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**The Nature of Misrepresentation:  
Black American Traditional Religions in Contemporary American Film and Media**

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During my first year at college, I went to the beach and impulsively decided to take a dip in the water. Though I highly enjoy swimming, this experience took an unexpected turn when I sliced the bottom of my foot on a boulder that was lodged near shore. The pain was excruciating, intensified by the agonizing sting of saltwater and the coarse sand seeping into the fresh wound. Because of this incident, I developed a lingering fear and aversion towards the outdoors, turning away from nature as a source of healing and tranquility. However, as I continue to partake in and study Black American traditional religions, I am gradually embracing the natural world once again. As a film and media scholar, I often engage with media featuring depictions of Black traditional practices, whether to simply pass the time or deepen my understanding of these complex belief systems. While the media can serve as a valuable tool for learning, it has also shaped and, at times, distorted public perceptions of Black traditional religions in America. This dual function of the media—as both a source of entertainment and a conveyor of cultural understanding—highlights the challenges in accurately representing the intricacies of these practices.

I must begin this paper with an important disclaimer: the information presented here, including references to natural products, is sourced from a range of books and articles documented in my bibliography. I emphasize this because both Hoodoo and Voodoo are closed religious practices, deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of Black people with ancestry linked to those forcibly enslaved in the Americas. This distinction is crucial because, in recent years, there has been an increasing trend of non-Black individuals engaging with these practices, particularly through social media platforms where Black traditionalists are more openly sharing their occult or traditional knowledge. This trend in social media has led to the distortion of a core component of both Hoodoo and Voodoo traditions: discretion.

While these traditions have been appropriated and commodified, it is essential to recognize that Hoodoo and Voodoo, though often used interchangeably, are distinct traditions with unique histories and beliefs. So, one might wonder, how exactly do Hoodoo and Voodoo differ from one another? Hoodoo is primarily a system of Black folk religion that uses roots, herbs, and other natural objects, alongside the invocation of ancestral and liberative Black spirits, for both medicinal and spiritual purposes. It emerged within communities of enslaved Africans on American soil as a direct response to the systemic medical oppression and dehumanization they faced at the hands of colonial America (Middleton 161). In contrast, Vodou—or Voodoo, as it is commonly referred to in America—originated in Haiti and was brought to the United States through Haitian migration in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Within the context of Westernization, it is referred to as a religion, but, historically, traditionalists consider it to be a way of life that centers around a supreme creator, Bondye, as well as intermediate deities, the loas (Juju Bae 42). Despite their differences in origin and structure, both practices draw on natural elements to serve spiritual and healing purposes, illustrating a shared reverence for the earth.

In both Hoodoo and Voodoo, the natural world plays an integral role, with traditionalists actively incorporating it into their religious practices. The distinguished Zora Neale Hurston, a Black American anthropologist and Hoodoo traditionalist, highlights this connection in her 1931 work *Hoodoo in America*, where she observes that, in addition to herbs, reptiles, and insects, traditionalists also utilize ritual objects that can be commonly found in Catholicism, such as altars, candles, incense, holy water, and blessed oil (318). These ritual object materials are employed as part of a larger system that draws on the natural world to harness specific energies for healing, protection, and spiritual guidance. The ritualistic use of these materials can be

grouped into four main categories—Earth, Air, Water, and Fire—which inform the foundation of many workings (otherwise known as rituals) in both Hoodoo and Voodoo.

Each element is believed to possess a unique power that can aid in achieving particular outcomes. For example, Earth is represented in some of the workings of these traditions through the use of specific herbs, earth materials, and other natural substances that hold symbolic and energetic properties. Some herbs (such as bay leaves) are known for their protective qualities while dirt might be used in rituals to symbolize a connection to the physical world (Moses 21). Air (or Wind) can also assume the spiritual role as a carrier of energy that activates and directs the desired outcome of a working. Depending on the specific work or lineage of the traditionalist, the significance of these elements can vary, with some traditions emphasizing one element over the others (Alifa 84). In all cases, however, the natural world is essential to the spiritual and ritualistic practices of Hoodoo and Voodoo, therefore underscoring a profound respect for the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. By understanding how these traditions engage with nature, non-traditionalists can gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage and spiritual significance that shape Hoodoo and Voodoo. This awareness fosters greater respect and a more nuanced understanding of the rich, nature-revered traditions that have long been a cornerstone of African diasporic religions.

