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Jacob Deitz is a History major with an English minor from Elderwood, CA. After graduation in December 2015, Deitz plans to pursue a Master's degree in Business Administration. During his sophomore year, Deitz began his first research project with Dr. Steven Salm, Dr. Robin Runia, and Dr. Elizabeth Manley on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The following year, he began working with Dr. Gary Donaldson on the studies of post-war Vietnam, while also researching to demystify Marie Laveau and Voodooism.

The Queen of Voodoo: The Legend of Marie Laveau as a Case Study of United States' Attitudes toward Voodoo

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Abstract

Marie Laveau is one of the most controversial women in New Orleans history. Yet, despite her notoriety, very few know exactly who she was. This paper examines the growth of the myth of Marie Laveau and the larger impact that it had on not only New Orleans, but the United States as a whole. Through the use of primary documents, it is possible to piece together how her legend grew, originally through her obituary in New Orleans newspapers and the *New York Times*, then New Orleans tourism advertisements, followed by fiction writers, and ultimately revisionist historians. Due to her increased importance to popular culture over the past century and a half, she became a figurehead of sorts for Voodoo across the country. How she was portrayed followed suit with how Voodoo was portrayed in the national and local media. United States' attitudes on Voodoo changed radically over the past century. First, Voodoo was criminalized by the French, then the South used it as a scapegoat for unsolved crimes, and finally today it has become a tourist attraction in New Orleans, as the zombie aspect of Voodoo has been wholly embraced by American culture. Because nothing in culture happens in a vacuum, Marie Laveau's meteoric rise corresponded with the rise in national interest in Voodoo. Marie Laveau embodied Voodoo. Through cultural construction, Marie Laveau became Voodoo.

Key Terms:

- Americanization
- Exoticism
- Feminism
- Marie Laveau
- Voodoo

Dark, murky waters lap against the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. It is midnight, St. John's Eve—June 23rd in the 1870s. The fires burning to celebrate the event can be seen all along the shoreline—from Spanish Fort to West End, and beyond. The humid, warm night air teems with life. Curious visitors see dancing silhouettes, ominously contorting. The dances, feasts, and other tantalizing exploits bring together people of every caste and color in New Orleans. Two hundred years later, pink X's stand out on a dilapidated gravestone—here lies one of the most powerful women to ever live in New Orleans. If one is sincere in their wish, the Voodoo Queen will grant it. Marie Laveau (1801-1881), the “Voodoo Queen,” led a following of black and white, of rich and poor, and of social elites and cast-offs. She knew the awe and aura of authority that followed her when she walked down the street: “She come walkin’ into Congo Square wit’ her head up in the air like a queen. Her skirts swished when she walked and everybody step back to let her pass. All the people—white and colored—start saying that’s the most powerful woman there is. They say ‘There goes Marie Laveau!’”¹ Marie Laveau held the imagination of New Orleans and the nation captive. She rose from relative obscurity, born of a slave mother, “an old slave woman,” and a father of the “finest French blood in Louisiana.”² In the middle of the nineteenth century, Laveau gathered a devoted following unlike any other in Louisiana history—a multi-racial, cross-cultural, multi-class following that truly believed Laveau had significant power in Black Magic. After her death, wild rumors and speculation spread caused the national perception of Laveau's supposed powers into a national phenomenon.

¹ Hank Wesselman and Jull Kuykendall. *Spirit Medicine: Healing in the Sacred Realm*. (Carlsbad: Hay House Inc., xi. 2004.) Quoted in: Ina Johanna Fandrich. *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of* ²“Obituaries.” *New York Times*. June 26, 1881.

This paper examines the life of Marie Laveau as a case study for the national perception of Voodoo, especially to explore how people framed Voodoo after Laveau's death as a divisive racial issue to try to discredit the people of African descent living in the American South. Scholars and popular historians alike have addressed three central themes when studying Marie Laveau: women in New Orleans at the turn of the nineteenth century, Voodoo in American culture, and the progression of female myth-making. Scholars and historians have failed to synthesize these three notions, and scholarship has been incomplete as a result. They leave out the greater contextualization of who Laveau was, and what place she had in shaping New Orleans culture into what it is today. Her notoriety has been well researched, but what conclusions can be reached from the researcher on a national level? How did it impact the growth of Voodoo, not only as a religion but as a facet of popular culture? Her eventual status created a symbiotic relationship between her legend and the religious perception of Voodoo nationally.

