Race, Reconstruction, and the Invention of "Negro Superstition," 1862-1877

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Abstract: This article traces the postbellum development and dissemination of the notion of "negro superstition." By the end of Reconstruction, many whites across the nation, both liberal and conservative, shared in the belief that credulity was the keystone of African-American culture. The formulation of superstition as innate racial trait served the conjoined causes of sectional reconciliation and white supremacy, eroding white support for black citizenship. As liberal estimations of black Christianity declined and conservative depictions of African-American magical beliefs proliferated, "voodoo" gained traction as a potent imaginary, shorthand for racial atavism, unreason, and dangerous sexuality.

In his 1877 history of the Ku Klux Klan, James Beard concluded that the power of the organization lay in its manipulation of black superstition. "That the negro is by nature grossly superstitious," he asserted, "no one who has even tolerable means of information will deny."[1] By the end of Reconstruction, many white Americans saw superstition as one of black culture's defining characteristics. Fifteen years earlier, however, Beard might have written with less confidence. During and immediately after the Civil War, the nature of black spiritual belief was fiercely contested. Whilst abolitionists presented black Christianity as an antidote to northern materialism, conservatives exhibited African-American

[1] James Melville Beard, *K. K. K. Sketches: Humorous and Didactic* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1877), 64.

magical traditions as evidence of an innate credulity that disqualified the freedpeople from citizenship. However, as the sections clasped hands across the bloody chasm, and increasing numbers of white northerners retreated from their responsibility toward the formerly enslaved, liberal and conservative racial discourse converged.[2] As Reconstruction waned, so too did the enthusiasm that liberals felt for black religion. As such, they were increasingly receptive to conservative claims regarding black superstition, which was supposedly epitomized by "voodoo."[3] An imaginary of significant power, "voodoo" contained multitudes: atavism, sexual danger, unreason. For white supremacists, "voodoo" cast a spell of its own, acting as a synecdoche for the cultural apparatus arrayed against black political power.

Of course, discourse on black superstition did not point unwaveringly towards white supremacy. When it came to African-American culture, attraction and revulsion were intertwined. To whites seeking voyeuristic excitement and a reprieve from bourgeois constraints, narratives of "negro superstition" became

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[2] For a discussion of the differences between liberal and conservative racial attitudes see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). These attitudes correspond in important ways to free contract and paternalist traditions of liberalism. See Marek Steedman, *Jim Crow Citizenship: Liberalism and the Southern Defense of Racial Hierarchy* (New York: Routledge, 2012). For a critique of the concept of racial attitudes, see Karen Fields and Barbara Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012).

[3] The spelling "voodoo" will be used throughout in order to differentiate the ideological construct from the practised religion, which, in line with Haitian orthography, should be spelled "Vodou." See Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

attractive commodities.[4] Nevertheless, during Reconstruction, this discourse functioned primarily as an ideological tool of racial domination. During the 1870s, with racial division and national reconciliation locked in "tragic, mutual dependence," the assumption of African-American superstition became part and parcel of the growing consensus between whites on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.[5] Moreover, as the cultural prejudice of white liberals sharpened, discussions of supposed African-American inferiority were increasingly suffused with biological notions of race. By the late 1870s, superstition had been "naturalized" as an indelible racial trait, reflecting and reinforcing the retreat from Reconstruction.[6]

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[4] Certainly, representations of the other were not always straightforwardly hegemonic and, during the 1880s and 1890s, folklorists like William Wells Newell and authors such as George Washington Cable allied discussions of "voodoo" to liberal racial politics. See Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Simon Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore and the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998); Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); David G. Cox, "Half Bacchanalian, Half Devout": White Intellectuals, Black Folk Culture, and the 'Negro Problem,' *American Nineteenth Century History*, 16, 3 (Sept. 2015): 241-267.

[5] David Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001), 5.

[6] Historians emphasizing the instrumentality of *laissez faire* political economics tend to diminish the influence of race. See, Heather Cox-Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Andrew Slap, *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). According to Slap, because most white northerners evinced a degree of racism, ascribing it causal power is too "easy." Slap, *Doom of Reconstruction*, p. 86. This argument, however, occludes the protean, contingent character of race. See Barbara J. Fields,

For middle-class Protestants, accusations of superstition had long policed the boundaries of acceptable religion. From the seventeenth century onwards, Protestant elites sought to disenchant the natural world, banishing the supernatural from the world of action and confining it to the realm of faith. "Nearly all that goes farther than the adoration of the supreme being, and the subjugation of the heart to his eternal orders," wrote Voltaire, "is superstition."[7] Leveled against Protestant sects and Roman Catholics, charges of superstition referred to excessive enthusiasm as well as belief in the efficacy of magic. Both threatened to return the spiritual to the secular. As the African Methodist Episcopal Church's *Christian Recorder* put it in 1861: "The superstitious man believes too much."[8] A number of scholars have turned their attention to "excessive belief as an accusation," whether directed against Roman Catholics,

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"Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 144-168. For works emphasizing the role of race in the retreat from Reconstruction see Blight, *Race and Reunion*; Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-77* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); John Sproat, *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). For more on "naturalizing" racism see Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

[7] Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version*, trans. William Fleming (Paris: E. R. DuMont, 1901), 273, quoted in Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 56.

[8] "Superstition," *The Christian Recorder*, 2 Feb. 1861, 1.

Methodist revivalists, spiritualists or mesmerists.[9] Such rhetoric, as Emily Ogden argues, issued "permits for domination," underwriting hierarchy whilst delegitimizing alternative conceptions of social order.[10] In other words, credulity meant incapacity for self-government.

In the wake of the Civil War, growing numbers of white writers turned this calumnizing discourse upon the spiritual beliefs of the freedpeople. As both Edward Blum and Curtis Evans have argued, race and religion were co-constituted: middle-class whites discussing black religion were usually seeking to define the racial character of African Americans and their place within the body politic. During Reconstruction, then, optimism about black citizenship and estimations of black Christianity went down together.[11] This declension was accompanied by a shift in the meaning of superstition. During the 1860s, when white writers referred to the superstitions of black southerners, they usually had in mind forms of Christianity different to their own. By the end of Reconstruction,

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[9] Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9. See also Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Explaining Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[10] Ogden, *Credulity*, 7.

[11] See Edward Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For the co-constituted nature of race and religion see Henry Goldschmidt, "Introduction: Race, Nation, and Religion," in *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas*, eds. Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-31.

however, "negro superstition" almost invariably referred to magic. These ideas were given heft by the fact that, over the course of the nineteenth century, the concept of magic had been progressively racialized. As with all such discourse, however, "negro superstition" was also a means of reflexive differentiation, constructing the white, middle-class subject as modern, rational, and fit for citizenship. For some writers, this was clearly imperative. As Drew Gilpin Faust notes, facing the catastrophic human losses of the Civil War, many white Americans were drawn towards the "consoling tenets" of spiritualism and other magical beliefs.[12]

Amongst the enslaved, magical traditions were loci of resistance, a complementary counterpoint to Christianity.[13] Although significantly imbricated, the magic of the enslaved was distinguishable from black Christianity because it sought to control the spiritual realm in order to effect changes in the material world. These magical traditions were nothing if not protean: syncretisms of north West African, west Central African, European and Native American beliefs and practices.[14] Conjure, Hoodoo, and root-working are amongst the labels attached to this disparate and evolving tradition. Although, according to Yvonne Chireau, this nomenclature signaled distinct traditions, during Reconstruction, middle-class

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[12] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 185.

[13] Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 12.

[14] For this syncretic process see Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

observers made slight distinction.[15] They employed these labels in a haphazard fashion, whilst, increasingly, gathering all African-American magic under the umbrella of "voodoo." Of interest here is not magic as lived experience but magic as discursive imaginary. To borrow from Jenny Franchot, "voodoo" was a "metaphoric construct," as distinct from the Vodou religion as "Romanism" was from Catholicism.[16]

Recently, Caroline Janney has qualified the conclusion of David Blight and others that white supremacy bonded a fractured nation.[17] To Janney, reconciliation was a fragile thing: significant sections of northern society refused to forgive the South for secession. Yet discourse on black superstition suggests that amongst middle-class whites, at least, a broad consensus did develop on African-American racial characteristics. This consensus, however, remained contested and uneven: hegemony is never complete.[18] A dynamic black counterpublic parried white discourse, contending sensationalist accounts of "voodoo" and reversing charges of superstition against white southerners.[19] Yet

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[15] See Chireau, *Black Magic*. For the relationship between Conjure to black Christianity see Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[16] Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, xviii.

