seabrook's motivations in writing it, and in the public's interest in supporting the book so wholeheartedly.

Michael J. Dash, in his excellent survey of writing about Haiti, sees Seabrook as part of a larger movement of the 1920s, that sought access to a 'secret vital world lost to the West'. With voodoo, Dash argues, Seabrook and others could carry out 'an imaginative plundering of Haiti for the fatigued West—essentially an intellectual *nostalgie de la boue* (Dash, 1988, pp. 24-5).

Seabrook has had many imitators since 1929 and it is likely *The Magic Island* which inspired the images of voodoo on film. In a quick survey of film indexes I have found over thirty feature films with the words 'voodoo' or 'zombie' in the titles.¹⁰ There are probably many more. In the fourth and final part of this survey of voodoo images, I want to outline its cinematic treatment in three feature films of recent years: 'Angel Heart'; 'The Serpent and the Rainbow'; and 'The Believers'.

In 'Angel Heart' detective Harold Angel undertakes a case that becomes a quest of self-discovery. Clues lead him to New Orleans where he meets Epiphany Proudfoot, youthful mambo to a voodoo community. In a scene worthy of Beale Davis, Angel comes upon a hidden ceremony. He crouches concealed in the underbrush, parts leaves, and his eyes bulge out of his pale face as he witnesses black dancers whirling to drum rhythms. Epiphany occupies centre stage as she raises a chicken above her head, cuts its throat with a gleaming straight razor, and lets its blood flow over her body. In ecstasy she pantomimes copulation and orgasm. Terrified, Angel recklessly flees the scene.

The film makers have taken a great deal of care in getting some of the visual elements of voodoo right, while at the same time utilizing the 'black magic' tradition of violence and unrestrained sexuality. The models for the drums,

rhythms, and symbols of voodoo are all taken from scholarly sources. Epiphany's dance scene, though embellished with more explicitly erotic touches, is mounted nearly frame for frame from Maya Deren's documentary footage in 'Divine Horsemen'. Thus, director Alan Parker knowingly used materials from the 'black religion' images of voodoo to preserve the 'black magic' image. Voodoo metaphysics is not really a part of 'Angel Heart'. The 'black magic' image of voodoo is used only to create a malevolent redundancy to the central mystery of the film. The 'heart' of 'Angel Heart' is a murderous and cannibal rite: an evil, unconscious 'heart' which the sympathetic, conscious Angel discovers within himself.

'The Serpent and the Rainbow' purports to enter the invisible world of voodoo through the adventures of youthful ethnobotanist, Dennis Alan. Again actual voodoo terms and symbols are appropriated from ethnographic literature to authenticate the images of horror. The film demonstrates its connection with the truth in the opening graphic message, 'Inspired by a true story'.¹¹ Once inspired, director Wes Craven sees the world of voodoo and Haiti itself as a hallucinatory inferno. Voodoo has the psychic and chemical power to terrorize and dement the population of Haiti, our hero, and through him the audience. Voodoo inspires murder, torture, and gore. The only moment of respite comes when Maya Deren's images of possession by the *vodun* spirit Erzulie are again used as the model for human eroticism. This time Deren's footage is the basis for the love scene between hero Alan and heroine Marielle Duchamps. The image of voodoo in 'The Serpent and the Rainbow' is of a malevolent kind of mind control which, in Moreau de St Méry's words, is a 'contagion so strong' as to torment whites.

'The Believers' represents voodoo, or its cousin religion, santeria, as an African cult of human sacrifice secretly permeating New York. Cal Jamison, a psychologist, discovers his young son is being magically coerced into becoming a victim of the cult, which has just imported the most potent high priest directly from Africa to empower its scheme to take over New York. Good santeros practice what the movie portrays as well-meaning but ineffectual rites to protect Jamison and the boy, but it is only Jamison's fists which finally save the boy from the 'Believers' clutches. The film ends with a wry scene in which Jamison discovers that the woman that he has married in the film's denouement has secretly set up a sacrificial altar in their gentrified barn.

In each of these movies credible scholarly sources have been consulted yet the images of voodoo are those developed by St John and Seabrook. In 'Angel Heart', 'black magic' triumphs; in 'The Serpent and the Rainbow', it is defeated. The audience of 'The Believers' is lulled into thinking that 'black magic' has been defeated, but learns that the struggle must go on. In each case the hero is white, and his security and very self-identity are threatened by

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blacks. And so it is the 'blackness' of the threat that brings our history to a close and forms the basis of our interpretation.