Few women of African descent in Louisiana history have been as legendary as Marie Laveau. Born free in the French Quarter of New Orleans in June, 1801, Laveau rose to prominence through the mysterious religion of Voodoo. She eventually became the priestess for the enigmatic religion, and with that gained a great deal of respect and notoriety. She did not become well-known on a national level, however, until after her death. This was due, in large part, to more ardent scholarship of the Voodoo religion in New Orleans, the Works Progress Administration Scholarship Program, as well as a shifting relationship with the Caribbean islands. Another important facet of the new-found interest coincides with the United States Marine Corps protecting American interests in the Caribbean via a prolonged stay in Haiti. Her legacy shifted from that of a woman of color in

New Orleans who converted from Catholicism to Voodoo, to a woman of great supernatural powers and someone worthy of fear, given her increased prominence on a national level in the feminine power structure as a Voodoo priestess. New Orleans as the setting for her rise to power was absolutely crucial due to the city's racial diversity and influx of Caribbean islanders. She became much more than a local Voodoo priestess; she became the embodiment of Voodoo.

When Marie Laveau died, June 15, 1881, New Orleans was a turbulent metropolis at the turn of the 20th Century. Reconstruction had just been declared over with the Compromise of 1876. Union troops had begun to withdraw a few short years before Laveau's death in 1881. Due to New Orleans' diversity, Laveau had the opportunity to draw followers from many different ethnicities and socioeconomic groups. At a time of racial disharmony, she fostered a cult of followers from whites and blacks. This was truly an achievement few could claim, particularly a free-woman of color. Her individual impact on all levels of society, from political leaders to prisoners condemned to death, is to this day unparalleled in the American South.

Her notoriety is unprecedented, and few women in Louisiana history can claim as much name-recognition as she has. Scholars like Carolyn Morrow Long have researched Laveau, but few have focused on the development of her legend contemporaneously with the American perception of Voodoo.³ Often, she is lost in the mix of other notable legends of the American South, as an isolated topic. The overwhelmingly

³Carolyn Morrow Long. *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess* is Long's most extensive work regarding Marie Laveau, and covers her from birth to death, as well as a lengthy historiography and a summary of adaptations of Laveau in performance and writing.

negative depictions of Voodoo as a "brutish" and "animalistic" ritual performed by "the most ignorant" of Southern Negroes displays the United States' interest and assumptions regarding the topic.⁴ Laveau's myth grew after her death; it hardly existed during her life. When one looks at historical figures of religious significance, few women are found, particularly of African descent in the 1800s. There are a few more general outliers if one were to include all women, such as Mary, mother of Jesus, Mother Theresa, and Anne Boleyn, but the lack of female religious figures of any kind, let alone those of African American ancestry, is incredibly limited, until recently. Camilla Townsend's *Malintzin's Choices* offers readers a biography on a Native American woman who was critical in the Spanish conquest of the indigenous peoples of America.⁵ Nevertheless, Marie Laveau is unique in that she was not only a female religious leader, but she was a woman of color who was able to capture popular imagination and become a folkloric character.

Historiography of Marie Laveau

Scholars have done an abundant amount of research on Laveau as a centralized religious authority figure. Laveau was unquestionably a prominent figure in society. She broke the mold of relatively low standards set by the dominant society for a Creole woman born of a slave woman. She had more influence than white males had in New Orleans. Recently, the amount of scholarship on women and power in New Orleans at the turn of the nineteenth century has increased. Emily Clark addresses Marie Laveau

⁴For an example see: "Voodooism: A Remarkable Set of Ignorant and Superstitious Blacks near New Orleans," *Wisconsin Labor Advocate* (La Crosse), August 28, 1886, 1.

⁵Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. Albuquerque: (University of New Mexico Press, 2006.)

and women in New Orleans in both her works.⁶ Clark examines the development of the trope of multi-ethnic women in New Orleans and the associations regarding interracial sex. The social constructions that revolve around women of mixed-race made life much more complicated and difficult for them to advance. Clark argues that the media, writers, and playwrights disseminated a stereotypical quadroon archetype that allowed the social hierarchy of white males in places of dominance to continue. The trope was not accurate regarding multi-ethnic women in New Orleans; it painted a picture more animalistic than human. It served as a contrast to white womanhood and its related virtues. The work argues against the chauvinistic narrative being preserved by popular literary works. In contrast, *Masterless Mistresses* discusses the education and advancement of women in New Orleans in the earlier parts of the nineteenth century, which is when Marie Laveau would have been educated. It is unlikely this education had any effect, for she was illiterate and did not leave behind any records involving her childhood. However, in a more broad sense, *Masterless Mistresses* gives a clear picture of the cultural environment for women during Laveau's lifetime. The work offers a view on how the education of women was in opposition to the hierarchy in the New World. The Spanish, the slaves, and others in New Orleans met the quest for education with various levels of cultural resistance.

