

Juju's Multi-Media Performances: the Evolution of Visual and Non-Visual Instantiations of Hoodoo as a Ritual-Inflected Aesthetic

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Woman dipped in dialect, hoodoo, and academy
Caught all those tongues marked folksy blues
Sinking into clay, islands, pangea broken, feeling
Whole in memory, resting solid in mouths,
Against gums. Those parting smiles recall heat
Burnin' that jook called the 'rati Manor,
Fyahjumpin' at de sun, fulla spunk. (Betts, 64)

Introduction

The African pantheon “trickstered” its way to the religious syntheses of the African diaspora that took root in the Old and the Deep South, the Caribbean and Brazil, and was forced into syncretism, assimilating bodies of folkloric belief of Native American and European ancestry. While, Voodoo, the religious tradition of the subaltern, filtered through the Christianized and Christianizing Euro-American hegemonic practices, has been placed under taboo, Hoodoo, the ceremonial, aesthetic tradition deriving from it, has been accommodated within a discursive field that nurtures, ever since the antebellum period, its gradual cultural industrialization. This process has been carried through a triptych of nostalgia, condescension, and commodification, leading to today's popular fascination with spectacular representations of African-derived “Juju” in the mass media.

At the same time, and since Hoodoo is suffused with its constitutive rituals' animistic and animalistic overtones, incorporating a premodern, performative reflexivity that is inherently subversive of western ideals of rationality and colonizing normativity, it has been approached as a means of resistance, retribution, and reclaiming of cultural identitarian originality by writers as different in style and perspective as Charles W. Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Ismael Reed. The “magical” ritual-inflected, thus performative and subversive, elements of the Hoodoo tradition, however, materialize not only in fiction and non-fiction, but are also dominant in cultural instantiations of the (Neo)Hoodoo aesthetic throughout the artistic spectrum in inspired creations that insist on foregrounding the folk's intertwining with the erotic and with the self-reflexive.

The contemporary multimedia exhibition *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, for instance, exemplifies through its “performative displays of ritual through film and gallery installations”¹ the value of performing ritual(s) in the artistic process and the wider implications of staged cultural revisioning in contemporary art.

The publication of Michael A. Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identity in the Colonial and Antebellum South, 1526-1830*, in 1998, indicated a transition—and an advance—in the way reinterpretations of slavery were incorporated in attempts at the synthesis of a definitive history of thenotorious American institution at the end of the previous century. Drawing on a vast array of sources, voices and examples, Gomez traces the development of African American identity premised on the thesis that this identity emerged out of diverse and differential African identities and is contingent on them.

¹Information drawn from the introductory page to the exhibition *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* in its site: <http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/205>.

The historical and social contexts, the ethnic cultures, from which African peoples originated, ceased to serve as a means of self-definition for most Africans once in America, largely due to the imposed imperative of defining themselves along (or across) racial lines, but they continued to determine to a great extent, infused as they were in “vivid personal remembrances, oral testimonies, and rich ethnographic descriptions,” transmissions of knowledge and culture (Chireau 6). Folklore narratives, oral, or even written, which “function as ‘moral truth’ rather than ‘historical truth’ . . . , giving evidence of a ‘deeper’ reality that endures in shared, communal recollections of the past, . . . have circulated for generations as valuable repositories of African American thought,” within the “black” performative tradition (6). Thus, despite the insistence on the part of several theorists of the past on an “Americanist” approach, according to which early comers of African descent in America are viewed as the custodians of “white” systems of belief, or as blank slates written on—and off—by a “white” authorial hand, today we have come to acknowledge the considerable influence of particular African local cultures on the shapings and reshapings of the African American identity.

Voodoo and Hoodoo

In as far as the African-derived spiritual traditions, and supernaturalism in particular, have had an important role in the entirety of (re)formulations involved in the making of the African American identity, an investigation of their origins, evolution, and implications can contribute to a profounder understanding of the currents and cross-currents that are conducive to the black culture’s inroads into the popular (American) culture. The “magical spiritualism,” which led to the popularization of the Hoodoo, Conjure, and root-working practices throughout the antebellum and postbellum period in North America, possesses, as writers from a variety of disciplines, including black studies, religion, history, folklore, and anthropology, have shown, “an extensive historiography” (Chireau 5). The “southern Negro” of Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida and the Mississippi, “brought to America,” mainly but not exclusively, “from that portion of the West Coast of Africa between Senegal and the Congo rivers,” and from the slave markets “about the mouths of the Senegal, Gambia, Niger, and Congo,” carried among other folk-beliefs of tribal origin, whose precise ancestry is irretrievably lost, a belief in “superhuman or supernatural agencies of all kinds,” described as a whole by the term “voodoo,” deriving “from the vodu of the Ewes” (Puckett 3, 15).

The West African Vodun, as practiced by the Ewe (and the Fon) tribe, incorporated elements and symbolism from other African peoples, including the Yorùbá and Bakongo, and was further forced into syncretism while in its transatlantic passage to America and through the influences exerted by the peoples and conditions encountered at the “intermediate stations” of Saint-Domingue and Haiti, including Taíno –the Bahama’s indigenous people-religious beliefs, Catholic Christianity, European mysticism, and Freemasonry (Cosentino 25-55). The word “vodou” –in its many potential spellings, such as “vodou”, “vodoun”, “vaudou”, and “voodoo”- has been used as a generic descriptive term for the traditional Haitian religion, whereas in Haitian Creole the word usually referred to only a small subset of Haitian ritual ceremonies, to “mysterious forces or powers that govern the world and the lives of those who reside within it, but also a range of artistic forms that function in conjunction with these vodun energies” (Brown 205; Blier 61). Vodou, its liturgy, rites and moral codes, has been associated with a diversity of practice across the country of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora; a diversity largely due to the exposure of the Haitian culture to multifarious ethnic influences after the Haitians’ emigration, mainly but not exclusively, to the United States, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Brazil.