Beginning in the 1790s, crystallized in the 1880s, flowering in the 1920s, and seemingly resurgent in the 1980s, images of 'black religion' as violent and licentious 'black magic' have dominated all popular discourse on African-derived religions. The longevity, tenacity and currency of the images seems to require some interpretation, some speculation about why these images are so powerful. I have been suggesting throughout the paper that the disjunction between the images of 'black magic' and 'black religion' leads us to inquire about the motivations of those who produce and support the 'black magic' images. This contrast of images takes the focus off 'them' and places it on 'us'.

Seabrook, the most successful purveyor of images of 'black magic', consistently reveals himself in his 'mythomania'. His work is a kind of unsuccessful self-analysis, proceeding in fits and starts and culminating in denial. Yet after a lurid description of the terror of voodoo rites, Seabrook experiences this hint of self-awareness:

But I forget that I am writing the description of a Voodoo ceremonial in the Haitian mountains, and that excursions among the terrors aroused by elemental nightmares in my own soul are an unwarranted interruption (Seabrook, 1929, p. 37).

Seabrook is aware that his own terrors are not part of a voodoo ceremonial but 'forgets'. This 'forgetting' on the part of Seabrook suggests that psychological interpretations might be applied to understand the disjunctions of images in African-derived religions. Could the same 'forgetting', the same confusion between internal and external phenomena, be operable among other writers and readers, film makers and filmgoers who produce and support these 'black magic' images?

Michael Dash referred to the work of Seabrook and others as 'a kind of intellectual *nostalgie de la boue*', an opportunity to imagine primitive, atavistic forces unleashed from the psyche by voodoo. While these unrestrained forces are supposed to be fearful, they are also imagined to be a therapeutic release of repressed libidinal energy. I believe that the 'black magic' images of African-derived religions, which are generated by and for whites, are using badly understood elements of black religion to imagine and express psychological processes in white minds. Voodoo, for example then, is not really saying anything about 'them', its devotees, but about 'us', who create these images. The 'otherness' of black religion is created out of the 'otherness' within the psyches of the creators and supporters of the images.

In these images of 'black magic' I see expressions of psychological forces of denial and projection. Joel Kovel in his 'psychohistory' of American racism writes:

If he is a white American, it is likely that he will find an outlet for some of his infantile fantasies about dirt, property, power, and sexuality in his culture's racism (Kovel, 1970, p. 50).¹²

The erotic and ecstatic elements in African-derived religions are selected and transformed into images of unrestraint and become vehicles for white sexual and aggressive fantasies. They displace the 'other' within to an 'other' without. What is 'dark' and 'black' and within the white psyche is projected onto what is 'dark' and 'black' in the social environment. Anna Freud writes of projection:

An ego which with the aid of the defence-mechanism of projection develops along this particular line introjects the authorities to whose criticism it is exposed and incorporates them in the super-ego. It is then able to project its prohibited impulses outwards. Its intolerance of other people is prior to its severity toward itself. It learns what is regarded as blameworthy but protects itself by means of this defence mechanism from unpleasant self-criticism. Vehement indignation at someone else's wrong doing is the precursor of and substitute for guilty feelings on its own account. Its indignation increases automatically when the perception of its own guilt is imminent (Freud, 1948, p. 128).

In the relations between the races: who is seducing whom? Who is committing violence against whom? Who is cannibalizing whom? Images of licence and violence in African-derived religions are denials of white guilt, projections of unrestraint and malevolence onto blacks.

William Seabrook tells of meeting a 'sort of Voodoo hermit-saint' who discourages his quest for voodoo and gives him advice that he disbelieves yet still repeats for us. The saint says, 'There is no such thing as Voodoo; it is a silly lie invented by you whites to injure us' (Seabrook, 1929, p. 27). We know, and Seabrook knows, that the sage is right. The purposes behind the 'black magic' images of voodoo are racially motivated and serve social and psychological functions among the whites that create and support them.

I think these images of voodoo are indeed images of 'black magic', or to be more precise, of witchcraft. Witches are thought to be people who harbour evil thoughts and gather at night to indulge in horrible inversions of life-sustaining behaviour. They revel in filth, they engage in indiscriminate sexual activity, they kill even children, and they eat human flesh and blood. Their hatred and envy of proper society drives them to these practices which happen in unseen places. In each of the literary and cinematic images of voodoo that we have looked at, those practising these horrible rites are black and the victims intended to arouse our sympathy are white. Whites are victims of irrational, malevolent and unseen violence which is directed at them by blacks. I believe that in these images of voodoo we have a recognition of social violence and a displacement of its true source.