Ina Fandrich, in her work *Marie Laveau: Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, examines Laveau as a piece of a cultural resistance among free

women of color and African conjurers within the Catholic community.⁷ A vast amount of information regarding Laveau is in this work, in addition to many insights of the matriarchal society found in Africa, particularly the empowerment of women via Voodoo. Barbara Rosendale Duggan's essay "Marie Laveau: the Voodoo Queen Repossessed" is also a notable work in studying women in the nineteenth century.⁸ This work focuses on free women of color in particular and is invaluable in viewing Marie Laveau within the broader terms of a group marginalized by society, who although they were free, lacked true socio-political power, which makes Marie Laveau's prominence even more notable.

Scholars do not call Marie Laveau "Queen of the Voudous" [*sic*] for no reason—she was unparalleled in her leadership.⁹ The mystery enshrouding her religion as well as the fear of the unknown led to unprecedented amounts of power for Laveau to claim. There are many sources on Voodoo in American society and culture. One of the most renowned scholars in the field is Zora Neale Hurston.¹⁰ Her work, *Hoodoo in America* (1931), examines the role of Voodoo in American society, particularly in New Orleans. The new-found interest in the counter-cultural religion aided in increasing the importance of Hurston's work. It is seen as the foundational work regarding Voodoo, leading to increased scholarship and research on the topic. Seventy years later, one of these scholars was Carolyn Morrow Long, whose work is of the utmost importance. Her book, *A New Orleans*

⁶ For Emily Clark's works see: Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) and Emily Clark. *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.)

⁷ Ina Fandrich. *Marie Laveau: Mysterious Voodoo Queen*. (New York: Routledge, 2004.)

⁸ The essay is found in: Barbara Rosendale Duggan. "Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen Repossessed," In *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, edited by Sybil Kein, 157-178. (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2000.)

⁹ "Obituaries." *New York Times*. June 26, 1881.

¹⁰ Zora Neale Hurston. *Hoodoo in America*. (New York, NY: American Folk Lore Society, 1931.)

Voodoo Priestess: the Life and Reality of Marie Laveau is the most recent research on Laveau.¹¹ Whereas Hurston viewed Voodoo as an overarching theme of her work, Long focuses primarily on Laveau and her role in the mysticism enshrouding Voodoo. Long's focus on Laveau serves as an excellent source for scholars to view how the Laveau narrative shifted over time, from a simple Voodoo priestess to one who held unparalleled power in the city.

The New World attitudes toward not only Voodoo, but all pan-African religions, can be traced back to the French royal edict of 1685, the *Code Noir*.¹² The first part of the document focuses solely on maintaining Catholicism's stranglehold on Saint Domingue. The edict begins with a declaration of faith: "Our officers in our American islands, who have informed us that the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church there and to regulate the status and condition of the slaves in our said islands." It continues with the second article, explicitly forbidding any alternative religions: "All the slaves in our Islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion...[and] we forbid any public exercise of any religion other than the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman; we wish that the offenders be punished as rebels and disobedient to our orders." The punishment for any deviation would be strict, and often fatal for all slaves who practiced a "deviant" religion, and equally fatal for any of the slave owners who allowed them to practice their religion. Historically, religion is one of the most unifying factors in regards to a community. When Catholicism became the only state-mandated religion, it attempted to strip Africans in the New

World of any past ties to their cultural heritage; it also attempted to mold them into a more easily discouraged workforce to do menial field labor in the sugar cane fields. Due to the research provided by many different scholars, Laveau's importance comes into focus as a critical woman in New Orleans history.

The Counter-Cultural Religion

Several aspects of Voodoo ran counter to main-stream America at the turn of the twentieth century. The emphasized role of women in African society, particularly in the religious aspects of the culture, was in stark contrast to the male-dominated industrial society. Ina Fandrich offers an explanation in regards to the difference between the pan-African religious society and the North American religious culture: "[Voodoo] offered a model 'of' and 'for' female behavior that clearly contradicted the ideal of 'true womanhood' of the dominant groups in New Orleans, i.e. the white, Catholic, French-Spanish Creoles, and the white Protestant North Americans."¹³ Even the Igbo language, found to the West of where Dahomeyan Vodun originated, has a similar idea regarding gender equality. Since scholars view Voodoo as an African religion, or at the very least a direct derivative of Vodun, it was already shifted away from paternalism by the time that it reached the shores of the New World. It focused on women, and gave women an avenue to success and power. Scholar Ife Amadiume provides a literal example of the difference: "The Igbo language, in comparison with English for example, has not built up rigid associations between certain adjectives or attributes and gender subjects, nor certain objects and gender possessive pronouns. The genderless word *mmadu*, humankind,

¹¹ Carolyn Morrow Long. *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006.)

¹² The *Code Noir* can be found in several places, including Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*. 50-54. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006.)