Imagine a hypothetical situation where a Hoodoo or Voodoo traditionalist ventures into town with a specific purpose: to retrieve an aloe vera leaf for a digestive tonic. The traditionalist carefully selects a leaf from a thriving aloe plant, one among many, so that the removal of a single leaf will not harm the plant or its surrounding environment. The traditionalist will return home to prepare the tonic, adding the aloe leaf to a boiling pot of water and honey before letting the ingredients saturate overnight. However, as the traditionalist performs this seemingly simple

task of cutting an aloe leaf, they draw the attention of non-traditionalists, who watch curiously and stare at them. Some onlookers may even sneer or whisper among themselves, finding the act of harvesting a plant with a pocketknife to be alarming or unusual. Despite their best efforts to be mindful of their surroundings and the natural world, the traditionalist cannot escape the judgment or curiosity of those around them.

What these onlookers fail to understand is that the traditionalist's actions are not random or bizarre; they are motivated by a deep knowledge of natural remedies as influenced by Hoodoo and Voodoo practices. These traditions are built on the understanding that nature provides powerful resources; thus, traditionalists respect and harness these resources with intentionality and reverence (Alifa 83). For the traditionalist, the aloe vera leaf is not simply a plant but a tool for spiritual and physical healing—something that has been passed down through generations of ancestral knowledge and practice. The intention behind their actions is to help someone in need, whether through alleviating physical discomfort, providing spiritual support, or both. The use of natural elements in Hoodoo and Voodoo is guided by a profound respect for the natural world, one that emphasizes balance, healing, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

Unfortunately, those who are unfamiliar with these practices may view the traditionalist's actions through a narrow, judgmental lens. What might seem strange or unconventional to non-traditionalists is, in fact, a deeply-rooted spiritual and cultural practice that has been carried through generations. This misunderstanding highlights the importance of approaching such situations with cultural sensitivity and an open mind. When non-traditionalists take the time to learn about the spiritual significance of these traditions, they can develop a greater appreciation for the ways in which Hoodoo and Voodoo traditionalists engage with nature, which is not out of superstition or eccentricity but rather as part of a time-honored system of healing and spirituality.

Understanding the context and purpose behind these actions fosters greater respect for the traditionalist's cultural beliefs.

As a dominant source of entertainment and information, television plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of Black American traditional religions. According to data that was collected in 2022 by the American Time Use Survey, nearly 80 percent of Americans engage in watching television daily (Krantz-Krent). With so many people watching it, television can easily influence how people view the world and learn about various cultures around them. The aversion to Black traditional religions in the media stems from deep-rooted misinterpretations and societal influences that have perpetuated negative stereotypes over time. Thus, it is important to consider how contemporary media representations, particularly on popular platforms, influence non-traditionalists' understanding of the religious traditions of these underrepresented cultures.

For instance, in 2013, *American Horror Story: Coven* drew in approximately 5.54 million viewers for its season premiere, signaling the massive reach and influence of the show (de Moraes). The portrayal of characters such as Marie Laveau (Angela Bassett), a well-known Voodoo priestess, and Papa Legba (Lance Reddick), a prominent loa or deity who is the gatekeeper between the living and spirit world in the Voodoo pantheon, provides a clear example of how misinformation about Black spiritual practices is disseminated, often without regard for accuracy or cultural sensitivity. In the season finale titled "Go to Hell," one scene stands out in particular: the one where Papa Legba has been invoked to take the wealthy white character Delphine LaLaurie (Kathy Bates) to "hell." This scene is problematic for several reasons and aligns with long-standing misconceptions about this loa, the first being that Papa Legba's role is misrepresented as being akin to that of "the devil" in Christian religions. Additionally, there is, in fact, no concept of "hell" in Voodoo, as the religion does not hold the same view of good versus

evil that can be found within Christian cosmology (Launonen 199). Yet the show conflates Black traditionalism with Eurocentric ideas of morality and damnation. Jennifer O'Reilly, a scholar of Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University, writes, "Through Murphy and Falchuk's depiction of Voodoo ceremonies and the deity Papa Legba, *Coven* sensationalizes Voodoo and presents its practices as dark and dangerous," indicating that the issues raised regarding these portrayals are not isolated observations but shared by other scholars (30). O'Reilly's analysis emphasizes the significance of this misrepresentation and the need for more accurate, nuanced depictions of Hoodoo and Voodoo in the media. Additionally, it is important to consider how this particular episode was written by a white woman, Jessica Sharzer, raising the question of whether or not Black American traditionalists were consulted or present in the production process of *Coven* in order to ensure a more authentic and respectful portrayal of these figures. This supposed lack of consultation underscores the broader issue of disrespect towards Black traditionalism within American media, where Hoodoo and Voodoo beliefs and practices are often reduced to sensationalized and villainized caricatures.