In images of 'black magic', white audiences see black power. Voodoo has the power to seduce and voodoo pose a danger to its own community. In the white 'civilization', as it did in St Domingue, in the world of witchcraft these images of voodoo recognize that voodoo poses a threat to whites. Yet since this power is not the causes of the anger that generate it are removed, they are inherently evil, even genetically so. Their power is some deep-seated maladjustment. Thus the white audience deflects a search on the part of their white creation of the marginalization that the black wielder of 'black magic' disguise the flow of seduction and power, reversing it. Instead of blacks being the cause of violence, whites are victimized by blacks. Whites recognize the consequences of racism and attempt to avoid responsibility for it. Thus voodoo and witchcraft become social images of witchcraft beliefs, symbols of the marginalization of a black 'them'.

Further evidence of the link between images of voodoo might be found in the timing of the phases of voodoo outlined above. In 1797 Moreau de St Ménézie's report, being written in the midst of the Haitian revolution, was seeking to re-enslave the island. Moreau de St Ménézie's experience of voodoo before the revolution to the white audience actively seeking to crush black resistance was as a dangerous 'dark cabal' and irrational 'frenzy' which its repression and deflected a search for causes.

The fear of the 'contagion' of the Haitian revolution among slaves became an obsession on the part of whites in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the conclusion of the century another slaveholding 'civilization' had come to power. It seemed to the planters that their fears of the Haitian revolution realized. Spenser St John lived in Haiti during the revolution; his memoirs in 1884. His characterization of the 'barbarians',¹³ was very well received in the United States. The dismantling of black emancipation were in ascendance.

The same motivations may be seen in the reaction to the twenty-year military occupation of Haiti. Michael Dash shrewdly points out that the colonists saw voodoo as insubordinate black mischief, and that they who imagined in voodoo a kind of atavistic and primitive same impulse.¹⁴ Voodoo was a 'dark' reflection

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In images of 'black magic', white audiences recognize the force and rage of black power. Voodoo has the power to seduce, dement and kill. Not only does voodoo pose a danger to its own community, but it has the power to overturn white 'civilization', as it did in St Domingue in 1791. As accusations of witchcraft these images of voodoo recognize that black power exists and that it poses a threat to whites. Yet since this power is characterized as witchcraft, the causes of the anger that generate it are removed from their sources. Witches are inherently evil, even genetically so. Their rage at the social order is due to some deep-seated maladjustment. Thus the images of voodoo as 'black magic' deflect a search on the part of their white creators and supporters for the causes of the marginalization that the black wielders of voodoo experience. Images of 'black magic' disguise the flow of seduction and violence in our society by reversing it. Instead of blacks being the victims of white seduction and violence, whites are victimized by blacks. This reversal allows whites to recognize the consequences of racism and at the same time absolve themselves of responsibility for it. Thus voodoo and other African-derived religions become social images of witchcraft beliefs, serving to justify a white 'us' in its marginalization of a black 'them'.

Further evidence of the link between images of voodoo and social repression might be found in the timing of the phases of the short history of these images outlined above. In 1797 Moreau de St Méry's observations on voodoo were being written in the midst of the Haitian revolution as Napoleonic armies were seeking to re-enslave the island. Moreau de St Méry was presenting his experience of voodoo before the revolution to an audience in the midst of it, an audience actively seeking to crush black resistance. By characterizing voodoo as a dangerous 'dark cabal' and irrational 'fury', Moreau de St Méry justified its repression and deflected a search for causes of the violence of the revolution.

The fear of the 'contagion' of the Haitian revolution among North American slaves became an obsession on the part of Southern slaveholders in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the conclusion of the American civil war another slaveholding 'civilization' had come to an end and it must have seemed to the planters that their fears of black independence had been realized. Spenser St John lived in Haiti during these years and first published his memoirs in 1884. His characterization of Haiti as a 'country of barbarians',¹³ was very well received in the United States as white efforts to dismantle black emancipation were in ascendancy.

The same motivations may be seen in the rash of literature on voodoo during the twenty-year military occupation of Haiti by the United States Marines. Michael Dash shrewdly points out that the colonialist mission of Marines, who saw voodoo as insubordinate black mischief, and the thrill-seeking of Seabrook, who imagined in voodoo a kind of atavistic authenticity, were really much the same impulse.¹⁴ Voodoo was a 'dark' reflection of white selves, 'cannibal

cousins' to use Marine Captain Craige's phrase.¹⁵ These expressions of black independence were either to be repressed or co-opted.

