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Only Evil Can Live Forever: Racialised Misrepresentations of Voodoo Communities in *American Horror Story: Coven*

If New York is the *City that Never Sleeps,* perhaps New Orleans has earned itself the byname of the *City that Never Dies*. Few other places in the US are quite as entangled with iconographies of the macabre, the supernatural, and the chill-inducing as this Louisiana metropolis, which, at the same time, functions as a symbol of carnivalesque hedonism. Some authors even attribute to this city "loose morals" (Jenkins 40), whatever this statement may entail or however one can envision a city's conception of morality in a more general sense. New Orleans is also 'the' American vampire city – a rather lucrative venture for the local tourist industry (Piatti-Farnell n.p.) – and 'the' city of voodoo, which has developed into a thematic staple for the modern horror genre as an umbrella term encompassing a vast array of real or imagined religious and magic practices (Fandrich 778). The myth of New Orleans as a space of haunted anachronism has lent a backdrop to many of these stories, providing a convenient setting for the supernatural, the chill-inducing, and the frightening.

The dark and mysterious side of New Orleans is closely enmeshed with the region's actual history – ghosts, after all, are most commonly understood as the spirits of the deceased haunting the realm of the living, disrupting the naturalised conceptualisation of death as irreversible and absolute. This transgression of the border between life and death is often traced back to a violent, grisly death that serves as an inciting incident to hauntings; a reason why the 'natural' course of life was disrupted and a spirit remains suspended between life and death. More concisely put: ghosts, in scary or supernatural narratives, are usually indices of very

real horrors, which most literary and film scholarship reads as an outlet for negotiating anxious awareness of historical circumstances (Briefel & Miller 4). In the context of the US and particularly the Southern states, including Louisiana, this addresses pasts of slavery and racialised exploitation, which are either allegorically or directly portrayed as sources of hauntings (Horsley 135). Stories tend to feature themes of reckoning with these painful histories as a way to "address the sins of the past, ultimately leading to a type of recompense" (Horsley 146). In this context, then, contemporary scary stories set in the American South are by no means unencumbered by painful, racist histories: for example, stories may feature ghosts of tortured slaves[1], or vampires as overtly or subtextually racialised entities[2]. Particularly prominently, racialising patterns of representation manifest in the imagery associated with voodoo, which serves as the primary focus of this paper.

However, before any analysis can take place, it may be worth briefly pointing to the history of horror and Gothic narratives in the American South to sketch some terminological distinctions. This paper reads the third season of hit TV series *American Horror Story,* subtitled 'Coven', as an example of an on-screen continuation of the earlier literary movement of the Southern Gothic, which can be understood as an offshoot of the larger American Gothic movement. American Gothic fiction has continually drawn audiences' attention since the days of Edgar Allan Poe or Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Monnet 1), whose work is often understood as the precursor to modern horror and crime fiction. The Southern Gothic, then, spearheaded by William Faulkner and Flanner O'Connor, more concretely situated gloomy, creepy, and

uncanny narratives in the American South (Horsley 19). This has spawned a plethora of film and television representations, including programmes such as *The Originals* or the aforementioned *AHS: Coven*.

This paper, then, focusses on *AHS: Coven* as a manifestation of racial politics in the representation of voodoo religious communities in the Southern Gothic on screen. In particular, I examine religious dimensions in narratives of immortality, which serve as a key impetus of *AHS: Coven*. There is nothing accidental about the narrative-discursive construction around voodoo, magic and immortality – there is a fragment of a religiously inflected moralism despite the show's seeming secularity, one which has descended almost directly from racist politics of the nineteenth century and continues to be a genre-defining trope in Southern Gothic narratives: that of voodoo practices construed as Satanic and, by consequence, inherently and irrevocably evil.

Voodoo or Witchcraft?

Voodoo (or vodou, in the Haitian spelling) is a hybrid religion that developed out of Yorùbá contact with Christianity and indigenous belief systems of the Caribbean and the South of the US. As an "Afro-Creole counterculture religion" (Fandrich 779), it has lent a sense of community and faith to oppressed Black individuals in the American South both in the nineteenth century and today by blending Christian saint-worship with Yorùbá spirituality, thus allowing for a 'common ground' of religious practice. However, misrepresentations of this school of faith have a long-standing tradition. It has been called a backward, Satanist, and "progress-

resistant" (Hebblethwaite 4) belief system, is said to have incited the Haitian revolution (Fandrich 779) and has been falsely accused of facilitating ritual human sacrifice (Hebblethwaite 8). In this sense, Black communities are associated with terminology of 'savagery' without any explicitly racist wording, and the rhetoric of subjugation becomes a cultural matter as opposed to a (pseudo)biological one.