*Coven* is a prime example of how contemporary media mischaracterizes Black religious traditions. Despite its popularity and the devoted following it has amassed, the show fails to respect the depth and nuance of Voodoo practices. By forcing these figures into a Eurocentric framework, the series contributes to the ongoing conflation of Black traditional religions with notions of evil, superstition, and danger. The sensationalism and distortion attached to these traditions contribute to a widespread misunderstanding that is particularly harmful because it reinforces long-standing stereotypes of Black spirituality as something to be feared. Hoodoo and Voodoo, rooted in traditional Africanism, do not adhere to the Western dichotomy of good versus evil, as seen in many Abrahamic religious traditions (Crosby 30). Instead of being rooted in a

belief of evilness, Hoodoo and Voodoo traditionalists simply have an understanding of the constructive and destructive forces all around us. The portrayal of these religions as villainous or threatening in the media, such as in shows like *Coven*, highlights how the cultural appropriation and distortion of Black religious traditions can shape public perceptions in harmful ways. In the HuffPost article “This Priestess Is Teaching Others The Truth About Vodou And Hoodoo,” author Shaquille Romblay highlights the experiences and perspectives of Jessyka Winston, a mambo or Voodoo priestess, addressing the harmful stereotypes surrounding Voodoo. According to Winston, the widespread belief that Voodoo is evil or sinister is rooted in its association with Black culture, which has led to the distorted portrayal of prominent figures within the history and pantheon of Voodoo, like Marie Laveau and Papa Legba, who are depicted as sadistic or devilish (Romblay). By demonizing these figures and their religious traditions, mainstream media perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforcing the misguided idea that Voodoo is inherently dark or malevolent. These depictions fail to reflect the true beliefs, values, and practices of real-life traditionalists of Hoodoo and Voodoo.

Understanding the historical context of these misrepresentations is crucial to fully grasping their impact. The hostility toward Black people and Black culture in America is rooted in the deep history of colonialism, slavery, and systemic racism. The negative stereotypes associated with Black traditional religions are a direct result of the history of racial prejudice in America, which seeks to demonize anything that is connected to Blackness (Diversi 250). The media, as a powerful vehicle for shaping public opinion, has played a significant role in perpetuating these harmful narratives. Not only do portrayals like those in *Coven* distort the reality of Black spiritual practices, but they also contribute to the marginalization and erasure of Black cultural expressions. To counter this, society must critically engage with these



representations, challenge the biases that underlie them, and work toward dismantling the harmful stereotypes they perpetuate.

In contrast to the negative portrayals of Black religious traditions, one example of a light-hearted depiction of Black traditionalism can be found in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*. One of the film's supporting characters, a Voodoo priestess named Mama Odie (Jenifer Lewis), is presented in an ebullient and musical manner that makes her accessible to younger audiences. Mama Odie is a central figure who embodies a harmonious relationship with nature, living in a boathouse on the bayou surrounded by candles, herbs, and other natural elements (Terry 478). This setting, though fictionalized, offers an introduction to Voodoo practices, particularly those that involve communing with nature to heal and restore balance. By integrating these positive aspects into a family-friendly animated film, *The Princess and the Frog* offers a more varied portrayal of Black spiritual traditions than the often negative or stereotypical depictions seen in other mainstream media.

Symbolizing her connection to the natural world, a key element of Mama Odie's character is her companionship with Juju, an anthropomorphized snake whose existence mirrors a Voodoo practice of consulting or invoking spirits via animals. In relation to Voodoo, traditionalists believe that animals, as part of the natural world, possess deep wisdom about resources that can aid in a particular ritual or in one's healing (Jordan 40). The relationship between Mama Odie and Juju—who acts as both a companion and a seeing-eye or guide, since Mama Odie is blind—delicately introduces viewers to the significance of animals in Voodoo, particularly the spiritual importance of reptilian or serpent creatures. In fact, within the Voodoo pantheon, two loa that are associated with serpentine creatures are Damballa and Ayida Wedo (Bellegarde-Smith 461). By recognizing the reverence of serpentine creatures through Juju's

character, rather than focusing on sensationalized elements that are often used to vilify these creatures, the film offers a mirthful representation of their importance in Voodoo traditions.