It may be too rash to see if the resurgence of voodoo on film in the 1980s once again indicates threatened borders of white consciousness and society. Each flowering of voodoo images has accompanied an effort to control real gains in black independence. Do the 1980s present as visible and concerted an effort to roll back black gains and reestablish borders as those efforts of the earlier eras? What does seem evident is that malevolent images of voodoo become important to whites when there is evidence of gains in black independence.

It is possible that this pattern of stereotyping is changing, however. The dissemination of the images of voodoo to outsiders is no longer completely in the hands of outsiders. Practitioners are gaining access to mass media as spokespeople, writers and film makers. Despite enormous prejudice on the part of outsiders, and often against the advice of those within the tradition, practitioners of African-derived religions are coming 'above ground' to sponsor conferences, publicize festivals, and incorporate as congregations. These actions will mean enormous changes for the traditions as they are challenged to develop new institutions, authorities and texts. If they are successful it will be interesting to see if the 'black magic' images of voodoo dear to outsiders will give way to images of 'black religion'.

I began this project with an attitude of amusement at what I thought to be ludicrous images of African-derived religions. As the research progressed the numbing sameness of the descriptions, and the predictability of the titillation and horror that they were designed to engender, began to sadden me. The images became symptoms of a sickness, a failure of white America to accept its 'dark' side.

In conversations with colleagues and students I was frequently given evidence for the validity of these images: there are such things as ritual murders, blacks do commit violence against whites.

In April of this year sensational evidence of such ritual violence came to light. A drug-smuggling organization in Matamoros, Mexico had ritually murdered thirteen people. Its leader was reported to be a priest of an African-derived religion and symbols of these religions were employed in the murders. Here was clear evidence of terrible violence in an African-derived religion. Yet the interrogation of the suspects revealed that the inspiration for the killings did not come from a African-derived religion. The leaders of the organization said that they repeatedly showed a tape of 'The Believers' to the members to prove to them that human sacrifice would protect and strengthen their drug-importing organization. The killers did not act on their faith in an African-derived religion, but in an outsider's image of one. A more pathetic illustration of the potency of these images cannot be imagined.

I do not mean to suggest that the actions of drug-smugglers and killers should indict these images of African-derived religions. They are destructive

not as blueprints for murder, but as blueprints for the crimes of the past and the healings of the future.

NOTES

- 1 Scholars seek to be self-conscious in the explaining the methods or techniques of access to the reality, to 'enlarge' from the religion (historians of religion, religionists) carried out by other disciplines. The secularist ethos of social science, with its is often seen as a serious inadequacy in the
- 2 There are a number of interesting exceptions. Academically trained, Gary Edwards and others have written of Yoruba religion from the perspective of integrated African-derived religions into Afro-American spirituality. Judith Gleason has researched treatments of the African spirit world. Dunham received both training in anthropology and *vodun*. A number of academic researchers in African-derived religions and have attempted to incorporate them into their scholarly work. Among them: more recently Robert Farris Thompson, Robert Smith Omari. Maya Deren's personal ethnography work the hermeneutic interest of the inscribed. There must be some level of self-identification with or knowledge of the precondition of writing 'about' something that is not another community for which the subject is being written.
- 3 See R. Po-Chia Hsia's *The Myth of Ritual in Modern Germany*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985. A fascinating survey of trials of accused Jewish ritual murderers. A court document shows an accused murderer trying to guess what the folk idea of ritual murder was and end his interrogation.
- 4 See Katherine George's 'The civilized World and the study in ethnocentrism', Ashley Montagu, New York, The Free Press, 1968. George's study of Renaissance maps are indicative of cultural ethnocentrism. Arens has written a beautifully contented and provocatively titled, *The Man-Eating Myth*, New York, Oxford University press, 1979. The act of cannibals, rather than the act, is the question. The question is not why people eat human flesh, but the question see Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Women Without Men*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- 5 I am tempted to follow Professor Cosentino's suggestion between 'voodoo' and 'vodoun' to demarcate the 'black religion' images of the popular religion from the