¹³ Ina Johanna Fandrich. *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*. (New York: Routledge, 2004.)

applies to both sexes.”¹⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, women had not even been granted suffrage, so to say that there was a large conflict in the very nature of the cultures would be an understatement. Other scholars such as Newbell Niles Punkett have also taken note of the importance of women in Voodoo: “The two ministers of the serpent god—the king and queen, or master and mistress, or papa and mama—communicated the will of the sacred serpent [Li grand Zombi]...and, of the two, the queen was far more important.”¹⁵ Even the sensationalist fiction author, Robert Tallant, acknowledged the feminist slant in Voodoo: “The king was always a minor figure. Papa didn’t count, Mama was the entire show.”¹⁶ This was in stark contrast with the religions from the Old World, with the pastor and priest being universally male. As a woman, Marie Laveau embraced the avenue presented to her, and became the figurehead of Voodoo in the United States.

The Diffusion of the Legend of Marie Laveau

June 21, 1881, is one of the most important days in the national awareness of Marie Laveau’s legend and Voodoo as a whole, because the *New York Times*, one of the most popular newspapers in the United States, ran Marie Laveau’s obituary on that date. Other than the immediate recognition as “Queen of the Voodoos,” the writer offered several other flattering and non-flattering descriptions of Laveau.¹⁷ “To superstitious black Creoles, Marie appeared as a dealer in the black arts and a

person to be dreaded and feared.” This description that clearly displayed her power, as well as her moral darkness, was followed by “Marie had a large warm heart and tender nature, and she never refused a summons from the suffering, no matter how dangerous the disease. Wherever she went she labored faithfully and earned life-long friends.” She was also referred to as “one of the most wonderful women who ever lived.” The average United States citizen was unaware of Voodoo, particularly until the United States Marine occupation of Haiti from 1915 through 1934. This larger than life figure jumped off the obituary page, leading to a greater national awareness, and to a lesser extent fear. At any rate, the United States was now aware of Marie Laveau. Before the obituary ran in the *Times*, Laveau was hardly written about, and even then, it was in small, regional, New Orleans newspapers. The first mention of Laveau was in an 1850 *Picayune* article, “Curious Charge of Swindling,” in which she was referred to as the “head of Voodoo women.”¹⁸ She was not written about for nearly two decades, where she reappeared in a short *Commercial Bulletin* notice to record her retirement as a priestess.¹⁹ New Orleans newspapers published articles about Voodoo between 1869 and 1881, but often about other Voodoo figures, such as Mama Frazie, Mama Caroline, and Sanité Dédé, but rarely ever Marie Laveau. The one instance, important in its singularity, is where she is reported to have converted to Catholicism.²⁰ The continued presence of Marie Laveau in modern society, whereas Mama Frazie, Mama Caroline, and Sanité Dédé have died out, is further evidence of Marie Laveau’s importance as the embodiment of Voodoo.

¹⁴ Ife Amadiume. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society*, 89. (London: Zed Books, 89. 1987.)

¹⁵ Newbell Niles Punkett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 178-179. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926.)

¹⁶ Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 31. (New York: MacMillan, 1961.)

¹⁷ “Obituaries.” *New York Times*, June 21, 1881.

¹⁸ “Curious Charge of Swindling,” *Picayune* (New Orleans) July 3, 1850.

¹⁹ “Voodooism,” *Commercial Bulletin* (New Orleans) July 5, 1869.

²⁰ “Fetish—Its Worship and Worshippers,” *Picayune* (New Orleans) June 24, 1875.

However, scholars, journalists, and fiction writers alike oft wrote about Laveau after her death. Due to the many references to her as the “head of the Voodoo women” and “queen of the Voodoos,” it is appropriate to look at her through the lens of changing American attitudes towards Voodoo. The descriptions and associations with Voodoo-ism certainly followed Marie Laveau in posthumous writings about her. George Washington Cable described her in his visit to her cabin near Congo Square in 1881, and he wrote in 1886, a reflection on his visit shortly before Laveau’s death: “In the center of the small room...sat, quaking with feebleness in an ill-looking old rocking chair, her body bowed, and her wild gray witches tresses hanging about her shriveled yellow neck, the queen of the Voodoos.”²¹ Later in the article, he describes her appearance in animalistic terms: “She had shrunken away from her skin; it was like a turtle’s.”²² Cable’s article was the first piece on Laveau to appear after the obituary, which had been published five years prior. Laveau’s appearance and behavior were not the only relevant information in the piece: “It is pleasant to say that this worship, in Louisiana, at least, and in comparison with what it once was, has grown to be a trivial affair. The practice of midnight forest rites seemed to sink into inanity with Marie Laveau.”²³ The writer indirectly argues that Marie Laveau held the Voodoo community together. For it to die with Laveau, she was the sole irreplaceable member of the religion, giving further credence to viewing her as the figurehead of Voodoo. Almost a century later, opinion had not changed regarding Laveau’s position in the Voodoo community. As John Blassingame argued: “The king and queen of the Voodoo sect in New Orleans were ‘Dr. John’ and Marie Laveau, who

