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Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in American Cinema

Jessica Knippel
Claremont Graduate University, jessica.knippel@cgu.edu

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Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in American Cinema

Abstract

This is a book review of Kameelah L. Martin, *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in American Cinema*.

Author Notes

Jessi Knippel is an academic, writer, and artist who lives in the promised land of Southern California with her partner and child. She holds a BA in Theatre and in Religious Studies, Two MA's in the intersections of Religion and Media/Art and is currently working on a interdisciplinary PhD in Religion, Gender Studies and Media at Claremont Graduate School. Her research includes Post/Ex-Evangelicals, Evangelicalism in the US, New Religious movements, Deviant Sex Cults and NRM, syncretism and folk practices in religion, as well as pop culture and religion.

Martin, Kameelah L., *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in American Cinema*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016.

Kameelah L Martin opens her book *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in American Cinema* by asking the question “what is the correlation between popular culture, women, and the understanding, or perhaps *misunderstanding*, of African-based religions in the United States?” (xv). Martin answers her question by way of a New Historicist methodological approach. The benefit of this approach for Martin is that the interplay between culture and art inevitably displays the prejudices and contradictions of categories such as race, sexuality, gender, and nationalism, which can be analyzed within that historical context. She uses this approach to evaluate ten popular American cinematic representations of female voodoo practitioners: *Chloe*, *Love Is Calling You* (1934), *The Love Wanga* (1936), *Devil’s Daughter* (1939), *Angel Heart* (1987), *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), *Eve’s Bayou* (1997), *The Skeleton Key* (2005), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006), *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (2007), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). In analyzing these films she looks at the documented authorial intent and biographies of filmmakers, uses theories of Laura Mulvey’s notion of visual pleasure, bell hooks’ oppositional gaze, Patricia Hill Collins’ safe spaces, the “Ifa Paradigm” (which uses the Yoruba spiritual system of Ifa as a means of evaluation), as well as her own experience as a black female spectator to add further depth and strength to the New Historicism modality. This intersectional method is what makes Martin’s approach to the analysis of these cultural items so strong, as she addresses them through several lenses and a robust engagement. Additionally this is what also makes her text valuable for a broad academic and public audience. Martin’s text offers a good example of how to investigate religious imagery and

presentations of marginalized religiousness that are not part of the dominant American Christian context or are misunderstood and villainized within that cultural context.

Martin begins the text by explaining the importance of the black priestess (also referred to as mambo, obeah or conjure woman) figure in the Atlantic World since enslavement. These women were (and are) the “spiritual advisor, culture bearer, and folk healer” within their cultural context and as time has progressed they have also become heroine characters featured in all forms of storytelling (xv). After establishing the communal value of these religious leaders within the African diasporic community of the Atlantic World, Martin addresses the reasons that so often these figures are misrepresented and misaligned in the broader context of the United States through the fusion of racism and sexism that produced certain stereotypes of these women and their religious context. She specifically looks at how the history of racism (rooted in American exploitation and vilification of Haiti and Haitian culture for its own political gains and the chattel slavery of the Atlantic World) and sexism intersect in the bodies of black women, specifically the ritual specialist. Martin argues that it is this matrix of gendered and stereotypical markers in US pop culture that inform the construction of “black female imaginaries” through what she calls “Voodoo Aesthetics.”

Martin establishes that the misalignment of African based ritual practice in cinema and pop culture, mainly through the terms and images of Voodoo, is often associated with William Seabrooks 1929 book *The Magical Island*. While this book is and continues to be highly influential in the construction of public perceptions of Voodoo, especially literary and cinematic, the negative contouring of these religious beliefs and practices actually began thirty five years before the Haitian Revolution, with Francois Makandal’s poisoning of the colonial water supply through his knowledge of the Island's plants and herbs in 1757 (xxi-xxii). The negative construction of Voodoo

as the only reason for the Haitian Revolution's success continued to be justification for colonial domination of the country. This literal association of Voodoo with "devil worship" not only negates Voodoo as a valid religious practice but also is rooted in a racist perspective that cannot accept the unaided ability of a black enslaved population to overthrow a "superior" colonial European power. This history of racism carries through into the American military occupation of Haiti (1915-1943) and continues today through cultural imagery such as travel and journalistic accounts and popular media. In Martin's words, "European power and the new American republic were deeply invested...in sustaining an image of Haiti that would unquestionably condemn it for all of its existence" (xxiv).

It is in this final landscape of colonial domination, the cinematic image, that Martin begins her analysis project. Martin begins with three films from the cinema of the 1930s to outline the origins of the African priestess/conjure woman image and to set a baseline for the possible growth or transformation of that caricature. What she finds is that in these early incarnations the exotic and misunderstood religious iconography is fused with existing stereotypes of black women as a means to make them palatable and acceptable to the white dominant culture.

Having established the various cinematic tropes of the obeah woman in chapter 1, Martin focuses her analysis on seven films from the last thirty years in chapters 2 through 5. Several films reveal how dominant the colonial misaligned caricature tropes still are (Disney being one of the sources of such recapitulation) while others complicate or challenge the tropes (two of which are by black female directors). Her goal with this text is to begin to offer a means of evaluation to dispute the existing tropes and stereotypes of these religious traditions. Additionally she seeks to offer recourse as a corrective for the dominance and damage perpetrated through the colonialist narrative and construction of Voodoo and other Africana diasporic religious practices. Ultimately,

she argues that we must approach these religious practices on their own terms, rather than those created by colonialist oppressors to disparage and villainize them and their adherents.

Martin concludes the book with a brief conversation about Beyonce's germinal 2016 album and visual film *Lemonade*, which she sees as a piece that furthers a black feminist/womanist critique of dominant representations of black women. "*Lemonade* places black women's spirit work on the world stage without apology or explanation for its comingling of Christian and African epistemologies.... Beyonce's black feminist Voodoo aesthetics...tells a tale as old as black women themselves; only this time the tale is performed in innovative, vulnerable, and daring ways" (179).

Overall, with *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics* Martin offers a strong resource for both research and classroom usage. Her writing style and narrative voice invite the reader to engage with the presented material in an enjoyable and thoughtful manner. There are vivid descriptions of the cinematic elements and imagery under evaluation, accompanied by rigorous unpacking of those sequences. Additionally, when needed Martin includes visual stills from the films to further clarify the imagery and her perspectives. Martin constructs a narrative space that allows the reader to follow along with her critical viewing, whether or not one has seen the specific film in question. There is very little to critique since Martin offers a strong and robust methodology with analysis of a specific cinematic construction. The book could have been broadened if Martin incorporated cinematic representations of the black female practitioners from the 1940s to 1990s, such as *The Mighty Quinn* (1989) or *Sugar Hill* (1974). But to be fair, few films features a black female religious practitioner in the obeah tradition and Martin chose the most popular pieces from within this archive. In the end, Martin has not only written a very interesting and absorbing text that delivers on its evaluative intentions but she has also constructed a path for other scholars interested in investigating non-dominant religious imagery in cinematic

and pop culture representation. For example, another scholar could use a similar intersectional methodology to evaluate the use of Native American tropes and iconography in American cinema. While the academic and artistic sources and tools would be context specific, Martin's methodology offers other scholars a template on how to engage the existing stereotypes of non-Protestant Christian religious representation in cinematic and popular culture that are rooted in historical perspectives that perpetuate racist and sexist tropes created by nonpractitioners of that religious practice.