While representations of voodoo as evil and Satanic are rooted in the early colonial history of the Caribbean, the deployment of this religion as a narrative trope in horror has continued well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Films such as *White Zombie* from 1932, *I Walked with a Zombie* from 1943, or more recent examples such as *Voodoo Dawn* from 1991 share this fear of voodoo as dark magic or a kind of menacing paganism (Reuber 8). For lack of a better way to phrase it, while the explicit false association of Blackness with amorality has disappeared, the misrepresentation of practices from Black communities persists. Most of this linking happens through a logic of guilt-by-association that weaves through almost all cultural imagery depicting voodoo religious practices and communities. For Christianity-based moral systems, voodoo is linked to witchcraft and sorcery and is thus Satanist in nature. As voodoo is a religion grown out of and primarily practiced in Black cultural spheres of the Caribbean or the American South, a transitive link is formed between Blackness and amorality; which abstracts the fictional construct of *race* into an immutable cultural difference. Even horror scholarship is not immune to this fallacious position. In some academic texts studying horror cinema, "voodoo and witchcraft", one a majority-PoC religious community and one either a catchall term

for perverted feminised spirituality or a reference to Wiccan faith, are coordinated unquestioningly (see: Abbott 99). The lumping together of two separate movements may suggest that this is not a statement about actual religions, but rather that non-Christian spirituality, no matter in which form, is a key element of horror narratives. This becomes particularly manifest in negotiating the trope of immortality.

Immoral Immortals

As the theme of the 2023 *Anglophonia* conference was 'Endlessness', the thematic anchor for this article is immortality, which is examined to extrapolate moralistic connotations in the primary material. For a theoretical prism, I turn to Marie Roberts's seminal work *Gothic Immortals*, which investigates the inherent moralism of nineteenth-century novels by, among others, Mary Shelley and Percy B. Shelley, specifically looking to their depictions of immortality. Immortality itself, observes Roberts, is not presented as intrinsically and inherently bad; however, it leads to a sort of spiritual degeneration among those seeking it (210). She finds that Gothic narratives often have an inherent didactic function to convince readers of the inevitability of death and an inherent immortality in quests for non-Christian eternal life (Roberts 208). However, Fontaine Lien later observes that this is not the complete picture: She postulates that there are two types of immortality, the 'spiritual' one, in a Christian sense, and a 'false' one that is acquired through selling one's soul (81). The author stresses that the notion of moral decay connected to immortality is Western and Christian-specific but tends to portray itself as universalised whenever it appears (Lien 85).

One of the major overarching themes of *AHS: Coven* is undoubtedly the quest for immortality and the pursuit of eternal youth. Particularly in the figures of Fiona Goode and Marie Laveau, different approaches to immortality are negotiated and placed in a larger moral context. Much of the show focusses on emphasising that these figures are basically polar opposites: Whereas Fiona Goode is the power-hungry and absentee leader of a coven of young, privileged white witches living in a white colonial mansion, Marie Laveau is the leader of a voodoo coven, running a hair salon and taking great pains to ensure the safety of those under her protection. Aside from the stereotypes woven into the characterisation of these two, clichés abound in their narrative arcs that, as I further argue, entirely fail to challenge racist stereotypes.

Leaving aside all comparisons with her historical counterpart, Marie Laveau in *AHS: Coven* is a prime example of a Faustian character who succumbs to what Fontaine Lien (81) calls the pursuit of "false" immortality, one that is rooted in a hubristic, immoral, *lower* urge. She trades her soul as well as countless lives to preserve her young, powerful body to a demonic version of the Haitian deity Papa Legba, who, in return, requires her to sacrifice one "innocent soul" per year. A noteworthy observation is that Papa Legba, in voodoo religions, is originally linked to Saint Peter and connects the mortal realm to that of divine spirits. He is alternately portrayed as an "old man who moves very slowly in a very distinct manner" (Fandrich 783) or a more mischievous trickster figure, yet never an outright malicious force (Fandrich 787). In *Coven*¸ however, Papa Legba is a demonic entity, red-eyed and

summoned with a generous offering of what looks like cocaine ("The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks" 34:07), trading false immortality for souls. *AHS,* in its depiction of Papa Legba particularly, wilfully employs untruthful notions of voodoo as demonic and Satanist to create feelings of horror, drawing on narratives from the nineteenth century.

Eventually, Marie Laveau is killed and sentenced to another eternal life in hell, where she must forever torture her nemesis Delphine LaLaurie. She does this, albeit not willingly, but only upon being coerced by Papa Legba ("Go to Hell" 41:00). *AHS: Coven* portrays Marie Laveau as a voodoo queen fallen from grace, receiving more eternal life than she originally bargained for. Importantly, Laveau's quest is portrayed as doomed from the very beginning, as her ways of attaining immortality begin in heresy – namely, in voodoo. However, it is worth noting that Laveau is not painted as an unsympathetic character but primarily a naïve one, and that she discovers during her long life that immortality is more a punishment than a reward and wishes to protect others from sharing her fate.

Seeking Eternal Life

The other particularly interesting character in this regard is that of Fiona Goode, the ageing supreme witch of her coven who, with all her might, wishes to escape death and decay by any means necessary. She approaches Marie Laveau in the second episode, "Boy Parts" (27:05-30:19), asking her for the secret to immortality, but its true nature remains unknown to her until much later, when Laveau reveals her bargain with the Papa-Legba-inspired demon ("The Magical

Delights of Stevie Nicks" 21:24-23:19). Attempts to summon him herself fail, however, as Fiona is revealed to have no soul of her own to sell ("Stevie Nicks" 36:30). Eventually, Fiona is killed as well, and is also sent to her own personal hell for eternal punishment.