[17] See Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

[18] See Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *The American Historical Review*, 90, 3 (June 1985), 571.

[19] For the concept of the black public sphere see Michael Dawson, *Not In Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North* (Oxford: Oxford University

middle-class black writers were often ambivalent about the spiritual beliefs of the freedpeople. With most subscribing to western notions of civilization, they engaged in a delicate dance, defending African-American citizenship whilst denigrating the culture of the freedpeople in order to distance themselves from charges of superstition. It would be over two decades before W. E. B. Du Bois limned black folk culture in *The Souls of Black Folk* and, as Kevin Gaines has argued, it was all too easy for black writers to tip into an argument for citizenship based on class stratification.[20]

1. Liberalism

Whether referring to magical practices or religious excess, discourse on the superstitions of the enslaved remained largely peripheral to antebellum

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Press, 1995); Manisha Sinha, "To 'Cast Just Obliquy on Oppressors': Black Radicalism in the Age of Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 64, 1 (Jan. 2007): 149-160; Catherine Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory*, 12, 4 (2002): 446-468.

[20] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903). Of course, the freedpeople continued to celebrate the dignity of their culture within the enclave of the black church. Although the focus of this article is middle-class discourse, it is important to recognize the persistence of this oral counternarrative. For the role of religion in contesting white supremacy see Joshua Paddison, "New Directions in the History of Religion and Race," *American Quarterly*, 68, 4 (December 2016), 1009. For some of the methodological difficulties faced by those seeking to access this oral tradition see Derek Chang, *Citizens of a Christian Nation: Evangelical Missions and the Problem of Race in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2010).

abolitionism. Indeed, whilst many abolitionists tended to emphasize the spiritual degradation engendered by slavery (echoing William Lloyd Garrison's charge that the enslaved were "kept as nearly as possible in total ignorance of everything they ought to know, as moral, intellectual, and religious beings"), growing numbers placed black Christianity in a flattering light.[21] As Curtis Evans and George Fredrickson have argued, many white abolitionists came to view the enslaved as possessed of an innate religiosity. To such "romantic racialists," slaves were natural Christians whose faith would enrich the nation.[22]

Exemplifying natural religion was the eponymous hero of Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although Tom's religious visions function as a crucial plot device, Stowe did not inveigh against such manifestations of religious superstition. On the contrary, betraying her fascination with mesmerism, the author drew upon psychological theories to defend and explain occurrences of direct revelation amongst the enslaved. Where magic does appear in the novel, it is associated not primarily with the enslaved, but with Simon Legree, a white slaveowner who, "like most godless and cruel men, was superstitious." Here, superstition is figured not as an excess of religious belief, but its absence. Throughout the novel, Legree's godless superstition is directly counterpoised with Tom's natural religiosity. Indeed, one of Legree's slaves, Cassy, far from

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[21] William Lloyd Garrison, "The Colored Population of the United States. No. 2," *The Liberator*, 22 January 1831, 14.

[22] See Evans, *Burden of Black Religion*, 17-63; George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press of New England, 1987), 97-129.

exhibiting credulity, successfully exploits her master's "superstitious excitability," in this case belief in ghosts, "for the purpose of her liberation."[23]

Meanwhile, in the slave narratives, abolitionists provided African Americans with a literary platform to explore the religious and magical beliefs of the enslaved.[24] Like the Garrisonians, Charles Ball sought to refute characterizations of slavery as a school of civilization, deploring the irreligion of slaves who were "universally subject to the grossest and most abject superstition," and who "uniformly" believed in "witchcraft, conjuration, and the agency of evil spirits in the affairs of human life." To Ball, superstition demonstrated that, thanks to their masters, slaves were no more civilized than "the inhabitants of the wildest regions of Negro-land."[25] Later narratives, however, tilted towards recognition of black Christianity's oppositional power. Here, Frederick Douglass's first autobiography holds especial importance. "Every tone," wrote Douglass of the spirituals, "was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer for deliverance from chains."[26] Discussion of magic, meanwhile, was always ambivalent, although a number of narratives hinted at the oppositional

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[23] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly* (Jewett: Boston, 1852), 464, 473, 440.

[24] Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 107.

[25] Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 165.

[26] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slave Office, 1846), 14. For a discussion of Douglass's treatment of slave songs see Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

energy of magical beliefs. Apparently "no believer in soothsaying," William Wells Brown nevertheless recalled "hunting up" an enslaved "fortune teller" who predicted that he "*should go free!*"[27] Similarly, although he initially "rejected the idea" Douglass kept hold of a protective root given him by another slave, Sandy Jenkins. His account of the role played by this object in his pivotal tussle with Covey the slave breaker was certainly ironical, but he conceded that he "was half inclined to think the *root* to be something more than I at first had taken it to be."[28]

During and immediately after the war, abolitionists continued to accentuate the positive. As the evangelical missionary Austa French recognized, the characterization of the enslaved "as debased, and degraded" meant that even those who "hate slavery […] despise the colored."[29] Accordingly, before they could convince the northern public of slavery's inequity, abolitionists must wrest control of racial representation from southern conservatives. Until the end of the 1860s, when antislavery northerners spoke of cultural degradation they often had in mind not slaves but slaveholders. With slavery having reduced the South to a pre-modern condition, the interests of the enslaved were "identical with those of civilization and progress."[30]

On the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Protestant missionaries from the Northeast encountered an "impressionistic" slave religion in many ways

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[27] William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown: A Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), 93, 91.

[28] Douglass, *Narrative*, 71. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contains a similar reference to a "witch thing" that prevents slaves "from feelin' when they's flogged." Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 440.

[29] French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 186, 190.

[30] E. P. Whipple, "Reconstruction and Suffrage," *The Atlantic Monthly* (Aug. 1865), 238.

unrecognizable to them.[31] From the raw materials of Christianity, the enslaved had hewn a theology to meet their social and political needs, evincing, as Steven Hahn puts it, a "quiet millennialism."[32] In so doing, they forged an alternative Christian hermeneutic oriented around "prophecy, magic, conjuring, and dreams."[33] Telescoping linear time into cyclical, or "sacred," time, the enslaved fused past and present, figuring Biblical characters and events as historical archetypes.[34] Of course, much of this was anathema to the rational religion espoused by middle-class Protestants (both black and white). Nevertheless, although uncomfortable with slave Christianity, many missionaries, especially evangelicals, saw in it an intensity of religious feeling lost to "materialistic" Protestants.[35] As Austa French put it, the freedmen were destined to "introduce a higher, purer Christian love, and life, into the great mass."[36] If "a few slight traces

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[31] Margaret Washington Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 285.

[32] Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003), 44.

[33] Mark Noll, "The Bible and Slavery," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53.

[34] Lawrence Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration of Neglected Sources," in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy Fulop and Albert Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 73.

[35] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), 262.

[36] Austa French, *Slavery in South Carolina and the Ex-Slaves; or, The Port Royal Mission* (New York: W. M. French, 1862), 265.

of superstition" should "occasionally come to the surface," they were peripheral to black "life or worship."[37]

As Evans notes, black missionaries were especially receptive to the beauty of the freedpeople's Christianity.[38] Initially, Henry MacNeal Turner, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, was chary of the "lower class of ideas" evident in the Christianity of black southerners, decrying its emphasis upon "Hell fire, brimstone, damnation." However, he was profoundly moved by the "undeviating determination" of the freedpeople, who, he averred, were able to "draw out a signal majesty" from the Bible, affecting even "the most hardhearted sinner." Witnessing one of their prayer meetings, Turner found himself weeping "like a child."[39] The Philadelphian missionary, Charlotte Forten, trod a similar path from suspicion to affection, moved by her appreciation of the freedpeople's sacred music.[40]

Missionary attitudes toward black Christianity, however, were frequently ambivalent. Even Forten thought some of the freedpeople's songs "wild and strange."[41] Whilst supposedly placing African Americans in a positive light,

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[37] "The Freedman at Port Royal," *The North American Review*, 101 (July 1865), 10.