It is pertinent to note at this point that Vodou, this *Kreyòl* religion that under the institution of slavery combined fragments from many different African and Amerindian nations and absorbed Roman Catholic elements in an attempt to conceal the Africanness of its character, has been the victim of a number of misconceptions and intentional distortions. Vodou is nowadays often confused with Louisiana Voodoo, a related but distinct set of religious practices, and/or mistakenly associated with the lore of Satanism, zombies and “voodoo dolls” (Fandrich 780). Although Zombie creation has been referenced within rural Haitian culture, it is not a part of the Vodou religion, since such manifestations fall under the auspices of the bokor or sorcerer rather than the priest of the Loa, the spirits subservient to Bondyé, the creator god (Davis n. pag.). Vodou religion has, also, much more pointedly, been associated with “Hoodoo,” a synthetic system of folk magical practices with West African origins, which crossed over to the United States as early as the 1800s and surfaced mainly in New Orleans, due to the large migration of Haitians in 1809 following the Haitian Revolution.

Although the two terms, “Vodou” and “Hoodoo,” are not synonymous, they have been so closely connected in the popular mind that they are often used interchangeably. However, although Vodou, the religion, and Hoodoo, the stylized, folk system of magic, are not co-extensive with one another, one can hardly fathom the latter without evoking and invoking the former, the genealogy and character of the one being so enmeshed in that of the other.

Whereas an early twentieth century study of Kentucky superstitions indicated that “the only class of original contributions made by the Negroes to our [European] stock of superstitions is that of the voodoo or hoodoo signs, which were brought from Africa by the ancestors of the present colored people” and “have taken only slight root in the Caucasian mind,” “this state of affairs is not entirely true of the South as a whole,” given that, in the South, Voodoo signs and hoodoo beliefs, “aside from a few slight traces of European lore, seem in general a Negro contribution,” held by whites and blacks alike and retaining most of their original constitutive elements unlike other bodies of “superstition” (Thomas and Thomas 4; Puckett 166).

The reasons for this partial transformation, partial preservation of elements drawn from African-diaspora religious syntheses in the United States can be traced in the conditions that threatened the physical health and social well-being of Africans enslaved in America; “the imposition of conditions and situation that allowed for widespread adverse health conditions and social discord to become endemic” among the enslaved black population (Roberts 117).

The “magical” practices of Hoodoo involved the conjurer², “a powerful individual who was believed to possess extraordinary abilities to affect the lives of individuals in the natural world for good or ill” by controlling spiritual forces “through the power of the spoken word,” to whom individuals resorted when needed the assistance of the spiritual world to have physical and social health restored, the perpetrators of evil punished, and their well-being protected (117). Although “the ultimate goal of conjuration was to restore equilibrium and harmony to the community,” “forces that mitigated against this belief system forming itself into a coherent religion” created the imperative for “belief that constituted the practice of conjuration . . . [to be] transmitted primarily through oral narratives generally referred to in the literature as conjure tales,” which:

dealt with the discovery of a situation involving ill health, either mental or physical, the inability of medical doctors to treat it, the subsequent realization that it was caused by an act of conjuration, and the restoration of health by a conjurer . . . [and] also served to warn against its practice and to enforce adherence to forms of behavior that respected the being of others by neither practicing conjuration nor becoming its victim. (117-118)

The practice of conjuration and the system of beliefs that supported it, both during the period of black chattel slavery and during the postemancipation period of increasing segregation, represented from the beginning an internally focused body of knowledge that allowed African Americans “to define and control behaviors within their community, especially those behaviors that threatened the spiritual values that they had traditionally found most advantageous in protecting their physical well-being and survival in the face of both internal and external threats” (Roberts 118).

Hoodoo and the Popular Culture

Although in the aftermath of the Civil War, clergy and educators working among the former slaves in the South attacked conjuring practices, were calling for the repudiation of Conjure and other slave traditions, identifying them with degradation, ignorance, and the demoralizing experience of bondage, to scholars in the emerging disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, Conjure embodied peculiar mystical traits, an unrefined spirituality, a racial and religious sensibility, thus, Conjure emerged as a powerful trope in popular culture, representing the exotic but dangerous “black magic” of literature and music (Chireau 122-123).

²“The word ‘Conjurer,’ though it is of English extraction, became the most common appellation to describe African American supernatural practitioners, although it did not acquire conventional usage until the nineteenth century. Before this time, the term alluded mainly to performances by traveling magicians or the acts of suspected witches, both black and white,” Chireau notes (55).

Within the interwar period and during the Great Migration, the harsh living conditions in the urban centers, the severity of the city life, the dislocation and alienation experienced by African Americans contributed to the creation of “urban conjure”, a set of conjuring practices that were “often syncretic, merging esoteric rituals and occult spiritualities with older supernatural traditions” (140). The publicization of conjuring practices by the press, which functioned as the primarily vehicle via which a growing number of Conjure practitioners, spiritual advisers, and mediums offered and exchanged their services, came to be added to the intensification of the need for supernatural solutions that conjuring traditions offered (Figure 1) (141).



Figure 1. The Bungleton Green cartoon strip poked fun at the trials of African American city life during and after the Great Migration; dire economic situations reflected on popular culture as this absorbed communitarian expressions of mainstream spirituality. From the *Chicago Defender*, 1920s.