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NOTES

- 1 Scholars seek to be self-conscious in their reduction of religions to images. By explaining the methods or techniques of reduction, they hope to allow the reader access to the reality, to 'enlarge' from the images back to the data. Scholars of religion (historians of religion, religionists) are particularly aware of the reductions carried out by other disciplines which seek to represent religion. The secularist ethos of social science, with its values of neutrality toward spirituality, is often seen as a serious inadequacy in understanding religious phenomena.
- 2 There are a number of interesting exceptions to this generalization. While not academically trained, Gary Edwards and John Mason have carefully researched and written of Yoruba religion from the believers' perspective. Luisah Teish has integrated African-derived religions into her personal quest for an authentic Afro-American spirituality. Judith Gleason has written novels and beautifully researched treatments of the African spirits which have influenced her. Katherine Dunham received both training in anthropology and initiation into Haitian *vodun*. A number of academic researchers have received initiations in African-derived religions and have attempted to incorporate these personal perspectives into their scholarly work. Among them: Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger; and more recently Robert Farris Thompson, Karen McCarthy Brown, and Mikelle Smith Omari. Maya Deren's personal experience with the *vodun* loas gives her work the hermeneutic interest of the insider. To write at all I suppose there must be some level of self-identification with one's subject. Yet I imagine that an equal precondition of writing 'about' something is that one is liminal, also a member of another community for which the subject must be interpreted.
- 3 See R. Po-Chia Hsia's *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, for a disturbing but illuminating survey of trials of accused Jewish murderers. One frighteningly revealing court document shows an accused murderer, under pain of torture, frantically trying to guess what the folk idea of ritual murder was so that he could confess to it and end his interrogation.
- 4 See Katherine George's 'The civilized West looks at primitive Africa: 1400-1800 a study in ethnocentrism', Ashley Montagu (ed.), in *The Concept of the Primitive*, New York, The Free Press, 1968. George argues that the monsters at the edge of Renaissance maps are indicative of cultural rather than natural geography. W. Arens has written a beautifully contentious book on accusations of cannibalism provocatively titled, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, New York, Oxford University press, 1979. He writes: 'The idea of "others" as cannibals, rather than the act, is the universal phenomenon. The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do' (p. 139). Arens goes so far as to question the actual occurrence of ritual cannibalism and takes anthropologists to task for their allegedly ethnocentric choice to believe reports on poor evidence. For a review of the question see Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- 5 I am tempted to follow Professor Cosentino of UCLA who likes the distinction between 'voodoo' and 'vodoun' to demarcate the 'black magic' and the 'black religion' images of the popular religion of Haiti. But as Leyburn had predicted

this distinction can confuse the unwary. See his correspondence with senior ethnographer Harold Courlander in *African Arts*, 21, 2, 3, 1988.

The problem is compounded since several excellent scholars such as Michel Laguerre of Berkeley use the 'voodoo' orthography. Magdaline Shannon, in translating Jean Price-Mars's *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*, makes the curious decision to render Price-Mars's 'Vaudou' as 'voodoo' and justifies it by appeal to the usage by scholars such as Laguerre and the Library of Congress. She notes that the translators of Alfred Métraux's *Le Vaudou Haïtien* rendered the title *Voodoo in Haiti*, Shannon, in Price-Mars, 1983, xxv-xxvii.

A study of the variants, uses and purposes of the term chosen to designate the popular religion of Haiti would make an interesting dissertation in itself. Nearly every treatment of the subject makes some more or less self-conscious choice and often explains it at the beginning of the work.

- 6 I have relied on the translations of Ivor D. Spencer and of Selden Rodman in these extracts. See Spencer's translation, abridgement and editing of Moreau de St Méry not-at-all-ironically titled *A Civilization that Perished: The Last Days of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, Lanham, Maryland, University Press of America, 1985; and Rodman's *Haiti: The Black Republic*, Old Greenwich, Connecticut, Devin-Adair, 1980.

- 7 St John gives the publication date of this story as December 5 1886. Jean Price-Mars places the credibility of St John and others in proper perspective in *Thus Spoke the Uncle*. He draws an interesting parallel when he writes:

Given such a mentality, is it surprising that reporters of the foreign press newly arrived in Haiti issue sensational reports in their newspapers about . . . the barbarous Haitian practice of human sacrifices of which they have not seen a trace anywhere, since after all they have drawn the material for their stories, which were as absurd as they were improbable, from the credulity of the milieu? (p. 147). Moreover this imagination easily complements that of theologians, inquisitors, and public prosecutors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance who have lent an authentic reality to the myth of the Sabbath (p. 148). In fact no one has observed it [human sacrifice] here (p. 150).