[38] Evans, *Burden of Black Religion*, 76-77.

[39] Jean Lee Cole, ed., *Freedom's Witness: The Civil War Correspondence of Henry MacNeal Turner* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2013), 260, 261, 260.

[40] See Charlotte Forten, *The Journal of Charlotte Forten: A Young Black Woman's Reactions to the White World of the Civil War Era* (New York, 1981); William Toll, "Free Men, Freedmen, and Race: Black Social Theory in the Gilded Age," *Journal of Southern History*, 44, 4 (November 1978), 575. Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 94.

[41] Forten, *Journal,* 153.

romantic racialism hinged upon the notion of essential difference. Racializing the faculties, abolitionists counterpoised rational Anglo-Saxons with a "black race" in whom emotion constituted the "richer part of the nature." Thus, at the heart of liberal reform was a cloying paternalism, for if the emotional nature of African Americans brought them closer to God, it also made this "lighthearted, laughing race" more childlike, dependent upon whites for protection and guidance.[42]

Accordingly, many white missionaries were chary of autonomous authority embodied by black preachers. In the early days of the mission, however, it was not uncommon to find missionaries coming to the defense of these ministers. As French wrote, they were of "real spiritual benefit" to their congregants, able to "state Scripture facts, narratives, and doctrines, far better than most, who feed upon commentaries."[43] Such encomium, however, could be double-edged. As the Unitarian missionary, Harriet Ware remarked, the "demonstrative and fiery" style of black preachers was distasteful, but "necessary to rouse the […] religious sentiment of a people who have heretofore had little of religion, except its superstitions."[44] Indeed, French's appreciation of black exegesis was rare even in the early 1860s. Although some missionaries came to admire it, many, like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, saw only "bewildered chaos" in the theology of the freedpeople.[45]

Whilst a number of missionaries were affected by the emotional content of the freedpeople's sacred music (as Higginson noted with a telling analogy, the

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[42] "Freedman at Port Royal," 10, 4, 7.

[43] French, *Slavery*, 131.

[44] Harriet Ware, "The Negro in South Carolina," *New York Times*, 19 July 1862, 2.

[45] Higginson, *Army Life*, 27.

spirituals acted upon listeners like a "magic piper's bewitchment"), some forms of cultural difference remained unpalatable. [46] Most objectionable was the "Shout," which, in the eyes of northern Protestants, veered perilously close to magical ritual. Abolitionist observers like William Allen sought to differentiate between "*hymns* and *shouts*". Whilst the former class contained "many sweet and touching tunes," the latter – a "kind of shuffling dance […] performed by a line of persons moving about in a circle" – was a "most peculiar institution."[47] The key difference was movement, an externalized expression of faith distasteful to exponents of internalized religion.

Missionary responses to the Shout exposed a tension between the romantic tradition and an assimilationist impulse conflating difference with inferiority.[48] However, although critics of religious enthusiasm had long sought to place ecstatic behavior like the Shout beyond the pale, discussions of the Shout were freighted with racial significance. [49] In their numerous descriptions of the "indescribable" Shout, missionaries most clearly prefigured later portraits of black belief, equating savagery and superstition with black, rather than white,

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[46] Ibid., 190.

[47] Marcel [W. F. Allen], "The Negro Dialect," *The Nation* Volume 1 No. 24 (1864), 745.

[48] See Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 142; Joe Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), ix.

[49] See Taves: *Fits, Trances, and Visions*.

southerners.[50] Missionaries writing about the Shout framed it as atavistic, a "savage, heathenish" custom, the "direct descendent of some African dance."[51] Much of this writing coursed with an erotic energy made explicit by William Allen in 1867. Disparaging the "intrinsically barbaric character" of such "purely African" cultural forms, Allen compared the Shout to the enthusiasm of "ancient bacchantes," dwelling pruriently on the excitement of "grotesquely half-clad field hands."[52]

2. Conservatism

In the public sphere, antebellum slaveholders made slight reference to the magical practices of their human property. Although keenly aware of the association between "superstitions brought from Africa" and slave rebellion in the New World, they sidestepped this affinity because it subverted the paternalist mythology that many sought to project.[53] Indeed, in one of the few extended

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[50] See Susan Walker, *Journal of Miss Susan Walker: March 3rd to June 6th, 1862*, ed. Henry Noble Sherwood (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1912), 16; Elizabeth Ware Pearson, ed., *Letters from Port Royal: Written at the Time of the Civil War (1862-1868)* (Boston: W. B. Clarke, 1906), 27.

[51] Laura Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne: Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*, ed. Rupert Sargent Holland (Cambridge: Riverside, 1912), 22; Allen, "Negro Dialect," 745. For a discussion of the Shout's origins see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black* America (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987).

[52] William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Peter Smith, 1867), xii, xiii. See also Towne, *Letters and Diary*, 20.

[53] Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 127. For the relationship between magic and resistance see Anderson,

discussions of slave culture penned by a proslavery author in the antebellum South, Edward Pollard framed as benign the "curious spells and superstitious appliances" of a plantation Conjurer named Pompey. Moreover, in ironic anticipation of wartime missionaries, Pollard celebrated slave religion as an emotional antidote to religious rationalism. Although "greatly mixed up with superstitions," in the "affectionate, and believing heart[s]" of slaves were "principles of religion as saving […] as the precise creeds, and solemn and exact manners of churchmen."[54]

After Appomattox, however, few white southern writers echoed Pollard's praise for black Christianity, turning their attention instead to African-American magical traditions. For such writers, Vodou came to hold a particular fascination. An evolving spiritual matrix, Vodou originated in Saint Domingue, as the enslaved syncretized the Catholicism of French colonists with West African belief systems. At the turn of the nineteenth century, as a result of the natural movement of enslaved people and free people of color within the francophone Atlantic, as well as the wave of refugees generated by revolution in Saint Domingue, Vodou

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Conjure in African American Society; David Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, and Resistance," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Latinamerikas*, 28, 1 (Jan. 1991): 21-51; Diane Paton and Maarit Forde, eds., *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Walter Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2006); William Suttles, Jr., "African Religious Survivals as Factors in American Slave Revolts," *The Journal of Negro History*, 56, 2 (April 1971): 97-104.

[54] Edward Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (New York: Pudney and Russell, 1859), 58, 87.

established a foothold in the French colony of Louisiana.[55] Profoundly disturbed by the Haitian revolution, antebellum proslavery writers frequently exhibited the republic as a prime example of black incapacity for self-government. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, no major antebellum ideologue dealt explicitly with Vodou until George Fitzhugh did so in an 1861 *Debow's* article on Haiti.[56] Tellingly, a similar article published by *Debow's* in 1859 made no mention of Vodou.[57] Despite the seismic impact that the Haitian revolution had on American political thought, discussions of Vodou were prevalent in neither the northern nor southern antebellum press.[58] Although accounts of Vodou (or "vaudoux") had

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[55] For the francophone Atlantic see Bill Marshall, *The French Atlantic: Travels in Culture and History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009); Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[56] George Fitzhugh, "Hayti and the Monroe Doctrine," *De Bow's Review: Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* 31, No 2 (Aug., 1861): 131-136. It is likely that Fitzhugh was introduced to "Vaudoux" by Gustave D'Alaux's condemnatory account of Haiti, *Solouque and His Empire*, published in French in 1856 and translated into English in 1861. See Gustave d'Alaux, *Soulouque and His Empire*, translated and edited by John H. Parkhill (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1861).

[57] W. W. Wright, "Free Negroes in Hayti," *Debow's Review: Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* 27, No 5 (Nov., 1859): 526-549. Among the many proslavery essays that discuss Haiti, but not Vodou, are Thomas Roderick Dew, *Abolition of Negro Slavery: Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature, 1831-'32* (Washington: Duff Green, 1833); Josiah Nott, *Two Lectures on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races* (Mobile: Dade and Thompson, 1844).

[58] For the impact of the Haitian revolution on the United States, as well as American representations of the republic see Matthew Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia

circulated the francophone world since the late eighteenth century, it was not until the 1850s that the Anglophone press of New Orleans began to take interest.