The accommodation of hoodoo “magical” practices and conjuring traditions to the budding mass print media of the early twentieth century, and the subsequent commercialization of African American supernaturalism, or even, its commodification within this early popular culture had five main consequences:

the intimacy and familiarity that had characterized contacts between Conjure practitioners and their clients in the past shrank in the relatively anonymous medium of print; the shift from an oral dissemination of conjuring lore to print media accompanied a shift from natural and organic supplies such as herbs and roots to new, mass-produced merchandise; Conjure practices became less specialized, more accessible; the rise of urban magic also brought about new specialized forms of gaming activity; and finally, the absorption of Hoodoo folk magic by the emerging commodity culture “spurred the simultaneous publicizing of conjuring traditions by the entertainment industry” (141-144).

The cultural industrialization of black spiritualism proved to be an irreversible process. Despite the occasional “periods of hibernation” that commercialized Conjure has suffered within the larger cultural context, contemporary mass media fascination with Conjure and the Hoodoo tradition indicates the continuity that characterizes African American supernaturalism’s long-term relationship with the popular culture. Hoodoo moved from the slave quarters of the Old and the Deep South plantations to the global markets of mass entertainment, for which it proved “a commercially viable and marketable product” appropriate for the consumption of “blacks” as well as “whites” (123).

It may be the case that the Afro-Caribbean and African American “folk cosmology” of Vudou and Hoodoo, besides its religious and cultural influence on the hemispheric “New World,” has nowadays acquired fame of global proportions and drawn the interest of the academy, which legitimized even its—diachronically—most taboo aspects as creative cultural expressions, but the urbanization and cultural industrialization it has undergone have obscured the inherently subversive politics of its performative reflexivity.

Hoodoo Narratives

At this point we should draw attention to the fact that, in spite of Hoodoo's affiliation with the Voodoo religion and the massive assimilation of its (performative) ritualistic elements by the black Christian churches, it is not a religion³Hoodoo does not constitute a cohesive system of prescribed, formalized and structured spiritual beliefs, and it is not exclusively an expression of spirituality; rather, it combines some of the systemic elements of religion, the coping resources of spirituality, and the diverge cultural identitarian mechanisms of transmigrating peoples that searched for a sense of bond while experiencing the psychological, social and spiritual loss of identity under slavery, into an amalgamated whole. It is a religion-inflected, ceremonial and/or aesthetic tradition whose formal and informal rituals have constituted potent vehicles for the African American spirituality to be channeled and to work therapeutically, in direct interaction with the trauma of political and social effacement, corporeal abuse, economic and sexual exploitation, segregation and aggressively manifested racism, suffered by the black community across the American continent⁴.

In as far as the Hoodoo tradition blends "Christianity, African and Native American religion in practices that foster resistance, survival, and well-being in a hostile culture," it demonstrates a hybridity of religious *and* cultural expression and experience, "forged at the border crossings of globalization and voluntary and forced migration," as Michelle Voss Roberts notes (51-52). If it would seem an exaggeration to claim that, due to this very religious and cultural hybridity that it exalts, Hoodoo results in the production of hybrid identities, it would not seem soto acknowledge the fact that it facilitates such a production through its endorsement of difference and enabling of a constant negotiation amongvarious identity markers.

For individuals like Horace Cross, the fictional protagonist of Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), immersion within the "magical" world of Hoodoo translates into the creation of a self that the larger community can accept; a self that can reconcile its complex psychological realities with the orientation of its erotic desire, and resolve its existential conflicts. Outside Kenan's fictional world, the multifold ritualistic practices and traditions that have been woven into the fabric of African American culture assisted in the production of a variety of methods of communal-consciousness raising, communitarian identity construction, and self-realization, such as singing and praying, music, rhythmic dance, symbolism, imagery, meditation, social services, and church attendance.

The dynamic dialectics of performativity and the vernacular tradition of the African American culture evolved along with Hoodoo aesthetics and within its politics of the subaltern in the South, serving as a means of resistance to, and survival despite, the traumatic Southern heritage. As Hoodoo healers and storytellers were inventing and reinventing a sense of identity for the dispossessed, depicting and exorcizing intimate, often tragic, realities and afflictions of black American life, evoking collective responses, and bringing about cathartic release, they invested in the Hoodoo rituals' transformative effects in order to heal and to reclaim a cultural heritage and a kind of historical continuity that had been denied to them.

The performative nature of Hoodoo counter-narratives not only contributes to, but also mobilizes resistance against containment by the leveling, taxonomic logic enforced by the normative master-narratives of the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon culture. The act of possessionof the living by the dead, in particular, this central act in the Hoodoo drama, fractures every kind of standardized narrative continuity at the same time as it opens up to other kinds of continuities, geographical and temporal, and as it renders the (dis)possessed subject a site of ventriloquism;

³"The change in attitude toward conjuration during the first half of the twentieth century was also influenced by the emergence of various other competing spiritual traditions that became prevalent in urban areas. These movements, which included the rise of Pentecostalism or holiness Christian religious denominations as well as charismatic ministries (such as those of Father Devine and Daddy Grace) often incorporated healing as well as alternative models of behavior for dealing with social and economic ills facing the African American community," John Roberts records (120).

⁴Certainly, as Yvonne P. Chireau observes, "a sharp delineation between 'magic' and 'religion' can be misleading, for these notions were nearly always connected in practice" (39); "the constituent components of magic are the same as those of religion . . . in practice religion and magic are often blended in ritual performance," and "although African traditional beliefs recognize a clear distinction between what is man-made and what is of the spirit, the intermingling of religion and magic is always present in every ritual" (de Craemer, Vansina, and Fox 460; Idowu 196).

a voluntary participant in an act of linguistic and semiotic projection involving a partial relinquishment of agency, that invites voices from different realms of existence. This act of dis-embodiment not only touches upon the existential, but it, also, forestages the (self)reflexive and the shared. The “acts” of Hoodoo revolve around and are apprised of a shared experience and a collective, or better, communal consciousness, vicariously associating the actor, the dis-embodied subject-vessel, with the body of the community.