²¹ George Washington Cable visited Laveau, and she died shortly thereafter. See: “Creole Slaves Songs.” *Century Magazine*, April 1886.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

exacted blind obedience from their followers...claiming a knowledge of the future and the ability to heal the body, Dr. John and Laveau exercised great control over the blacks.”²⁴ Blassingame’s piece is in opposition to New Orleans citizen and author, Henry C. Castellanos’ later work in 1978, which claimed that there was a broader audience than just the ex-slave population; he asserted that Laveau had great influence over whites as well as blacks: “Ladies of high social position would frequently pay her high prices for amulets supposed to bring good luck.”²⁵ The “ladies of high social position” would have also included free women of color and women of mixed ancestry. In 1919, Laveau was supposedly going to be summoned by a group of Voodoo-ists during the Elks’ Club Rendezvous for the Fourth of July. The article began with the orientalizing of Voodoo: “Weird incantations, strange dances, and mystic ceremonies, which originated in the deepest jungle of darkest Africa, will be rehearsed once more on the very ground where they once held sway.”²⁶ It continued with a specific reference to Marie Laveau:

The program of the life of New Orleans for the past 200 years will include the mysterious worship of the Voodoo cult which flourished under the slaves of Louisiana. Marie Laveau, the Voodoo queen, whose once tumbled-down shack was one of the landmarks of Bayou St. John for many years, will be a prominent figure with the coterie of seeresses [*sic*], who will be summoned from the past to reveal the future.²⁷

²⁴ John W. Blassingame. “The Negro in Antebellum New Orleans.” In *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973,) 5-6.

²⁵ Castellanos, Henry C., and George F. Reinecke, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1978,) 96-97.

²⁶ “Voodoo Queens will Reign at Elks’ Rendezvous July 4th,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), June 3, 1919, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Laveau's importance to an outside organization transcends the much smaller contemporaneous Voodoo priestesses and re-animates her as a means of predicting the future. The Elk's Rendezvous happened to fall just four years after the beginning of the American occupation of Haiti, when reports would just begin to filter back to the United States of the Voodoo rituals that took place in the neighbor to the south. The Elks' Club capitalized on this newly-garnered attention to create a crowd for their July Fourth celebration. Marie Laveau's importance makes national perceptions of her and that of Voodoo virtually inseparable. Marie Laveau had, in effect, become Voodoo.

The Americanization of Voodoo

The prevailing opinion in regard to Voodoo-ism amongst the American public was overwhelmingly negative. Newspapers from all around the country assailed the faith as "animalistic" and "brutish," just as the *Code Noir* had centuries before. An African American newspaper, *The Freeman*, printed out of Indianapolis, gave a list of things that they wished to see come to fruition in the African American community in 1909. Inscribed in the first column of the list is "Bogus prophets, voodoo [*sic*] doctors, and fake leaders turned down."²⁸ The same column of the list makes mention of several other cultural phenomena such as "Jack Johnson give Jim Jeffries a good licking," "Ernest Hogan back in the game" and "An impetus in Y.M.C.A. work."²⁹ The location of the complaint in the paper was important—the very front page. The fact that Voodoo is listed amongst several other goals that members of the African American community set apart with the intention of achieving shows it is important. The "problem of Voodoo," as described by the *Freeman*, was apparently large enough to be

placed high among the "wish-list" of northern African Americans, showed an unmistakable religious schism between African Americans from Indianapolis to the northeast, and some African Americans residing in the South. It also explicitly showed a continued awareness and significance in the African American socio-religious culture of the South.

At the turn of the century, the opinions of the newspapers regarding Voodoo fell somewhere between the spectrum of pity and fear, and almost always demeaned any followers of the religion as backward, superstitious, and ignorant. A newspaper from La Crosse, Wisconsin, mentioned that a more assorted group than previously thought followed Voodoo, but its diversity was not portrayed in a positive light: "The superstition is prevalent among the negroes, nearly all of whom are believers in the power of the 'Voodoo' man for evil, but there are many white people—of the least intelligent class of course—who hold the charms of this peculiar evil genius in great awe."³⁰ The association of Voodoo and the members of society deemed as "of the least intelligent class" should not be surprising. The response was similar all across the nation, particularly the North. Written in 1886, the *Wisconsin Labor Advocate* article is not lacking in general inaccuracies regarding dates, particularly the line regarding Marie Laveau dying "years and years ago," when in reality she had not died but five years prior. The article also unknowingly gave Voodoo-ism and Marie Laveau in particular, legitimacy. The first display of respect is in the same line about Laveau's death: "since her demise the followers of the horrible faith have diminished in numbers."³¹ The "demise" of the Voodoo followers should be taken with a grain of salt, as the author did not provide any direct

²⁸ "The Freeman Would Like to see Early in the New Year," *The Freeman* (Indianapolis), January 16, 1909, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ "Voodooism: A Remarkable Set of Ignorant and Superstitious Blacks near New Orleans," *Wisconsin Labor Advocate* (La Crosse), August 28, 1886, 1.