The anthropomorphization of Juju, while playful and humorous, also reflects a spiritual aspect of Hoodoo in which snakes are considered symbols of protection. For example, the snakeskin that is leftover as a result of the ecdysis or molting process—wherein a snake protects itself from parasites through shedding its skin—is interpreted as a symbol of protection and is sometimes incorporated into spiritual objects for Hoodoo traditionalists (Evans 73-4). By giving Juju a distinct personality, the creators of *The Princess and the Frog* cinematically represent the bond between traditionalists and the natural world, showing how some animals are considered spiritual allies in these practices. While Juju is a secondary character and comic relief, his presence in the film invites further exploration of how animals, particularly those that might evoke fear or discomfort in Abrahamic religions, are sometimes revered in Black traditional religions. Without resorting to the tropes that have often distorted these traditions, Mama Odie's relationship with Juju in *The Princess and the Frog* serves as a gateway for young viewers to gain an appreciation for the cultural and spiritual depth of Hoodoo and Voodoo.

Dr. Elizabeth Pérez, a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, conversely critiques the film's failure to authentically represent Afro-diasporic traditions in her essay on Afro-religious elements in the film. In contrast, I believe the film successfully introduces aspects of these religions to viewers in a light-hearted and humorous way. Additionally, I offer the opinion that children's films are an excellent means of sparking interest in understanding these religions without requiring active participation in their practices or rituals, thus fostering cultural respect for Black traditional religions. Pérez argues that the misrepresentation in *The Princess and the Frog* stems from a Protestant normative bias

that dominates American cultural productions (71). Regardless of our differing opinions on the film itself, Pérez's analysis reinforces the idea that in America, deeply ingrained religious biases—rooted in whiteness—often label Hoodoo and Voodoo as malicious practices (72). This lack of differentiation, combined with a general disinterest in understanding the distinctiveness of these traditions, perpetuates disrespect. Pérez's critique highlights the need for a broader cultural shift toward recognizing Hoodoo and Voodoo as complex religions with their own cultural and spiritual significance. By developing a more nuanced understanding of these traditions, the media can move beyond reductive stereotypes and foster more accurate, respectful portrayals of Black religions.

A comprehensive understanding of Hoodoo and Voodoo is closely tied to the framework of Critical Race Theory, which asserts that racial bias is deeply embedded within various aspects of American society, particularly its legal and social institutions. Within this framework, Christianity is one such social institution that has held a historical role in maintaining racial hierarchies (Mirola et al. 89). The political influence of Christianity has shifted societal structures in ways that marginalize non-Christian traditions. To fully grasp the historical underpinnings of Hoodoo and Voodoo, it is essential to examine the impact of Christianity on the forcibly enslaved Africans brought to the Americas. During the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the forcibly enslaved Africans were introduced to the *Slave Bible*—a version of the Bible that was deliberately edited by colonizers, which was on display at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. from November 2018 to September 2019. In conversation with Michel Martin, a host of *Morning Edition* on the National Public Radio, Dr. Anthony Schmidt, who was an associate curator of *Bible and Religion in America* at the museum in 2018, noted that key passages promoting equality, freedom, and resistance, such as Galatians 3:28—"There is neither

Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”—were omitted from the *Slave Bible*. At the same time, passages like Ephesians 6:5—“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ”—were heavily emphasized (Martin).

The selective editing of the *Slave Bible* is an important historical fact that illustrates the way Christianity was co-opted as a tool to maintain control and suppress resistance. By preventing enslaved Africans from drawing upon the messages of liberation in the Bible, slaveholders sought to diminish the cultural identity and spiritual agency of the enslaved. This selective editing reflected the broader intent to erase African traditions and replace them with a version of Christianity that supported the status quo. Understanding this historical context is crucial in appreciating the liberative role that Hoodoo and Voodoo maintain in Black communities. These spiritual practices emerged as acts of cultural resistance and survival, allowing enslaved Africans to preserve ancestral knowledge, reclaim their identity, and resist the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Hoodoo and Voodoo are more than mere religious practices: they are powerful expressions of defiance against an oppressive system that seeks to strip Black people of their humanity.

Today, Christianity remains a dominant force in American society. A 2022 Pew Research Center study revealed that approximately 61 percent of Americans self-identified as Christian in 2021. This statistic reaffirms Christianity’s pervasive influence on American culture and social norms, and it sheds light on why practices like Hoodoo and Voodoo are often misunderstood or marginalized. These spiritual traditions, which are rooted in African ancestral beliefs, do not align with the doctrines of America’s evangelical or Protestant Christian practices. The emphasis on one supreme God with no lower deities, the scriptural authority, and the rigid religious rituals

within mainstream Christian denominations all create barriers to understanding and accepting alternative spiritual practices. As a result, Hoodoo and Voodoo are especially viewed as foreign, unorthodox, or even threatening to those who strictly adhere to Evangelical or Catholic beliefs. This societal rejection highlights the ongoing tension between the traditions of Black religions and the dominant religious narratives that have shaped American culture since its inception.