In that light, the Hoodoo tradition can be understood as consisting of stylized, cultural performances during which the decentering of the agency of one actor (paradoxically?) precipitates a re-centering and re-experience of agency on the part of the other actors participating in the communal ritual drama. It is as if, divested of—a mundanely experienced—agency, through their identification with the dis-possessed individual, the individuals comprising the community are, simultaneously, liberated from conceptual and existential delimitations associated with the secular regimen of every-day life and willing to be introjected with a renewed sense of—numinously experienced—agency borne off the spirit(s) that possess. Hoodoo is premised on an understanding of subjectivity as always in flux and determined by change; at once, irreducibly private and communal; provisional, positional, and relational. An open reading of individual identity undergirds the Hoodoo performance.

The transgressive and subversive qualities of occult spiritualism and Hoodoo magic are evident in the ways they provide alternative aesthetic and communicative patterns in a straitened culture, which involve defamiliarization and the self-reflexive laying bare of devices productive of diegetic linearity, mimetic fidelity and cultural normativity. The metatextuality of Hoodoo performative acts, which involves a “confusing” rendering of different levels of reality and the individuals’ perception of them, is conducive of a stylistics of existence *and* corporeality according to which the rationalist criteria, textual laws, and socio-realist moorings and conventions governing the separation of mimetic and diegetic elements are flouted and thwarted⁵.

Henry Louis Gates’s analysis on the African sources of African American literary practice attests to the particular qualities of the mythologically attuned African American folk discourses when he claims that “[t]he Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying is a rhetorical act that is not engaged in the game of information giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signifier” (989). Within the “magical” performances of Hoodoo, the body, the language, and the sanctioned categories that contain both are interrogated, denaturalized and reconstituted, resisting calculation and the “colonizing” codes of (re)presentation. Hoodoo rituals unveil the textuality of the body, of language, of all the dimensions of culture, exposing them all as constructions, generating, thus, a subversive politics resisting dogmatic systems of control.

Hoodoo in Fiction and Non-Fiction

As has been already noted, Hoodoo’s constitutive rituals are replete with animistic and animalistic overtones, incorporating a premodern, performative reflexivity that is inherently subversive of western ideals of rationality and colonizing normativity. Writers as different in style and perspective as Charles W. Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Ismael Reed have approached the rich performative and aesthetic constellations of black “magical” spiritualism as a means of resistance, retribution and reclaiming of cultural identitarian originality.

Charles Chesnutt’s collection of short stories *The Conjure Woman* (1899), as well as his other Conjure tales, draws on the Hoodoo tradition in an attempt to engage the abundant diversity of African American religious and cultural life, using “magical spirituality as a source of elderly wisdom and humor” (Chireau 137). The novelist interviewed African American Conjure practitioners at the turn of the twentieth century while researching his collection, describing their most striking characteristics, recording their vernaculars, and attesting to their supernatural powers.

⁵Let me note at this point that I draw from the language of theatre/drama not in order to construe theatre as a metaphor for the aesthetics and sociocultural import of the Hoodoo tradition; rather, I intend to establish that Hoodoo “magical” acts are not contrasted with the real (are not strictly-speaking imaginary because of their partaking of the “pre-verbal” and of the preternatural) but constitute a reality that is such insofar as it is performed. Challenging the restrictive distinctions between appearance and reality, Hoodoo’s reality is constituted by the performance itself.

Despite his equivocal views on Conjure practices, which he believed perpetuated the attachment of stereotypes such as primitivist and savage to the African American population, he not only gave detailed accounts of Conjure “healing” practices, observing that “Conjure-related ailments among African Americans accompanied hard lives, worn bodies, and old age,” but he also “insisted that black American magic and ‘goopher’ practices had emerged in Africa but overtime were ‘mingled and confused with the witchcraft and ghostlore of the white man, and the tricks and delusions of the Indian conjurer,’” thus affirming the hybrid nature of the African-derived supernatural traditions (103); traditions which “developed in an eclectic manner” and “enabled African Americans to gain power in order to address their particular circumstances and effect transformations in an individual’s world,” and “to maintain African-based worldviews” (56-57). The play of vernaculars embedded in his Conjure stories contrasts the “popular narrative,” which is “ceaselessly drawn on to restore vitality to an enfeebled and asphyxiating ‘high culture’,” with a vernacular language with its “vital sources of production” which is “reappropriated by the exhausted and media-standardized speech of a hegemonic middle class” (Jameson 72). Charles Chesnutt’s conjurers enact and establish the subversive strategies of the repressed, marginalized voices within a dialogical and dialectical system that constantly juxtaposes hegemonic and non-hegemonic interlocutors.

Chesnutt, however, was not the only one to pursue supernatural themes; other writers and folk collectors, such as Mary A. Owen, the writer of *Ole Rabbit, the Voodoo and Other Sorcerers* and *Voodoo Tales* (1893), and Zora Neale Hurston, the writer of “Hoodoo in America” (1931) and *Mules and Men* (1935), “combined supernatural tales and ethnology in their published works,” drawing on “conjuring stories to explore aspects of African American identity” (137). The former, “detailed the ceremonies of initiation for members of a ‘Voodoo’ cult of black Conjurers in the late nineteenth century,” her observations pointing “to the link between Conjure and other diasporic spiritual traditions such as Haitian and Cuban *santería*,” while the latter collected information, both written and oral, concerning hoodoo, conjure, folklore and related manifestations of art existing amongst North America’s “black” population, fusing the anthropological with the aesthetic in her explorations of “the very transmutations between art and ethnography” and anticipating “contemporary performative or contextualist folklorists” in her attention to the setting and style of telling (Chireau 23; Manganaro 179). Despite criticism aimed at Hurston’s work due to its purported angularity, its pandering to a white audience’s tastes, and its claims at authenticity, her perspective is indispensable given her own hybrid status as both an insider and an outsider engaged in investigating cultural artifacts with similarly hybrid origins.