The *Daily Picayune*, a Crescent City newspaper established by the northern migrant, George Kendall, planted Vodou in the minds of many Anglo-Americans.[59] The *Picayune* first mentioned Vodou in 1851 when it reported on "eleven free negro women" arrested the previous evening for engaging "in the rights of the 'Voudou.'" In this four-sentence notice could be discerned the twinned impulses behind the *Picayune's* interest in Vodou: cultural condescension and voyeurism. "Some of the women were dressed and some were not," the paper noted, "but they were all going through their foolish and mumbling ceremonies on the floor."[60] The *Picayune's* representations of Vodou worked insistently to Other the Crescent City's French-speaking Creole population, whose fluid ethnic mix and Catholic religion clashed with the racial ideology of the *Picayune's* white, largely Protestant readership across Louisiana and Texas. As such, representations of

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Press, 2010); Alfred Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Ironically, as Kate Ramsey has argued, the Haitian government's attempt to repress Vodou practices during the 1860s (thus demonstrating the republic's civilized status) introduced many white, western commentators to Vodou, playing into the hands of white supremacists. Kate Ramsey, "Legislating 'Civilization' in Postrevolutionary Haiti,' in Goldschmidt, *Race, Nation, and Religion*, 231-258.

[59] See Fayette Copeland, *Kendall of the Picayune* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943).

[60] "The Voudous Again," *Daily Picayune*, 25 July 1851, 2.

Vodou bulwarked efforts to Americanize the city and "corral" New Orleanians into binary racial categories, intensifying during the 1850s.[61]

The overlap between Catholicism and Vodou meant that the anti-Catholic tropes arrayed against "Romanism" could easily encompass "Voudou." A swing at black Vodou practitioners might double as a jab at all Catholic Creoles. In both sets of discourse, religious leaders were positioned as loci of a dangerous authority existing outside of the secular state. Moreover, as Michelle Gordon has argued, in the case of Vodou, discourse on female religious leaders – the "dusky sisterhood" – allowed white male writers to express fears of female, as well as black agency. [62] More immediately, Vodou helped to sell newspapers during a period of increased competition from rivals like the *Daily Crescent* (founded, significantly, in 1851). Warning that a "description of the orgies would never do to put in respectable print," New Orleans journalists spent the next twenty years doing just that.[63] Thus, Vodou was commodified as an ersatz pornography

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[61] Angel Adams Parham, "Caribbean and Creole in New Orleans," in *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean*, eds. Martin Munro and Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2012), 60. For more on Americanization see Virginia Domínguez, *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[62] "The Voudou Vessels," *Daily Picayune*, 1 Aug. 1863, 2. See Michelle Gordon, "'Midnight Scenes and Orgies': Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy," *American Quarterly*, 64, 4 (Dec. 2012), 772.

[63] *Daily Picayune*, 12 July 1859, quoted in Carolyn Morrow Long, "Marie Laveau: A Nineteenth-Century Voudou Priestess," *Louisiana History*, 46, 3 (Summer 2005), 281.

allowing middle-class Protestants to indulge forbidden sexual impulses under the guise of disapproval.[64] As Jenny Franchot has noted in her work on anti-Catholicism, such discourse saw white Protestants "practicing the very vices they ascribed to their enemy."[65] With their allusions to *Macbeth*, murder, and interracial mixing, newspaper depictions of Vodou worship titillated as much as they horrified.[66]

Because discourse on Vodou pointed in directions other than white supremacy, it spread beyond the conservative press, with Republican newspapers like the short-lived *Era* recognizing its commercial potential. In the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation, however, depictions of Vodou increased in frequency and were aligned more explicitly with racial domination. Having taken loyalty oaths, the region's planters remained legally entitled to their slaves, yet the wind blew insistently toward universal abolition. Seeking to bulwark slavery, conservatives turned to Vodou as illustration of racial inferiority. After Confederate defeat and emancipation, accounts of Vodou began to permeate the conservative southern press as whites rushed to restore racial hierarchy. Democrats sought to transfer the label of savagery from white to black southerners, inverting liberal arguments that black interests and national

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[64] See Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Cornel West, "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 17-33.

[65] Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 107.

[66] For a description of a Vodou ceremony including all of these elements, see *New Orleans Era*, 1 Aug. 1863.

progress were complementary. During Presidential Reconstruction, however, the Republican press continued to associate white rather than black southerners with savagery. To the *New York Times*, the "luminous example of Hayti" remained evidence of black potential, and "the horrors of Belle Isle and of Andersonville […] vastly more cruel and atrocious" than Haiti's "Vandome rites."[67]

As the reports of Vodou travelled up the Mississippi Valley, its common spelling shifted from "Voudou" to "Voodoo." In November 1866, Nashville's Democratic *Union and American* reported that the "most grotesque and absurd religious superstitions" were "much more general among the negro population of the South, than was generally known." Compiling articles published in New Orleans over the previous three years, the *Union and American* explained that one "of the forms of this heathenism is denominated *Voodoo*, by the negroes." This clarification reflected the embryonic nature of "voodoo" as a discursive formation, as did the tatterdemalion orthography of the word itself.[68] Figuring "voodoo" as evidence of racial regression, the newspaper explained that black southerners, freed by emancipation "from the check which was once held over them," had "unlimited control over their baser passions, and now and then it bursts out," proving "that the worship of their barbaric fathers still runs in the blood of the Americanized negro." Ominously, alongside the usual references to

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[67] "Education in Hayti," *New York Times,* 11 Feb. 1866, 4.

[68] See Alasdair Pettinger, "From Vaudoux to Voodoo," *Modern Language Studies*, 40, 4 (Oct. 2004), 415-425.

nudity and the Scottish play, the *Union and American* added a new element: "human sacrifices."[69]

Such accounts remained inflected with voyeuristic envy, performing, like minstrelsy, a "derisive celebration" of black culture.[70] Many middle-class readers may have desired liberation from external controls over their own "baser passions." However, as Franchot has argued, "imitative desire" and "extreme prejudice" were not antithetical.[71] As an ideological congerie, "voodoo" became popular largely because it promised to undermine black citizenship. On the southern border of Ohio, a region notorious for its virulent racism, Cincinatti's *Enquirer* seized upon this promise. The *Enquirer's* racial philosophy was straightforward: "Slavery is dead, the nigger is not, there is the misfortune."[72] Only five days after it first appeared, the *Enquirer* reprinted the *Union and American's* article on "voodoo."[73] A few weeks later, the *Enquirer* published a "true account" of the murder of a white man by black thieves. "Who is responsible for Such Murders?" the headline asked, before answering: "Voodoo, Nigger Freedom and their Jacobin Advisers."[74] The article itself made no mention of

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[69] "African Superstitions in America," *Nashville Union and American*, 16 Nov. 1866, 1. *Union and American*'s account was modeled upon an article in the *Daily Picayune*, 1 May 1864, 1.

[70] Eric Lott, "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Anne Marie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 18.

[71] Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, xxii.

[72] *Cleveland Leader* 22 May 1865, quoted in Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 223.

[73] *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 21 Nov. 1866, 1.

[74] *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 30 Nov. 1866, 1.

"voodoo," but its inclusion in the header alongside references to emancipation and Radical Reconstruction spoke volumes.

As black southerners made political gains, "voodoo" featured with increasing frequency in the Democratic national press, becoming a catchall category for any variety of African-American magic. As the *Baton Rouge Advocate* conjectured in 1867, "a grand order seems to have been issued from the great Fetish of the Voodoos" because there was "no end to the 'conjuring' going on."[75] However, because "voodoo" had yet to attain the prominence it would later enjoy, northern journalists could not assume that their readers were familiar with "voodoo." Accordingly, in 1867, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* twice published the same one-sentence notice: "Negro conjuring doctors are called 'voodoo' doctors in Mississippi."[76] Although conservative Congressmen invoked the "ignorance and superstition" of black southerners as evidence of "feeble understanding" (and despite the fact that discussion of Haitian savagery had become a "worn commonplace"), they did not mention "voodoo" (unlike Democratic Congressmen in the 1890s who seemed incapable of mentioning Haiti without doing so).[77]

"Voodoo" was also absent from the raft of white-supremacist tracts which appeared in the immediate wake of the war.[78] This was partly a consequence of

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[75] Quoted in "African Superstition," *Detroit Free Press*, 9 July 1867, 3.