As I conducted research for this paper, I noticed a troubling trend in scholarly articles: there was a significant lack of distinction between Hoodoo and Voodoo. This realization prompted me to shift the focus of my paper, leading me to concentrate more heavily on the analysis of Voodoo traditions rather than Hoodoo. This adjustment echoes the sentiments expressed by Dr. Tiffany D. Pogue in her essay “Hoodoo is a Sovereign ATR and Must be Respected as Such or Else.” As a devotee of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) Lukumí and Palo, Pogue asserts that Hoodoo deserves recognition as a legitimate cultural practice separate from other Afro-diasporic religions, with its own authenticity and autonomy. The most distinct example of the lack of sovereignty given to Hoodoo is mentioned earlier in this essay, wherein I observe that Hoodoo and Voodoo are often treated interchangeably. Such a simplification erases the unique histories and practices of each religion. The failure to acknowledge Hoodoo as sovereign, Pogue argues, is rooted in the “deficit perspective that is often used when considering the cultural traditions of Black people in the US.” Pogue’s perspective underscores the importance of recognizing Hoodoo as a unique and valid religious system, rather than dismissing it or conflating it with other traditions. The reluctance to properly categorize Hoodoo also speaks to deeper issues of internalized racism, where the cultural practices of Black American communities are often belittled or dismissed by other Afro-diasporic people. As Pogue suggests, this failure to respect Hoodoo’s sovereignty is symptomatic of a lack of respect towards Black

American culture in the United States, allowing for the cultural significance of their religions to be minimized. This lazy approach to understanding Black religious practices not only diminishes their richness but also reinforces harmful stereotypes that obscure their true value.

Environmental racism is another important framework in considering the significance of Hoodoo and Voodoo traditions beyond their depictions in mainstream film and media. Dr. David N. Pellow, a professor in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, addresses this issue in his essay on critical environmental justice studies. He emphasizes that anthropogenic climate change is intensifying, and its impacts are disproportionately felt by people of color (Pellow 227-8). Black communities, which are disproportionately marginalized by other factors of systemic racism, are therefore more vulnerable to environmental harms such as pollution, climate change, and a lack of access to clean air and water. The convergence of racial inequality and environmental degradation in these regions highlights how environmental justice issues are deeply intertwined with racial justice concerns, affecting not only the physical health of these communities but also their cultural practices. A 2022 study published in *BMC Public Health*, for example, emphasizes that Black communities are disproportionately burdened by the harmful effects of pesticides (Donley et al. 5). Concerning Hoodoo and Voodoo, the consequences of pesticide use go beyond the health and environmental impacts. These spiritual traditions rely heavily on the natural growth of herbs, roots, and other plants, which are used for a variety of healing, spiritual, and ritual purposes. The widespread use of pesticides disrupts the ecosystems that support the growth of these essential natural resources, making it more difficult for traditionalists to access the plants they depend on for their work, which not only complicates their practices but also undermines their ability to

maintain the traditional knowledge and connection to nature that is integral to their belief systems.

In addition to pesticide use, the privatization of natural spaces like bayous (particularly in Louisiana), where a vast amount of Voodoo traditionalists in America reside, has further exacerbated the challenges faced by Hoodoo and Voodoo traditionalists (Roppolo 5–6). Bayous, which are found near areas rich in natural resources that are used in these traditions, have been increasingly privatized since the late twentieth century, restricting access for communities that rely on these areas for the materials needed in their spiritual and healing practices. Significant barriers for Hoodoo and Voodoo traditionalists are created by the combination of environmental degradation, the use of harmful chemicals, and the privatization of key natural resources. These obstacles are a direct result of environmental racism, which not only harms ecosystems but also hinders the ability of marginalized communities to access the resources essential to their cultural and spiritual well-being. Thus, the fight for environmental justice is also a fight for the preservation and accessibility of these traditional religions that are vital to Black communities' cultural and spiritual survival.

As I continue to deepen my knowledge of Black traditional religions, my encounters have reinforced my understanding that nature is not something to be feared, but it is, in fact, a powerful and integral force that should be embraced. For me and countless other Black individuals, the practices of Hoodoo and Voodoo are not evil or dark, as they are often portrayed in mainstream American media. Rather, these traditions are deeply rooted in the reverence of the natural world, which is seen as sacred and alive with spiritual energy. The inaccurate portrayal of these religions dismisses the profound impact they have had in shaping Black identities and liberation throughout American history. From the sacred rituals of Hoodoo and Voodoo to the

everyday practices that sustain our well-being, nature is an ever-present source of healing. The bond between Black people and the natural world is a testament to the resilience of our cultural traditions, which continue to thrive despite centuries of suppression.



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