As Tiffany Ruby Patterson has argued, Hurston is “an invaluable witness to her era,” tackling sensitive subjects such as sexuality, Voodoo, Hoodoo, gender, and the color line, at the same time bearing witness to the cultural value of “the underbelly of black life” (7). Hurston presents in her work the multiple ways in which modernization, during the interwar period, affects the African American subjects, whose culture and its folk elements are at once imperiled by secularization’s inevitable intrusion into their lives *and* rendered adaptable by responding to the new forces that bring change. She endorses and incorporates in her work an egalitarian view of culture that transcends rigid cultural categories, reflecting and exposing the power structures that distort our perspectives on culture, while, at the same time, celebrating alternative networks of meaning, patterns and possibilities of artistic creation and cultural production.

In researching and writing both “Hoodoo in America” and *Mules and Men*, Hurston “recreated the African ancestral bridge between black communities in Haiti and those in New Orleans in the twentieth century,” “shedding her Western identities as a writer and anthropologist to assume the serious responsibility of introspection within the context of the African diasporic world,” as Richard Brent Turner pointedly argues (36). Nevertheless, whereas writers, such as Charles Chesnutt, Mary Owen and Zora Neale Hurston, illuminated the spiritual powers of Hoodoo as well as aspects of its cultural politics, both infused within the black community’s cultural manifestations, others, such as Vachel Lindsay (“The Congo”), Wallace Stevens (“Bantams in Pine Woods”), and T.S. Eliot (“Sweeney Agonistes”) are more suspicious towards the Hoodoo tradition that, for them, seems to symbolize racial anxieties.

Still others appear drawn and fascinated by the vernacular traditions of ritualizing embodied practice, lending primacy to the ritualized and ritualizing human body as bearer of the dynamics of social change in their work. As Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown shows, by “constructing alternative epistemologies,” novelists such as Toni Morrison—in works such as *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), or *Beloved* (1987)—and Paule Marshall—in works such as *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983)—

draw attention to the periphery through the incorporation of “rites of communion” in their fiction and through their use of Hoodoo and Conjure mark folk magic as a means of traversing “temporal and psychosocial borderlands” and resisting cultural dominance (97, 1, 16).

In looking back to Africa, these authors enact “a strategy for border crossing,” in terms of culture and psychology as well as geography, reformulating the “fecunding matrix” of “black” folklore, in Toni Cade Bambara’s words, as an interstitial zone of transition (2, 110). Accretions of racial meaning as sedimentary products, versions of essential femininity, and the fiction of a unitary erotics are interrogated through the display and spectacle Hoodoo magic presents and preserves. Hoodoo tradition, as approached in the work of these authors, advances a nomadic, a migratory paradigm for identity—an identity grounded in the body yet able to extend from it, bound to the senses yet not delimited by any particular essence(s). Individuals negotiate their liminal positioning and palpate their way out of the commensurabilities of dominant cultural scripts through “magical” ritualized performances that remain obstinately, if at times ambiguously, non-assimilable, hence challenging and subversive.

On another level, “Ishmael Reed posits a relationship between art, religion, and Hoodoo,” focusing, “albeit in a patriarchist context, on magic as the aesthetic root of literature,” if not art in general (36). Reed’s Neo-Hoodoo metaphysics cannot be disassociated from his parody of most well-known, canonized literary forms or from his envisioning of the pervasive and transformative impact of elements of the black culture upon “mainstream” American culture. In *Mumbo-Jumbo* (1972), the man who was also one of the leading figures of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s, performs an intersection of the real and the spiritual, placing a special emphasis on spirit, which “implies a concomitant respect for mystery and wonderment,” and which acts out in stark contrast with a quasi-subject-less scientific rationalism “that seeks to explain and, by explaining, control” (Mason Jr. 101).

The “departures from reality” that his work embraces, “[t]he imaginative expansiveness of his novels and the alternative vision of black culture they offer constitute significant values that cannot be ignored,” given his intention, or design, “to offer in the novel an explanation of black culture, a new myth, by revealing as false certain accepted fictions about black history—that it is ‘primitive’ and insignificant, or merely a catalogue of suffering” (103-104). Inscribed in his work, his performative logic emphasizes the “fictionality of history,” if not the historicity of fiction too, bringing into an illuminating synthesis history and culture (104).

Reed’s literary production on the workings of neohoodooism: his book of poetry, *Conjure* (1972)—especially “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” “The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic,” and “Catechism of d Neoamerican Hoodoo Church”—and the actualizations of neohoodooism as a practice in his novels *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), the aforementioned *Mumbo Jumbo*, and *Flight to Canada* (1976), not only inspired other artistic statements such as the visual art exhibit, *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, but also generated an organizing metaphor and an anti-structural paradigm for the intertextual and metatextual cross-cultural mechanisms and technologies that defend one from cultural marginalization’s dire implications and that constitute an artistic weapon in the hands of the dispossessed to contest canonical considerations of genre, form and style, to transgress simplistic and limiting dichotomies, such as “mainstream” and “alternative”, and to resist the catechism of the dominant, universalizing culture.

The Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic, with its carnivalesque qualities and its elements of the grotesque and the absurd, disrupts the causal sequences of institutions and practices, forestaging the singular, the personal, the idiosyncratic, the accidental. Reed draws heavily on the Hoodoo tradition and its concomitant self-reflexive, figural, topological, as well as interpretative, system. In his work such (unlikely) pairings as mimicry and diegesis, repetition and inversion, parody and polemic, normally found in enactments of ceremonial Hoodoo magic, coalesce and are subsumed in a “double-voiced discourse,” to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, whose very doubleness is signified upon during an incessant process of “internal dialogization” and “external” critical signification (Gates 995, 997). Conjure in Reed’s work possesses much more than figurative and symbolic significance; its emanations in poetry, dance, music, and literature demonstrate an aesthetic in which “every man is an artist and every artist is a priest” (Reed 25).

Whereas the “black” Christian tradition has been emphasized for the role it played in providing the African Americans with a sense of identity and purpose and the Islamic tradition for the role it played in the search of African Americans for African roots in many areas of black life, the former has, also, been attacked for its function as the chief weapon of colonization, imposed on black slaves to make them docile and passive,

and the latter has been criticized for its negative impact on America's racial problems, given its radical strands' opposing of integration during the 1960s. Despite contrasting views on the subject, religious patterns of many kinds have been pervasive in African American culture, at times assisting and at times impeding African Americans' spiritual (and material) quest for human freedom.

Hoodoo in Music

"Black" spirituality in its many religious instantiations, and especially supernaturalism, a forceful undercurrent propelling the rise of cultural awareness within the "black" community, have been manifested through the souls of "black folks" in many artistic forms, predominant among which is music. As Leonard Brown claims, "[b]lack music tells multiple stories in a multiplicity of voices through a multitude of perspectives; all connected through . . . the spiritual ethos" (155). Music, as literature and art, in general, has been "widely influenced by the ferment of African American supernatural traditions that began in slavery" (Chireau 119).

What began as Southern "black" music, an expression of values and beliefs of the people living in the South and changed by it, in time captured the intersection between traditional notions of culture and an emerging popular culture, as well as the relationship between culture and historical change. "Black" music, this conjurational phenomenon that endorsed improvisation, ritualistic ethos and pathos, the latter's incantatory effects, as well as all kinds of—both sacred and secular—cultural developments, responded to regional (Southern) and national tensions giving vent to many of them via performances that projected old values at the same time as they celebrated progress.

The spirituals, gospel music, jazz, and especially the blues, the secular spirituals that resulted from African American's creative attempts to come to terms with the existential dilemma of human suffering, articulated at once a nostalgic, bittersweet vision of the South and the psychic *pathos* of African Americans in confinement and yearnings for freedom, in songs that also served as a prime conduit for community-held supernatural beliefs, since Conjure was a constant inspiration of blues composers and performers who revered figures from the traditions of conjuring, divination, and root working (Chireau 145).

"From the country styles of the Mississippi delta songsters to the urban blues performers of the post-World War II era and beyond, black bluespeople utilized the rhetoric of Conjure in their songs," songs that parallel the progression of black cultural traditions from rural to city contexts, encompassing "a pattern of Conjure topics" and "direct and oblique references to Hoodoo talismans, spiritual signs, and magical mysteries," as a number of blues titles, such as "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues" by Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Hoodoo Blues" by Bessie Brown, and "Low Down Mojo Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson, indicate (144, 145).

Either seen as a body of superstitions entrenched in the cultural expressions of uneducated people or as a cultural legacy reconfigured to appeal to the evolving tastes, needs, and demands of the people it concerns, the "magic" of the blues is, at a great extent, expressive of "black" folk cosmology. Cultural retention and cultural memory are endemic to the blues; community and faith, as well as memories and sensibilities, are constitutive of their "magic". "The blues is nothing but the Devil," James Thomas once said, as William R. Ferris records (5); "If you play spirituals, and you used to play the blues, the next thing you know, the Devil gets in you, and you're going to start right back playing the blues. You can't serve the Lord and the Devil, too" (5).

The blues embodied both mythologies of evil and sagas of romantic love and erotic entanglement; they addressed affliction by immediate, practical means and they articulated blacks' cultural narratives of the erotic and experiences of alienation, victimization, and loss. Ultimately, the blues, like Conjure, "became existential appeals for control in an uncontrollable universe," giving voice to suffering by describing both personal and collective afflictions through their lyrics (Chireau 146). Blues performers, like preachers or gospel singers, reflected the rhythms of black spirituality and registered the transitions that the black culture underwent, through their engagement with magic and supernaturalism and their incorporation of Conjure sensibilities into their performances, with "transformative effects" for their audiences (148).

Hoodoo in Dance

In spite of the fact that the popular media of entertainment have embraced the blues and thus they have largely commercialized them, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, the blues remain bearers of a "healing" tradition, of a spiritual heritage and of communal bonds which, however transformed, are hardly lost.

Nevertheless, music is not the only cultural domain informed by effusions of African-derived supernaturalism and the Hoodoo, in particular, as a mode of expression of a performative aesthetic. Hoodoo's presence has been inscribed in the domain of modern dance and in the audio-visual industry of cinema and the television.

Especially since the later part of the twentieth century, and with the contemporary choreographers' immersion within a postmodern field of pluralistic performances, dance has moved away from the dominant Eurocentric ethos in order to explore new, emerging possibilities of expression and empowerment through the body's positioning in a cross-roads of multi-cultural discourses touching upon ethnicity, race, gender, age, corporeality, and spirituality. Responding, or reacting, to pervading conflicts about identity, subjectivity, and sexuality, modern dance has borrowed from expressive cultures, subversive ritualistic aesthetics, and non-normative, idiosyncratic representations to construct narratives with, upon and over the body that challenge at the same time that they heal.