[76] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 December 1867, 1. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30 December 1867, 10.

[77] *Congressional Globe*, 40 Cong., 2 sess., May 28, 1868, 2632. *Congressional Globe*, 39 Cong., 1 sess., Jan. 26, 1866, 448. Edward Pollard, *The Lost Cause Regained* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 170.

[78] John Van Evrie came close to a discussion of "voodoo." Like Fitzhugh, Van Evrie drew upon Gustave D' Alaux's *Solouque*. Van Evrie framed the coronation of Solouque, "a serpent worshipper

white supremacists' short-lived abnegation of paternalism and tilt toward a scientific racism less dependent upon discussions of culture. In the deeply religious antebellum South, scientific racism was widely shunned. However, with natural history's vast extension of time furnishing centamillenia for the hierarchical stratification of humanity, postbellum white supremacists were able to reconcile Christian monogenesis with biological difference.[79] Toward the end of the 1860s, however, discussion of black superstition moved to the center of racial debate. Chastened by the failure of the Democrats' overtly racist 1868 campaign, conservatives changed tack, accepting black suffrage as a *fait accompli* and remolding antebellum paternalism to fit this new dispensation. Black culture became the primary evidence of political incapacity

During Grant's first term, Democratic newspapers fixated upon "voodoo," ridiculing black legislators as "voodoo oracles." The *Daily Milwaukee News*, (descanting on the "curiosity and horrors of the African superstition voodooism") reported that civil courts frequently faced cases of "witchcraft or supposed injury to person or property by spells and incantation, the negroes bringing their newly acquired privilege to shield them from their barbarism."[80] Here, the logic was circular: in using their new civil rights to defend themselves against "barbarism," black southerners disqualified themselves from such rights. Meanwhile, New

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and *Obi-man*, as chief or emperor" as the inevitable result of Haitian independence. John H. Van Evrie, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton, 1868), 330.

[79] Faust, "The Proslavery Argument," 15. See George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 184. To Edward Pollard, the "political question of the negro," was now "simply and purely a question of natural history." Pollard, *Lost Cause Regained*, 112, 142.

[80] *Louisville Daily Courier*, 13 March 1868, 1. "Voodooism," *Daily Milwaukee News*, 18 July 1869, 6.

Orleans journalists gleefully depicted the annual African-American festival of St John's Eve as a debauched voodoo bacchanal, framing it with varying degrees of subtlety as evidence that blacks were unfit for citizenship.[81] Unsurprisingly, the *Enquirer* amplified the political implications of these reports: "In spite of the influences of freedom and the ballot, which were announced to work such wonders in elevating the negroes, this degraded superstition holds full sway over the clouded minds of the new citizens of the South, showing itself once a year in these orgies."[82]

Conservatives deliberately confused the proliferation of white ideas with the spread of black practices. As Galveston's *Daily News* complained, the "negro is perhaps the most superstitious of all races of men, and so many carpet-bag negroes have come among us since the war, we are not surprised that "Voodoorism" has found its way to Texas."[83] This charge encompassed an objection to newfound black mobility (a very real impediment to labor control) and an effort to universalize superstition. Such reports were quick to emphasize any connection between superstition and crime, whilst eliding all magical practices with "voodoo." "VOUDOUISM is increasing about Memphis," blared the *Enquirer* in December, 1869; "nearly every negro scamp that is arrested," it

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[81] By 1871, the New Orleans *Picayune* could reflect that these festivities had "been too frequently described to need repetition." "Voudou Superstition," *Daily Picayune*, 25 June 1871, 5.

[82] Attending this "Voudoo Festival" were the "colored citizens who regulate the affairs of Louisiana, and send men to Congress to legislate for the nation." "A Voudoo Camp Meeting," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 28 July 1870, 4.

[83] "Congo Court Gossip," *Charleston Daily News*, 17 June 1869, 1; "Voodooism," *Galveston Daily News*, 15 October 1868, 2.

claimed, was found to have "a 'Voodoo' charm on his person."[84] Reports of the relationship between "voodoo" and African-American crime became increasingly sinister, anticipating turn-of-the-century discourse in their fixation with murder and racial contamination, whilst betraying anxieties about white civilization with complaints that "many whites" were involved in such "idolatries."[85]

Such white-supremacist denigration of black culture remained contested; in 1870, for instance, the *Texas Ledger* complained that liberals still regarded the "Voodoo rites and ceremonies that are now being practiced to a greater or less extent all over negro-dom […] as mere fictions – the result of a settled prejudice against the negro race, or a greatly diseased imagination."[86] Nevertheless, by 1873, discussion of "voodoo" was a staple of the Democratic press and, as the Edgefield *Advertiser* put it, the "devil's work" of Reconstruction was "almost done." Yet pockets of black power remained scattered across the Deep South. As the *Advertiser* complained, "Voodoo savages" had "been thrust into all their highest stations – as Legislators, Governors, United States Senators, and Supreme Judges."[87] In this respect, Vodou's link to Louisiana, a locus of black political power, made "voodoo" an especially useful trope. As the *Louisiana Democrat* insisted, the Republican nominating convention of 1873 was nothing more than "The Convention of the *Voodoos*."[88]

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[84] *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 15 Dec. 1869, 4.

[85] *Galveston Daily News*, 21 Oct. 1870, 3.

[86] *Texas Ledger,* 28 May 1870, quoted in "Voudooism in Texas," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 July 1870, 1.

[87] *Edgefield Advertiser*, 15 May 1873, 1.

[88] *Louisiana Democrat*, 19 Nov. 1873, 2.

3. Convergence

As conservative discourse on voodoo proliferated, liberal estimations of black culture declined. Progressively, black Christianity was stripped of its dignity and recast as superstition. Although not initially instrumental to this declension, discourse on "voodoo" greased the wheels of liberal obloquy. At Reconstruction's outset, however, with Republicans confident that the freedpeople were ideal free laborers, predictions that African Americans would make their "own peculiar contribution to the final completeness of civilization" remained unexceptional.[89] With an election looming, Republicans sought to rationalize rather than repudiate black suffrage, ensuring that representations of black religion remained positive. In 1867, whilst insisting that the freedpeople were "industrious and hard-working" and would "not misuse the right" to vote, the *New York Times* declared that the "religious nature" of black southerners was a "wonderful phenomenon"; "by no means a mere superstition," it was the conduit through which African Americans might be "most effectively reached and elevated."[90] By 1870, however, such expressions were less frequent. All but a small coterie of Radicals saw the

[89] *Congressional Globe*, 40 Cong., 2 sess., Jan. 11, 1868, 458. See Cox Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, 28.

[90] "Affairs in New Orleans," *New York Times*, 5 May 1867, 1. See also "Emotional Religion," *American Missionary*, March 1870, 59.

Fifteenth Amendment as the conclusion of government responsibility for freedmen. They could "Root, hog, or die!"[91]

As early as 1869, *American Missionary* correspondents began to complain that the official organ of the American Missionary Association failed to "exhibit sufficiently the *dark side* of the negro character."[92] Whilst missionaries might still belittle the idea of racial inferiority as "all stuff," their sense of cultural superiority sharpened.[93] In part, the denigration of black culture arose from an increasingly urgent sense that northern enthusiasm for the education of black southerners was beginning to flag. Organizations like the AMA sought to give urgency to their calls for racial elevation by emphasizing African-American "ignorance and degradation."[94] Whilst enfranchised freedmen were "kept in ignorance," the AMA warned, they were a threat both to themselves and the republic. To liberals, without "education and religious culture," liberty became license.[95]

As public support for racial elevation ebbed, missionaries were increasingly estranged from black religion. The tropes of emotionalism, atavism,

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[91] Albion Tourgée, *A Fool's Errand by One of the Fools* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1880), 120.

[92] "Our Southern Work – Its Lights and Shades," *American Missionary*, June 1869, 135.

[93] *American Missionary*, Jan. 1870, 7. See James McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 201.

[94] "The American Problem," *American Missionary*, Nov. 1873, 253. For declining northern enthusiasm for Reconstruction see "Northern Responsibility," *American Missionary* Volume, July 1872, 159.