As for the testimony of Sir Spenser St John, Minister Resident of Her Britannic Majesty, and that of his colleague, Minister to Her Majesty's Catholics in Port-au-prince, in respect to sorcery in Haiti around 1864, the two diplomats reveal such a lack of critical sense in that one could impose the worst foolishness upon them without a doubt crossing their pitiful minds (p. 150 n. 144).

- 8 It would be interesting to speculate whether the emphasis on the horrible in this and later images of voodoo is itself a kind of religiosity. Rudolf Otto argued that the horrible and the grisly is a kind of low level experience of the divine wholly other, a primitive stage in an evolutionary development of the schematization of the numinous. See *The Idea of the Holy*, New York, Oxford, 1958, especially expressions of 'daemonic' dread', p. 14ff.
- 9 Watergate's Howard Hunt wrote a spy novel which used horrific images of voodoo for a grisly frisson. In homage to his predecessor Spenser St John, he chose the pseudonym, David St John. See, if you must, *Diabolus*, New York, Weybright and Talley, 1971.
- 10 What is equally interesting is that I have yet to come across a treatment of black religion on film. In two major bibliographic surveys of blacks in American cinema. I found no reference to religion, let alone voodoo. See Allen L. Woll and Randall M. Miller, *Ethnic and Radical Images in American Films and Television:*

Historical Essays and Bibliography, New York, *Blacks in American Film and Television*, New York, study of religion on film, I found no reference to religion. See Michael Bird (eds), *Religion in Film*, Knoxville, TN, Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1982.

- 11 The 'true story' is Wade Davis's *The Serpent and the Rain*, New York, Basic Books, 1985. Readers may wonder why a quest for zombie poison deserved Wes Craven's attention. This raises a question that space will not permit. I find Kovel's use of the pronoun 'he' suggestive. What if the word 'sexism' were inserted for 'other' by virtue of their bodies. It is not sufficient that their bodies are projected onto women and onto voodooographers are not only white but also female, having a triple 'otherness': it is non-Christian, non-white, and non-male. Are the 'black magic' images of voodoo as much as they are black power?
- 13 St John so enjoys this characterization that he attributes it to Louis Napoleon, 1889, p. 1).
- 14 See Dash, 1988, especially pp. 24 and 25.
- 15 John Houston Craige, *Cannibal Cousins*, New York, Basic Books, 1988.

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y. See his correspondence with senior *ican Arts*, 21, 2, 3, 1988.

veral excellent scholars such as Michel orthography. Magdaline Shannon, in *a l'Oncl*, makes the curious decision to o' and justifies it by appeal to the usage ibrary of Congress. She notes that the *lou Haitien* rendered the title *Voodoo in v-xxvii*.

oses of the term chosen to designate the interesting dissertation in itself. Nearly e more or less self-conscious choice and work.

D. Spencer and of Selden Rodman in abridgement and editing of Moreau de *vilization that Perished: The Last Days of aryland*, University Press of America, *Republic*, Old Greenwich, Connecticut,

story as December 5 1886. Jean Price- id others in proper perspective in *Thus arallel* when he writes:

ing that reporters of the foreign press al reports in their newspapers about . . . man sacrifices of which they have not they have drawn the material for their were improbable, from the credulity of nagination easily complements that of rosecutors of the Middle Ages and the tic reality to the myth of the Sabbath it [human sacrifice] here (p. 150).

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Historical Essays and Bibliography, New York, Garland, 1987 and Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Film and Television*, New York, Garland, 1988. In a recent study of religion on film, I found no references to blacks. See John R. May and Michael Bird (eds), *Religion in Film*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1982.

- 11 The 'true story' is Wade Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1985. Readers may wonder if Davis's adventure account of his quest for zombie poison deserved Wes Craven's treatment or not.
- 12 This raises a question that space will not let me explore, still I must note that I find Kovel's use of the pronoun 'he' suggestive. Could the same statement be made if the word 'sexism' were inserted for 'racism'. Women like blacks are made 'other' by virtue of their bodies. It is not surprising that repressed ideas about the body are projected onto women and onto blacks. The overwhelming majority of voodooographers are not only white but also male. Thus voodoo can be seen as having a triple 'otherness': it is non-Christian, black, and largely controlled by women. Are the 'black magic' images of voodoo marginalizing women's power as much as they are black power?
- 13 St John so enjoys this characterization that he opens the book with this epigraph which he attributes to Louis Napoleon, *Haiti, Haiti, pays de barbares* (St John, 1889, p. 1).
- 14 See Dash, 1988, especially pp. 24 and 25.
- 15 John Houston Craige, *Cannibal Cousins*, New York, Minton, Balch, 1934.

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