³¹ *Ibid*

evidence for this statement. While it declared that the followers were diminishing, the article was written with a clear narrative to belittle the faith and declare it dead. This is one of the very few times that Voodoo is described as a “faith” in newspapers, which lends legitimacy to a comparison with other faiths, such as Catholicism, as is seen in a more direct comparison later in the piece. The article compares Marie Laveau to Archbishop Foray, and by direct association Laveau’s followers, and the nuns of Foray: “Some half dozen darkies, men and women, who believe devoutly in her power as do the nuns in the teachings of good Archbishop Foray.”³² Never mind the explicit description of the Archbishop as “good,” or the commonplace race-baiting with “darkies,” the comparison in the quantified amount of conviction that the members of both faiths have lends credence to the sincerity of the followers of Voodoo as followers capable of religious belief, rather than some animalistic experience of sexual carousing, decadent feasting, or excessive drunkenness as the buttress of their religious experience.

Voodoo was long used as a scapegoat for the ills of Southern society in the post-Reconstruction era. It was an excuse to explain away the lack of progress in the fields of science and medicine. One article goes so far as to blame the Voodoo doctor for the dearth of “colored” physicians in Philadelphia.³³ According to the author, the “colored” people in the North were just escaping the clutches of the powerful Voodoo doctor: “Fifteen and twenty years ago the pioneers among colored physicians encountered a hard struggle. They then had the superstitions of their own race...the colored people of the North had not long been separated from the Southern Negro doctor of Voodoo [sic] fame...associated him with the imposter of

whom they had known so much.”³⁴ The author made it clear that the “colored” people of the South were still very much in the grips of the “imposter” down in New Orleans.

Another article cited Voodoo as the reason behind the lack of educational progress. The *New York Globe* demeaned the religion and then promptly mocked its followers:

It would seem that superstition still has a strong hold upon many colored people who are otherwise well informed...ghosts and hob-goblins and ‘haunts’ still stalk the graveyards and deserted places, being careful to display themselves only to colored people...but these relics of barbarism and slavery are going. The rising sun of education is rapidly dissipating them. The colored men and women who have not been able to rid themselves of a reality of Mother Goose stories and superstition of their childhood are to be pitied. The number is small and growing smaller every day. Education and culture are doing their perfect work.³⁵

Voodoo and its “Mother Goose stories and superstition” were the cause of pittance and the reason that the Southerners lacked in proper culture. The author suggested that education would rid the African Americans living in the South of their “relics and barbarism.” The educated elite in the North viewed the southern following of the faith as caused by a lack of learning; they viewed Voodoo as something that was holding back African Americans. Other cultural problems, like crime, were nonchalantly blamed on Voodoo superstitions.

African Americans had to bear the burden of religious discrimination in addition to racial discrimination in the legal sector. Voodoo

³² *Ibid*

³³ “Philadelphia Physicians,” *New York Globe*, December 29, 1883.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ “[Washington],” *New York Globe*, May 10, 1884, 4.

was also used to convict African Americans of unsolved crimes. The *Huntsville Gazette* of Huntsville, Alabama, gave an example: “Henry Harris, the voodoo doctor of Desha county, [sic] Ark., who is believed to have killed many persons with his diabolical arts, has been convicted of man-slaughter.”³⁶ Another article from Cleveland gave a similar story: “The entire family of John Harris, colored, are [sic] dying of a slow poison supposed to have been placed in some corn-meal by a voodoo doctor whose powers they ridiculed.”³⁷ The convenience of shifting the blame on to an already marginalized group of society was too easy for the courts and juries to not take advantage. Many articles such as these painted a picture of ignorance, superstition, and death. The supposed ignoble nature of the religion captivated readers through salacious headlines in newspapers at the turn of the century.