African and African American movements have provided modern dance with alternative corporeal "texts" to (re)present, or better perform, internal struggles, irreducible personal experiences, communal and communitarian (r)evolutions, and changing social dynamics. Within this context, choreographers such as Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson, "sought to connect self with cultural identity" thus they "developed neo-African styles that mixed past and present black/African culture and movement with contemporary modern dance;" in neo-African performances, "the body –the expressive, rhythmic, and culturally inflected body– became a critical site for artistic and spiritual realization and for revealing new perspectives" on identity and subjectivity (Paris 22). Post-African or neo-Hoodoo modern dance fuses "black cultural and religious forms and a postmodern deconstructivist approach" in performances in which "self, identity, and spiritual realization are manifested not so much through effusive kinetic power but rather as kinds of spiritual/intellectual inquiry into how the contemporary body can restage black historical, cultural, and religious elements and, thus, reveal new meanings" (23).

This twenty-first-century progressive and pluralistic "dance species" serves to remind us how broadly and profoundly the ritual-inflected aesthetic of hoodoo has permeated both black and white culture, providing us with alternative, although hardly new –in the literary sense of the word, ways of seeing and imagining the individual, the self, and the body within and without the larger cultural framework.

Hoodoo in Cinema and the Television

On a different level, Conjure tradition and the Hoodoo "system" of folk magic have determinately stepped into America's audio-visual, mass media, and especially in the cinematic and the television apparatus, tapping into the popular imagination and into collective fantasies of supernatural agency, mediating representations of racial or gender otherness and assisting in the construction of a mass-oriented utopian discourse.

Contemporary mass-mediated occultism has been approached as a rhetorical phenomenon central to American culture, as an idiom expressive of diverse, normative and non-normative, patterns of meaning registering the interrelationship among language, symbolism, imagination, politics, spirituality and conspiracy theories, as a blueprint to mind-control, and as a mechanism for the indoctrination of the masses in paganism, or even Satanism.

However, modern media's fascination with the occult reflects a rebirth of supernaturalism that took place in Western society during the 1970s and has involved a broad spectrum of activities, disciplines, and modes of representation. The multi-dimensional character that supernaturalism exhibits today is premised on the audience's projection on mass cultural forms of a demand for unconventional, unorthodox networks of meaning, as well as on its dominant consumption habits. Occultism constitutes a trend that, since its first appearance in the popular culture with the invention of the printing press, has undergone several revivals, functioning as a coping mechanism for, or antidote to, increasing materialism, positivism, a mechanical culture and a pervading machine aesthetic.

Occultism, as represented today in the mass media, blends elements from European supernatural traditions with stereotypical versions of the South and aspects of African diasporic spiritual traditions, such as Hoodoo, appropriating all in narratives that, in many cases, do justice to neither. On the one hand, theorists and critics have claimed that in public media, such as television and film, "black" people, and, particularly, "black women are playing a strong role in conveying spiritual themes and material" and that studying "these media phenomena extends our exploration of this new spirituality into arenas that are equally as important as lived experience and books" (Hull 182), while, on the other hand, they have harshly criticized the portrayal of African Americans as

magical figures in several, recent American films, such as *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (dir. Robert Redford, 2000), *What Dreams May Come* (dir. Vincent Ward, 1998), *Family Man* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2000), and *The Green Mile* (dir. Frank Darabont, 1999), as suggestive of a fundamental ignorance of African American life and culture (Farley 14).

While Hoodoo's indubitable cultural industrialization, as exemplified through its current instantiations within the popular mass media, has had several negative effects on the integrity and originality of, what one could call, the "authentic" African American spiritual and aesthetic tradition, we should not forget that this tradition has always been characterized by hybridity, by an endorsement of diverse and divergent cultural elements, constituting a space of negotiation, rather than negation or silencing, of difference.

Eventually, the ways in which African American filmmakers reconstruct the image of the conjuring woman engaging issues of body politics, stereotype, and the position of African retentions in visual texts, as in Kasi Lemmons's film *Eve's Bayou* (1997), and the ways in which such films foreground conflicts around constructions of gender and race, expressing a "yearning for miracles" that serves "as a measure of how dire the condition of both constructs is," emphasize black communitarian concerns and the creation of identity via the braiding of various identitarian strands, providing a rich landscape in which to thoroughly explore the nuanced, filmic representation of African Americans (Hicks 52).

Narrative and cultural integrity is, in many cases, lost to cinematic spectacle within a globalized market and an expanding entertainment industry with specific demographics, target audiences, diversified multi-media conglomerates, new media technologies and delivery systems, and as signs are commodified during a process of derealization of the real. However, the meta-visual spaces created by new technologies and supported by postmodern theory and/or performative aesthetics, do question previously unquestioned labels, such as "real," "normal" and "natural," rigid boundaries and binary opposites, offering symbiotic hybridity as a viable option and favoring the processual and –at times- the "non-representational"⁶. As Rosemary Jackson argues:

In a culture that equates the 'real' with the 'visible' and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the unreal is that which is in-visible. That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes 'I see' synonymous with 'I understand.' Knowledge, comprehension, reason, are established through the power of the look, through the 'eye' and the 'I' of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision. (45)

The supernatural, when not vulgarized in contemporary audio-visual representations, acquires strong transgressive and/or subversive overtones, undermining narrative linearity and equations of the visible with the real and of sight with knowledge and understanding, through a visualization of the in-visible and a concretization of the fragmented: of myths, legends, rituals, rites, dreams and memories.

Ultimately, there is indeed the possibility for cinematic narratives to redefine and reaffirm alternative realities, to do away with polarity and delimiting Western empiricism, incorporating disintegration of absolute truths, fragmentation and pluralism, favoring the *animus mundi* that unifies all beings, that brings together ancestral pasts and present life-worlds, and offers new ways of knowing.