[95] "Negro Voters," *American Missionary*, Oct. 1872, 230. See also *Congressional Globe*, 41 Cong., 2 sess., April 26, 1870, 2979.

and eroticism coursing through missionary descriptions of the Shout and conservative representations of "voodoo" were extended to black Christianity as a whole. Hostile to black autonomy, and faced by the postbellum exodus of freedpeople to black churches, increasing numbers of reformers came to believe that black Christianity might only be reformed once missionaries had "gotten congregations away from under the influence of their leaders, and organized a Church that can be controlled."[96] The "religious worship of the Freedmen" was, according to one *Missionary* correspondent, "a great hindrance to their elevation." "They pray, they sing, they leap, they shout," continued the letter-writer, describing a black prayer meeting, "they dance with joined hands, they go into contortions, they scream and wail and become insensible." Far from a welcome complement to Anglo-American culture, black religion became "heathenish degradation," an atavistic form of worship going "back for its source to Ethiopia not to Bethlehem."[97]

Of course, benefiting from the influx into their churches, African-American ministers saw things differently. The AME Church enjoyed particular good fortune, seeing its membership grow exponentially after a wave of revivals in 1866. As Jay Riley Case has argued, the success of the AME Church was due

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[96] "An All Night Contest with Superstition," *American Missionary*, June 1872, 121, 122.

[97] "Obstacles: From a Missionary in the South," *American Missionary*, Sept. 1870, 209-210. The convergence of liberal and conservative discourse was further illustrated by the *Missionary's* decision to republish an essay by the proslavery author and architect of Lost Cause mythology, Edward Pollard. See Edward Pollard, "The Romance of the Negro," *American Missionary*, Nov. 1871, 241-247.

largely to its acceptance of and adaptation to black southern Christianity.[98] In 1867's *Apology for African Methodism*, AME minister and educator Benjamin Tanner rebutted accusations that black southerners were an "uncultivated, mean, superstitious people." Tanner eschewed the dichotomous approach to racial faculties evident in much liberal discourse, portraying black Methodism as the ideal synthesis of "heart" and "head."[99] As Blum has argued, on the ground, some white missionaries, including Laura Towne, also dissented from an increasingly dim consensus on black religion.[100] These individuals, however, remained voices in the wilderness.

By 1871, then, the stage was set for a new, consensual view of black culture as superstition that facilitated sectional reconciliation. Support for this consensus came from an unlikely source: the Congressional committee established in 1871 to investigate the Ku Klux Klan. On the one hand, the public hearings of the committee, and the consequent Congressional report, widely reported in the press, fanned the embers of sectional resentment. Once again, white not black southerners were accused of the "barbarities of savages." For African Americans, however, criticism of the Klan was double-edged. If the investigation revivified the notion of southern savagery, it also located much of the Klan's power in an appeal to black superstition. Attempting to explain the "horrid disguises" of the Klan, Daniel Pratt of Indiana concluded that they gave Klansmen a "supernatural" appearance, disarming "the superstitious negro of all

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[98] See Jay Riley Case, *An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[99] Benjamin Tucker Tanner, *An Apology for African Methodism* (Baltimore, 1867), vii, 66, 67.

[100] Blum, *White Republic*, 67.

hope of defense."[101] Although black southerners quite clearly feared bands of armed whites not ghosts, this interpretation of the Klan's potency allowed conservatives to present northerners with images of Klansmen as harmless mischief-makers and black southerners as credulous stooges.[102]

Ironically, then, the Klan investigation helped conservatives transfer the label of savagery to African Americans. Of course, black writers challenged this interpretation of the Klan. In an 1871 letter to Boston's *Advertiser*, picked up by the black press, William Wells Brown recounted a narrow escape from a band of Klansmen intent on his murder. Brown claimed that when one of his captors fell victim to delirium tremens, he saved him with a hidden hypodermic, determining "from the first" to conceal his medical knowledge and impress upon the Klansmen the "idea that I derived my power from some supernatural source." Thus distracted, the Klansmen let him escape. Here, Brown inverted popular accounts of Klan activity, charging Klansmen, not their victims, with credulity. "Nothing so charms an ignorant people," Brown declared, "as something that has about it the appearance of superstition."[103]

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[101] *Congressional Globe*, 42 Cong., 2 sess., May 17, 1872, 3587. See also, Ibid., 41 Cong., 3 sess., Feb. 14, 1871, 1221.

[102] H. Grady McWhiney and Francis Simkins, "The Ghostly Legend of the Ku-Klan," *Negro History Bulletin*, 14, 5 (Feb. 1951), 109-112. For the possibility that Klan members were attempting to appropriate and exploit the spiritual beliefs of the freedpeople see Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 76; Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 62; Andrew Silver, *Minstrelsy and Murder: The Crisis of Southern Humor, 1835-1925* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 70-71.

[103] William Wells Brown, "A Night with the Ku-Klux," *New National Era*, 12 Oct. 1871, 1.

For those whites anxious that superstition was not confined to African Americans, Brown's account may have made uncomfortable reading. However, during the 1870s, the racialization of superstition found intellectual legitimacy in the work of cultural evolutionists. Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* was published in 1871, a year later than John Lubbock's *Origin of Civilization* and the same year as the congressional Klan report. Setting the parameters for the nascent discipline of anthropology, Tylor and Lubbock rejected eighteenth-century notions of cultural diffusion, arguing that all societies trod the same path from savagery to civilization. Moreover, because societies supposedly evolved at different speeds, the prehistory of civilized nations might still be discerned in the lives of contemporary savages. According to Tylor, religion evolved in the same fashion, from savage magic to civilized Protestantism. Although perturbed by the "revival" of spiritualism amongst apparently civilized westerners, the anthropologist thus added weight to the racialization of magic that attended nineteenth-century European imperialism.[104] Made over four decades earlier, Hegel's association between magic and "the ethnic religions generally" was now commonplace.[105] Black superstition became evidence of evolutionary torpor.

These tenets met slight resistance from assimilationist black writers.[106] As Jeremiah Moses put it, to many middle-class African Americans, racial progress

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[104] Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871), 15.

[105] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press), 101, quoted in Styers, *Making Magic*, 64.

[106] William Toll, *The Resurgence of Race: Black Social Theory from Reconstruction to the Pan-African Conferences* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 13. As Stephen Prince has argued, in

hinged upon "making blacks more like whites."[107] Acquiescing to evolutionist notions of the Dark Continent, many black writers sought to parade their civilized status by emphasizing their distance from African culture. As Brown's history of the African diaspora, *The Rising Son*, demonstrated, when it came to Africa, most black intellectuals were unable to remove the "conceptual blinders" of western culture.[108] As the *New Era* declared in 1870, African religion was little more than "fetichism, reveling in devil worship."[109]

Dim views of contemporary Africa found their corollary in negative representations of African-American folk culture. "Humbuggery, superstition and tomfoolery captivates most of the race," complained one *New National Era* correspondent in 1874.[110] Others decried the "incessant bellowings" of black ministers and the immorality of their congregants.[111] Even black nationalists like

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the national construction of southern identity, there were no "neat and tidy" counter narratives. K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). 4. See also, Patrick Rael, "The New Black Intellectual History," *Reviews in American History*, 29, 3 (Sept. 2001), 357-367.

[107] Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Hamden: Archon, 1978), 23. See also Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 175.

[108] Anthony Appiah, "Alexander Crummell and the Invention of Africa," *The Massachusetts Review*, 31, 3 (Autumn 1990), 388. See William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son, or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (Boston: A. G. Brown, 1882). See also Dickson Bruce, "Ancient Africa and the Early Black American Historians, 1883-1915," *American Quarterly*, 36, 4 (Winter 1984), 692.

[109] George Vashton, "Africa as a Field for Missions," *New Era*, 21 April 1870, 1.

[110] "From Ohio," *New National Era*, 4 June 1874, 1.

[111] E. K. D., "From Texas," *New National Era*, 9 July 1874, 1.