That is not to say that there was no support for Voodoo-ism in the media. Although it was not a popular opinion, particularly in the North, the *New York Freeman*, and African American newspaper, rebutted an article in the *Boston Herald* about accounts of barbarism in Haiti. The *Herald* article referred to Haiti as “Our cannibal neighbor to the south,” and sensationalized Voodoo and cannibalism as central aspects of Haitian society. The author wrote a book review within the editorial letter: “Exasperation follows indignation when I discover that the *Herald’s* authority is the book of Sir Spencer St. John...the author quotes one authentic instance of cannibalism, that which was discovered in the reign of President Geffrard about twenty years ago.”³⁸ The author went on to defend Haitian culture by describing the

³⁶ “Late News Items,” *Huntsville Gazette*, April 20, 1887.

³⁷ “A Family Poisoned,” *Cleveland Gazette*, March 19, 1887.

³⁸ “Cannibalism in Hayti: Charges of the ‘Boston Herald’ Again Denied,” *New York Freedman* (New York City), October 9, 1886.

prevalence of Voodoo in not only the West Indies and Jamaica, but also surprisingly London, where two thousand followers were arrested just a few years prior. This lone example stands in the face of the myriad of articles like the one reported in the *Boston Herald*. The new attention paid to Voodoo, and the following negativity, began to captivate the national imagination. These negative attributes that were attributed to Voodoo would later be attributed to the “Queen of the Voudous” through journalists and fiction writers. The undesirable traits found in the newspapers would buttress public suspicion of Voodoo’s ill intents on society.

Voodoo in Hollywood

While the tie between Marie Laveau and zombies is not always explicit, in the *American Horror Story: Coven* episode, “Fearful Pranks Ensue,” Marie Laveau summons a horde of the undead.³⁹ While modern popular culture zombies are a bastardized version of the original, they serve as a link from the past to the present. Originally, zombies were mindless reanimated slaves that did not need to eat, unlike today’s mindless husks whose one desire is to gorge on brains. As the figurehead of Voodoo, Marie Laveau has re-emerged into popular culture, along with the negative tropes seen in early zombie movies, which are worth studying as an extension of her public perception.

The growing national discussion following Zora Neale Hurston’s *Hoodoo in America* meant that Voodoo was not exempt from Hollywood’s gaze. The infiltration of Voodoo into the Hollywood sphere began in 1932, not surprisingly at the height of the United States’ military relationship with Haiti and the incredibly successful works of Hurston the year prior. *White Zombie* (1932) was the first horror

³⁹ “Fearful Pranks Ensue,” *American Horror Story: Coven*, Directed by Michael Uppendahl, October 30, 2013.

film to involve Voodoo. The plot consisted of a newly-wed couple travelling to Haiti on their honeymoon; a series of disasters occurred that culminated in a Voodoo priest and an evil plantation owner turning the new wife into a zombie so that the planter can marry her. Immediately, the title conjures racial images and overtones. The juxtaposition of the white woman being corrupted by the Voodoo doctor created the element of horror for the American audience. The movie ends with a Christian missionary working in concert with the husband to rid her of the curse. In the film, the missionary shares his feelings regarding the Haitian people and their ideas: "Haiti is full of superstition and nonsense. I've been a missionary for thirty years and I still don't understand it."⁴⁰ The Voodoo doctor is white, but his appearance is devilish. He is always clothed in black, which is in stark contrast to the bride wearing her white wedding dress throughout almost the entire film. After the bride is taken by the Voodoo followers, the husband states what the director wanted the horror aspect of the film to feature: "Surely you don't mean she's in the hands of the natives? She's better off dead than that!"⁴¹ The whole notion of a pure bride on her wedding day being dragged off by natives was a terrible thought for the United States audience to behold. Gary Rhodes' book, *White Zombie: The Anatomy of a Horror Film* is considered the primary work on the film, and Rhodes argues for the impact that it had on its successors in the zombie genre of film.⁴² The film was not well received initially, as critics often cited poor acting and ridiculous plot sequences as holding back the film.⁴³ The film has received much more positive reviews recently, as the atmosphere and aura surrounding

the film has been praised, but the overall lack of quality in regards to acting has continued to draw criticism.⁴⁴

The 1930s zombie film *Chloe, Love is Calling You* (1934), involves a black Voodoo priestess coming out of the swamp to avenge the death of her husband on the white plantation owner responsible for the death. It involved a condemnation of miscegenation, as the title character was only able to date the successful white man after her "whiteness" was no longer in doubt. This was different than the previous film which focused on Voodoo more as a religious cultural aspect, rather than a racial matter. The other three zombie and Voodoo films of the 1930s were titled *Black Moon* (1934), *Darkest Africa* (1936) and *Devil's Daughter* (1939).⁴⁵ The films were much the same in the 1940s. *King of the Zombies* (1941), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and *Voodoo Man* (1944) continued the popularity of the exotic Voodoo man, who was always associated with evil.⁴⁶ Race was inconsistent throughout the films, but the religious difference stayed the same.