Hoodoo in the Experimental Visual Art Scene

It is into the *animus mundi*, as forestaged by the performative aesthetic of Hoodoo through its ritualistic elements and syncretic, trans-temporal and multi-cultural, character that the exhibition *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* taps. Inspired by Ishmael Reed's neohoodooism, this multi-media exhibition includes some fifty works of sculpture, photography, assemblage, video, performance, and other media, bringing together artists of different ages and origins, all engaged with ritualism to enrich their work, all drawing on spiritual, oral and written, traditions, employing ritualistic practice

⁶"Non-representational theory is concerned with the flow of practices in time, with the 'presentations' produced by acting in the present rather than with the *post-hoc* reconstructions of the event which are studied by many social sciences. non-representational theory attempts to do two related things: firstly, to provide an ontology which takes mundane practices seriously and, secondly, to provide various means of amplifying the creativity of these practices through various performative methods" (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht n. pag.); here the term is used more broadly (see Works Consulted).

“as a means to recover ‘lost’ spirituality and to reexamine and reinterpret aspects of cultural heritage throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s,” and combining “disparate materials and mediums to create spaces where art and audience can interact unhindered by history or societal constraints”⁷.

The exhibition catalogue that accompanies the actual exhibition discusses “the ephemeral and (often) experiential aspects of African, European and Native American derived spiritualism as represented in visual art and culture,” positioning contemporary art in a historical context (Figure 2), determining “the twenty-first century as that of the age of the black image” and stating that “contemporary black visual art embodies the essential ideas behind NeoHooDoo” (Ojo 552). The photographic reproductions of some of the works of art, included in the present paper, cannot, of course, capture the impact of the actual works of art as they appear in the exhibition on the viewer/participant, but they can point to the ways in which creative combinations of different materials and textures can, through the application of new technologies and the mediating role of multiple media devices, examin—and invite the examination on the part of the viewer on—how spiritual quests are secularized via ritualistic acts (Figure 3 and 4); acts, the performative elements of which bring to the fore the practitioners’ drama of identity search, construction, and assertion. Art, spectacle and the latter’s mechanics exist in a symbiotic relationship within the exhibition’s milieu, as they do in individual and social spectacular and/or supernatural “melodramas” of representation, subjectivity, gender, identity, mediation, power, presence and absence. In this mixed-media and performance spectacle where the relationship between art and technology exhibits its new and radical dimensions, the artists challenge “conceptions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ . . . [s]ituating their work in a vernacular aesthetic, [as] the meaning of the work fluctuates according to its context,”⁸ and as technology develops into a force that impinges upon and inscribes all available surfaces, prescribing, at the same time, possible individual and/or collective performances.

The (disabled) body, stage brutality, performance documentation (video), digital scenography, hypertextual-interactive spaces, and (the detritus of) memory represented in experimental *mise-en-scène* (Figure 5), all combine to penetrate subject-ed discourses, manipulating technology’s incursions and materializing the subjectivities, kinetic and body codes, synesthetic modes, corporeal limits and (im)possibilities that the hoodoo “magical” tradition spiritually embraced, performatively expressed and culturally established.



Figure 2. Figure 4. Radcliffe Bailey, *Storm at Sea*, 2006; courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

⁷Information drawn from the introductory page to the exhibition *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* in its site: <http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/205>.

⁸Information drawn from the introductory page to the exhibition *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* in its site: <http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/205>.

Conclusion

Hoodoo’s ritualistic performances create such sense-perceptual conditions that are conducive to a peculiar reification of the act of seeing and the fact of understanding through the construction of systems of signs that re-create the observer and redefine the codes of vision, or even, the codes of sense. Even when placed in domains and discourses that normally—and normatively—sublate subversive micro-narratives within dominant cultural regimes, Juju’s imaginative, performative acts, grounded in the body as they are, slide into transgressive oppositions.

Its performances’ investment in the flesh, perhaps paradoxically, does not reflect or translate subjectivity as temporally or spatially conditioned but as transgendered, transracial, and even trans-human. Flesh, experienced as a medium or mediator in a spiritual, (dis)possessing process, produces a performative register of subjectivity, displacing internalized objectivist categories and structures and dis-centering the body as exemplum of organicist ideals and humanistic values.

Through the disruption of canonical identificatory processes, conclusive characterizations, or factual truths, Hoodoo narratives posit alternative representations of the self and the world in a transcendent, immaterial zone, thus offering unconventional, liberatory ways of understanding and approaching identity. The brief discussion of Hoodoo’s many visual and non-visual instantiations in (popular) culture serve to indicate its aesthetics’ incursions into most, if not all, domains of culture and art and to show that, even as urbanized and/or commercialized, black supernaturalism still challenges, or bears the potential to challenge, the colonizing bio-politics and politicized anxieties of the hegemonic cultural mechanism via the “magical” dramatic praxis that it enacts and empowers.

The paper’s intention is to open up a discussion on the more understudied aspects of African-derived folk cosmology, on its favoring of a seditious coalescence of the real and the imaginary and its intersections with technology and with cultural universals. Such a discussion might explore the multifarious implications of the diachronic and productive dialectic between the empirically visible and the felt invisible as inscribed in Juju’s contemporary multi-media representations.



Figure 3. Amalia Mesa Bains, *The Curanders's Botanica*, 2008; Collection of Richard L. Bains; Photo: Matthew Septimus; courtesy P.S.1 Contemporary art Center



Figure 4: . Pepon Osorio, Lonely Soul, 2008; courtesy Ronald Feldman, Fine Arts, New York; Photo: Matthew Septimus; courtesy P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center



Figure 5: Photo: Matthew Septimus; courtesy P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center