Fiona Goode's reasons for pursuing immortality resemble those of Marie Laveau, albeit only at first glance: She, too, seeks immortality to satisfy a power-hungry hubris that will not allow her to relinquish the position of the supreme in her coven and hand it over to the next generation. However, upon closer inspection, there seem to be more sinister factors at play than mere hubris. Despite being aware of the hefty price paid by Marie Laveau for her eternal youth, Fiona is fully prepared to sign a contract with Papa Legba. He asks her whether, in order to attain immortality, she would mutilate her daughter or murder her loved ones, to which she responds, "Absolutely. Whatever it takes" ("Stevie Nicks" 35:57). Whereas Marie Laveau, at the point of selling her soul, is unaware of the moral corruption that her deal with the deity will bring, Fiona does not hesitate to sacrifice other lives for her own self-indulgence. Marie Laveau is clearly distraught at having to give up her child, tricked into this by Papa Legba, but Fiona almost eagerly offers the life and health of her daughter and fellow witch Cordelia Foxx. Both Marie and Fiona are arguably partially redeemed by their fierce protection of the coven against witch hunters. However, notably, Marie is depicted as a flawed but generally caring leader of her coven, whereas Fiona remains ruthless and brutal throughout her entire quest, yet somehow, they end up in the same place: hell. Marie Laveau even outright protests

this, arguing that "[she] helped so many people" ("Go to Hell" 40:52), but Papa Legba insists that her punishment is just and that there is no difference in degree between the crimes of Fiona and Marie.

This leads to the question of why Marie Laveau's character is so much more readily sacrificed for crimes inarguably less heinous than Fiona Goode's by the show's narrative-building. One reason may be that through her association with voodoo and 'Black magic' – a term that is itself rather loaded, but to discuss it would likely exceed the limits of this paper – she is inherently seen as corrupted and morally inferior. Her punishment serves a didactic function that can be traced back to nineteenth-century novels, which "have bestowed immortality on characters whose chronic dissatisfaction with existence, prolonged or otherwise, ensures that they will always remain discontented" (Roberts 210). However, with Marie Laveau, the sin lies not merely in pursuing immortality or aspiring to the wrong sort of immortality – rather, she is reproached for presuming and succeeding to grasp immortality through what is understood as an abject religion: voodoo. She is, literally, punished for being part of an Afro-Creole religious community.

Conclusion

AHS: Coven plays on known anxieties, inspiring fear through what is considered to be particularly *American* horror, meaning one that is unique to its cultural sphere (Johnston 45). In this case, the sphere is one that remains permeated by issues of racial injustice and exploitation. Contradictorily, the show retains explicitly progressive and inclusive elements, particularly in its casting choices and

representation of non-normative bodies, such as disabled, Black, ageing, queer, and not conventionally beautiful individuals (Jowett 24; see also Christian 1115). However, at the same time, the narrative takes some shortcuts to inspire fear in its viewership by appealing to an ingrained sense of apprehension in the US-American cultural consciousness: the fear of voodoo, which stems from a moralism superimposed on religious practices in order to justify the oppression of Black communities.

To summarise, the first contention in this essay is that *Coven* grievously reproduces falsehoods about the practice and religion of voodoo; secondly, it links these practices to an immoral pursuit of immortality, which is in turn racialised. Finally, the narrative continues to perpetuate moralism rooted in early Gothic literary traditions. The characters of Marie Laveau and Fiona Goode are used as representatives for making this argument – the Black woman Marie Laveau has access to immortality through her immoral practice of voodoo, which the white Fiona Goode seeks to reproduce but cannot. Both immortality and immorality come more easily to the racialised individual; the Black woman in *AHS: Coven* can more easily access what is deemed evil by Christianity. Thus, the depiction of immortality reproduces a racialised moralism rooted in the nineteenth century.

End Notes

[1] A very interesting recent cinematic example of this would be Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* from 2021. In this film, which modernises the urban legend of 'Bloody Mary', the spectres of murdered, lynched, or otherwise brutalised Black individuals literally return to seek recompense (in the form of murder, dismemberment, and general mayhem).

[2] For instance, the roots of the vampire myth can be traced to portrayals of 'bloodsucking' aristocrats entangled problematically with antisemitic caricatures of Jewish money lenders figuratively 'sucking people dry' (see also: Roberts 1). As portrayals of vampires become more romanticised, they lose their antisemitic connotations and become almost exclusively defined by their extreme whiteness – see, for example, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* or the HBO series *True Blood*, where Black vampires are rather sparse. Of course, the myth of vampiric whiteness has not remained uncontested; see, for example, Octavia Butler's *Fledgeling,* which engages, among other things, with the racialisation of the vampire myth.

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