Alexander Crummell embraced the evolutionary axis, lambasting "ignorant" and "half-heathen" black southerners.[112] Such complaints not only echoed the rhetoric of the AMA but also followed the same logic of missionary appeal, emphasizing black degradation in order to promote an educated ministry. As Patrick Rael notes, African-American intellectuals met "unavoidable" accusations of ignorance and superstition among black southerners head-on, recasting them as evidence of racial oppression.[113] In 1874, another *Era* correspondent echoed Garrison, excoriating slavery as the "monster evil that has deformed their minds."[114] However, environmentalism failed to brace support for Reconstruction. To conservatives, what mattered was the supposed fact of black inferiority, not its causes.

By the time of Grant's re-election, the writing was on the wall for Reconstruction. Amongst liberals, the idea took root that special interests had corrupted politics. To their minds, the republican harmony of interests was threatened by politicians pandering to the poor, whether Irish-American northerners or African-American southerners. This hostility intensified as black politicians, dissatisfied with Reconstruction's essential conservatism, became increasingly assertive during the 1870s.[115] Hostility toward African Americans may have been fuelled by political economy but when it came to black southerners, white northerners could not parse class and race. As black

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[112] Quoted in Wilson Moses, "Dark Forests and Barbarian Vigor: Paradox, Conflict, and Africanicity in Black Writing before 1914," *American Literary History*, 1, 3 (Fall 1989), 647.

[113] Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 175.

[114] A. C. Bartlett, "From Mississippi," *New National Era*, 1 October 1873, 1.

[115] See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 470, 352.

government in the South was refigured as an unholy mixture of Haiti and the Paris Commune, references to the savagery of white southerners began to dissipate. By 1872, when newspapers talked about "ignorant, superstitious, semi-barbarians" in the South, they meant the freedpeople.[116] With Reconstruction on its back, articles on African-American superstition appeared with increasing frequency in northern newspapers. As the notion of lazy, "offensive" blacks replaced the idea of African Americans as ideal free laborers, black Christianity was robbed of its dignity.[117]

At the close of a year spent denouncing Charles Sumner's Civil Rights bill, the *Chicago Tribune* betrayed its hardening racial attitudes by swiftly reprinting a meditation on black credulity from *Appleton's Journal*, a mouthpiece for conservative southerners. The author of the piece declared: "wherever the African has been settled, he has carried with him the belief in and the practice of the necromancy known in Africa as *obi*, and throughout the Southern states as voodooism, or 'tricking.'" Although both "religion and the white man" had battled this "relic of barbarism," the "terrible scourge of voodooism" continued to thrive, "hydra-headed, and ever and anon the newspapers raise an outcry as some fresh instance of its power and diabolic results is brought to light." [118] Here was an unintentional description of the process by which black religion was anathematized. Constant discussion of black superstition, employing potent labels like "voodoo," worked insistently to freeze and distort an evolving

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[116] *New York Daily Tribune*, 1 May 1871, 1, quoted in Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox*, 103.

[117] "Social Rights of the Negro," *Chicago Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1872, 4.

[118] "Obi: Witchcraft Among the Blacks," *Chicago Tribune*, *26* Dec. 1872, 6. See M. P. Handy, "Witchcraft among the Negroes," *Appleton's Journal* Volume 8 (14 Dec. 1872), 666-667.

constellation of African-American beliefs. The intended message was clear: amongst black southerners, superstition was ubiquitous, ineradicable, sinister.

Despite widespread acceptance of cultural evolutionism, black writers were all too aware of the baleful effect on public opinion of this journalistic "outcry." As the New Orleans *Republican* explained in 1873, northern complaints about immorality in the Crescent City were unfounded. Reported "voodoo" festivals on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain were, in fact, "harmless fourth of July picnics." Northern journalists had confused signifier for signified, becoming "bamboozled" by "an account of something that never occurred as reported."[119] Yet despite such complaints, liberals continued to paint black culture in darkening hues. In the same year, a letter published in *American Missionary* gave ominous indication of the dawning white consensus. Written by a teacher at an AMA school in Georgia, the missive began by praising the moral and religious progress of the school's black students, before inveighing against the "mire of corruption and superstition in which must be laid the foundation of better things!" Admitting that, occasionally, the hearts of the teachers "quailed before the awful power of the old faiths," the writer insisted that every southern plantation was "a stronghold of belief in the fetish" (the "same forms" that might be "found in Africa"). Such was the pessimistic tone of the letter than the editors of the *Missionary* saw fit to insert the addendum: "This extract from the letter of a teacher at home breathes a little of homesickness."[120]

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[119] "The Northern Press on Voudooism in Louisiana," *New Orleans Republican*, 30 July 30 1873, 1.

[120] *American Missionary*, July 1873, 151.

4. Consensus

As the *Missionary* observed, by 1874, with Democrats in the congressional majority, even stalwart Republican publications like the *New York Times* were "outspoken" on the failure of black suffrage.[121] The enslaved had been "made free," declared the *Times*, but they did "not know how to use their freedom."[122] Urging continued education and evangelization, the *Missionary* concurred.[123] Representations of black Christianity echoed this political disenchantment. As the *Times* asserted, the "peculiar rites, ceremonies, 'shouts,' and observances" of black southerners may "have so often been described" that further comment was unnecessary, but "with all their show of religion they have no morals."[124]

At the AMA's 1875 anniversary celebrations, Bishop Michael Strieby regretted that the failure to establish comprehensive black education in the South had given rise to "idleness and intemperance," exploitation by demagogues, and a "relapse into a fetishism as licentious as it extravagant." Citing Jamaica and Haiti as "a startling lesson," Strieby's arguments drew from the same discursive well as conservative rhetoric, mirroring it in content if not intent.[125] By this point, as Joe Richardson has argued, such language was as much a genuine expression of soured racial attitudes as a fundraising tactic. Of course, the AME Church

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[121] The Freedman as Legislator," *American Missionary*, April 1874, 85.

[122] "South Carolina: The Social and Moral Condition of the Colored Population," *New York Times*, 4 July 1874, 5. See also "The Negro in the South," *New York Times*, 12 May 1874, 4.

[123] "Freedman as Legislator," 85.

[124] "South Carolina," 4.

[125] "The Nation Still in Danger," *American Missionary*, July 1875, 151.

retaliated, dismissing claims of black degeneration as an "outrageous lie."[126] However, although, in some quarters, assimilation was ceding to self-reliance, black intellectuals continued to emphasize cultural elevation. Frederick Douglass may have denigrated missionaries as a "swarm of white beggars," but he continued to identify "[i]gnorance, superstition and grovelling sensuality" (evident in the "animal heat and excitement" of black Christianity) as "natural outgrowths of slavery."[127]

With Reconstruction abandoned, southern conservatives were again free to shape northern racial attitudes. To many middle-class whites across the political spectrum, superstition had become a defining characteristic of black culture. Hand-in-glove with Redemption, the idea of black superstition was embedded in southern cultural politics. In 1866, the *Memphis Appeal* introduced its readers to the word "voodoo"; a decade later, it was able to use "voudoo people" as a synonym for "negro."[128] Moreover, by 1873, southern journalists began to borrow from their northern cousins. "Voodoo" was now a national rather than regional concern. Indelibly racist, the Democratic *New York World* soon began to lead the field in depictions of "voodoo" as a *World* account of the festival of St John's Eve circulated the southern press.[129]

In 1874, the *New York Times* joined the chorus of calumny, republishing a pair of southern items figuring "Negro Superstition" as a near-universal cultural

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[126] Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 252.

[127] *American Missionary*, Sept. 1875, 197; Frederick Douglass, "The Emancipated Man Wants Knowledge," *American Missionary*, Aug. 1875, 171.

[128] Quoted in the *Pulaski Citizen*, 26 Aug. 1875, 4.

[129] See Gordon, "Midnight Scenes," 776.

trait, both symptom and etiology of criminality and credulity. The *Times* also printed two articles from a correspondent in Mount Meigs, Alabama, who, clearly, sought to besmirch black suffrage with superstition.[130] The correspondent declared that he knew of "one old negro" who claimed "that a 'conjure doctor' had made a water snake enter his leg" because "he promised his old master that he would vote a Democratic ticket." "Would not this," the correspondent wondered rhetorically, "be a good field for missionaries?" Just as appeals for missionary labor reinforced conservative denunciations of black belief, so conservative proscriptions might masquerade as missionary appeal.[131]

Even during the death throes of Reconstruction, however, such discourse remained polysemous. The author of an early piece of local color, published in the *New York Times*, evinced admiration for the songs of New Orleans stevedores, describing them, in an inversion of the usual rhetoric, as "white men's music bewitched by some Voudou charm." Ultimately, however, "the weirdness and incompleteness" of this music "overbalanced the beauty."[132] In other quarters, countercurrents continued to flow. As Pittsburgh's *Commercial* observed, the "fact that the negroes of the South are superstitious, and that some of them still

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[130] "Negro Superstition," *New York Times*, 12 April 1874, 10; "Negro Superstition," *New York Times*, 1 March 1874, 5.

[131] "Alabama: Religion Among the Whites and Negroes," *New York Times*, 12 Dec. 1874, 1. A week after the *Times* published its latest Alabama epistle, it printed a letter from Tennessee portraying black Christianity as a fine crust overlaying superstitious depths. Tellingly, it is unclear whether the author was a missionary, denouncing degradation to drum up support, or a conservative, adopting a paternalist tone to demonstrate degradation. "Sorcery Among the Negroes," *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 1874, 6.

[132] "Leaves of Travel," *New York Times*, 12 Dec. 1874, 1.

practice Voodooism, which their forefathers brought from heathen Africa with them," had been "cited as evidence that they are still barbarians, and therefore unfit for civil rights." The popularity of mediums, however, demonstrated that superstition was "as rife among the whites in Philadelphia as among the negroes in the South."[133] Indeed, even the *American Missionary* continued to warn against "hasty generalizations" about black religion.[134]

Edward King's *The Great South* epitomized the ambivalent impulses of much liberal discourse. King intended the work as an epitaph for the Port Royal Experiment, supposedly sunk by the redistributive policies of "Swart Demos in his legislative chair." A liberal reformer, King praised the mission of the AMA and denied "special race limitations." Moreover, whilst recoiling from the autonomous authority of black southern preachers, he recognized "a certain rude force" in their "wild word-pictures." Nevertheless, King was convinced that the chief obstacle to racial progress was not racial oppression, but black religion, little more than "Fetichism with a Christian cloak on." Perhaps to suggest a correspondence between the two, King buttressed his critique of black Christianity with an anecdote about African-American magic. In Philadelphia, he claimed, one charlatan, seeking to profit from "a revival of the barbaric superstitions still prevalent among certain classes of negroes," had "revived many of the features of Voudouism, and was rapidly fleecing his victims when a pitying white man interposed and tried to expose the swindler." Just as benevolent whites rescuing blacks from their own credulity were a common feature in tales

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[133] *Pittsburgh Commercial*, 31 Dec. 1874, 2.

[134] "Negro Piety – Hasty Generalization," *American Missionary*, Oct. 1875, 218. See also "Communication: Why Is It?" *American Missionary*, Nov. 1875, 253-255.

of "voodoo," so, too, was the prurient eroticism of King's writing (prayer meetings were apt at any moment to "descend to orgies"). Yet King continued to pay lip-service to the possibility of racial elevation from "practices resembling barbarism to sincere Christian worship."[135]

Despite such environmentalist expressions, racial thought continued to harden, with increasing numbers of white writers shifting their attention from culture to nature. James Pike's *The Prostrate State* epitomized this turn. An erstwhile Radical, Pike discarded environmentalist explanations of "ignorance and superstition," embracing instead the language "of race and of blood." In the 1860s, the freedpeople of the Sea Islands were the object of abolitionist encomia, now they were "just as slightly removed from animal creation as it is conceivable for a man to be."[136] During the election year of 1876, with the South caught in a maelstrom of violence, some representations of black culture began to prefigure the racial radicalism of the 1890s. Black practitioners of magic, whether referred to as "voodoo doctors" or "Conjurers" (these were labels often used interchangeably), had come to symbolize dangerous black authority.[137]

Appearing that year, Mary Bryan's short story, "Kountz the Conjurer," was riddled with naturalizing images of black bestiality. An embodiment of African-American predation, bent upon the cannibalization of Rosie, a white girl, the eponymous villain appeared simultaneously reptilian and simian. His head, Bryan

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[135] Edward King, *The Great South* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1875), 432, 607, 585, 586, 781, 586, 781, 608.

[136] James S. Pike, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina Under Negro Government* (New York: D. Appleton, 1874), 67, 60, 263.

[137] See *Atchinson Daily Champion*, 2 Sept. 1877, 4.

wrote, "was of the ape type," with "a double row of yellow, animal-looking teeth" (a binate dentition complemented by a necklace of "snake-bones and alligator teeth"). In one passage, Kountz enraptures his victim by striking "up a chant and a shuffling step, with which he moved in a circle before the child." Whether Bryan was alluding to a "voodoo" dance or a Shout was moot: the two had been thoroughly fused in the minds of white readers. At the tale's denouement (after the requisite rescue of Rosie by a white man), a lynch mob arrives at Kountz's house to find him dead, incinerated by a house fire. Amongst the charred wreckage are found the remains of missing children, eaten, according to local folklore, by a "Black Devil."[138] The point was obvious: they had been. Such gothic discourse blurred the boundary between literal and figurative demonization of African Americans, using imagined black savagery to legitimize real white violence.[139]

Having redeemed the South in 1877, Democrats continued to employ superstition to ridicule their opponents. "Columbus, Ohio, enshrines the living prophet," crowed *The Tennessean* on the day of Rutherford Hayes's inauguration: "Thither are turned the eyes of pious Sambos as toward the Shrine of Obi, or the temple of Voodoo."[140] As the author of an 1878 *American Missionary* article

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[138] Mary Bryan, "Lost Rosie; or, Kountz the Conjurer," *The Intelligencier*, 7 Dec. 1876, 2.

[139] As a Mississippi newspaper speculated after Charles Caldwell, an African-American senator, was shot in the back of the head without warning: "This Voodoo worshiper (we assume this must be his religious status) was said to be drunk. Senator CALDWELL was instantly pursued by some chivalrous sons of the Sunny Land, and a lively passage with firearms ensued." *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 1 Jan. 1876, 2.

[140] *The Tennessean*, 3 March 1877, 2.

entitled "Negrology" complained, with their political ascendancy secure, southern Democrats dominated discussions of race. Austa French's ambition to wrest control of racial representation from white southerners withered on the vine. The *Missionary* writer expressed disappointment that southern writing expressed the persistent racial conservatism of the region's elite.[141] Yet liberal reformers were complicit in conservatism's discursive monopoly, having spent the best part of a decade calumnizing black culture.

During Reconstruction, discourse on black superstition played an important part in the twinned projects of white supremacy and national reunification. With race and religion intertwined, declining estimations of black Christianity accompanied rising skepticism about African-American citizenship. As criticism of superstitious excess overshadowed praise for natural religion, white, northern liberals became increasingly receptive to conservative portrayals of black superstition. These portraits tended to present belief in magic as evidence of innate credulity rather than "cultural weakness."[142] Not only did this discourse complement the liberal critique of black religion, it also began to shape it. As liberal writers turned their attention toward magic, they both registered and reinforced the defamation of black faith. Even so, were it not for the emergence of "voodoo" as a signal imaginary encapsulating the tenets of white supremacy, the magical traditions of the freedpeople may have held less fascination. "Voodoo" may not have resonated as powerfully with white readers had it not sustained other needs (providing readers with a voyeuristic reprieve from middle-class morality, for instance), but its primary function was as an ideological tool of white

[141] "Negrology," *American Missionary*, March 1878, 67, 68.

[142] Beard, *K. K. K. Sketches*, 69.

supremacy. Just as discourse on black superstition was not monolithic, however, neither was it uncontested. Although hampered by their accession to western cultural norms, middle-class black writers sought to refute white perjury, defending the dignity of black religion and distancing themselves from accusations of credulity. Nevertheless, ideas of innate credulity continued to bulwark the conservative assault on African-American citizenship, facilitating the northern retreat from Reconstruction. Reinforcing race whilst discrediting black Christianity, "negro superstition" worked to exclude African Americans from a Protestant, white republic.[*]

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