Voodoo films continued to be produced throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, movies focused more on zombies themselves, and less on the racial aspect behind the zombies. The draw became the pure horror of the walking undead rather than the complex racial tensions being broken. This is not to say that race was no longer an issue in the films, as the United States still had deep-rooted, unsolved racial issues at hand; it was just that it was no longer the primary focus. Films resorted back to *White Zombie's* style of horror. The socio-religious aspect of Voodoo, rather than the race of its

⁴⁰ *White Zombie*, Directed by Victor Halperin and Edward Halperin, 1932. Los Angeles, CA: United Artists, 1932. Film. The film can be found on several different websites, including *Netflix*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gary Don Rhodes. *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film*. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2001.)

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "Gris Gris - Voodoo Themed Films List," Listal, September 17, 2011.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

followers, drew horror film fans to the edge of their collective seats.

The genre has had continued success, and ranges from futuristic apocalyptic films, such as *World War Z* (2013) and *I am Legend* (2007), to much less serious films like Disney's *Princess and the Frog* (2009). The zombie genre has invaded television as well with the wildly popular *The Walking Dead* (2010-2015), which has drawn a cult following. The most recent season premiere drew 17.3 million viewers, eclipsing even the broadcast of *Sunday Night Football* on the same night.⁴⁷ Marie Laveau, portrayed by Angela Bassett, is a character on the popular American television show, *American Horror Story: Coven*, which incorporates many of the outlandish aspects of her legend, which shows that even 150 years after her death, she is still a relevant cultural figure.⁴⁸ The continued use of the constructed Marie Laveau, instead of the reality based Laveau, further perpetuates the myth that was created long after her death. Television writers have joined the ranks of the journalists and fiction authors to add their own twist to who Laveau was.

Exoticism of Laveau via Modern Scholarship

It is not a matter of much debate between scholars today over the authority of Marie Laveau in the New Orleans community from the end of the Civil War through her death in 1881. Most scholars accept that she played a significant role in the African American community, and to a lesser extent the white community. Some revisionist scholars such as Ina Johanna Fandrich

have added abolitionist flair to Laveau's persona; however, there is no evidence to support such a claim. Carolyn Morrow Long points out in her work that Laveau and her husband purchased slaves and there is no archival evidence of manumission.⁴⁹ Her legend grew the most from 1894 through 1946. The 1894 addition to the legend emphasized Marie Laveau as a hairdresser and procuress. This was the foundation for the information gathering aspect of her legend, which was overemphasized in her 1881 *New York Times* obituary: "Wherever there was a skeleton in the closet, Marie held the key."⁵⁰ In 1900, a pamphlet designed to bring in tourists to New Orleans eroticized Laveau and introduced her relationship with "Li Grand Zombi," a snake deity that would later be inseparable from Laveau.⁵¹ By the early 20th century, she cemented her place in New Orleans folklore; however, her legend continued to build through the 21st century.

The year 1931 hatched the next breakthrough in Laveau's legend—the most outlandish aspect to date. Zora Neale Hurston wrote in *Hoodoo in America* on the new parts of the legend that Laveau could control behavior of police officers, and that she rose from and walked on the waters of Lake Pontchartrain.⁵² Following Hurston, much of the new material originated from Lyle Saxon's *Fabulous New Orleans*.⁵³ Saxon and Robert Tallant were both sensationalist fiction writers, who skillfully wove their fictional narratives into Laveau's life story. Their works were written during the height of the Haitian occupation, so the public interest was

⁴⁷ Sara Bibel, "'The Walking Dead' Season 5 Premiere Hits Series High Ratings, Delivering 11 Million Adults 18-49 & 17.3 Million Viewers." TVbytheNumbers. October 13, 2013.

⁴⁸ Dave Walker, "Angela Bassett is getting to know Marie Laveau, her 'American Horror Story: Coven' character." *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), August 5, 2013.

⁴⁹ Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.)

⁵⁰ "Obituaries," *New York Times*, June 21, 1881.

⁵¹ *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, (New Orleans: Picayune Job Print, 1900.)

⁵² Zora Neale Hurston, *Hoodoo in America*. (New York, NY: American Folk Lore Society, 1931.)

⁵³ Lyle Saxon, and E. H. Suydam, *Fabulous New Orleans*. (New York: The Century Co, 1928.)

already piqued. Reports of cannibalism and animal sacrifice in Haiti captivated the American public, and Saxon and Tallant capitalized on this growing interest and sold more than a few books. Hurston wrote that Laveau kept a rattlesnake in *Mules and Men*.⁵⁴ The last major additions to the legend were in Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans*, published in 1946, where he expanded on the concept of a Marie I and Marie II hereditary Voodoo priestess leadership.⁵⁵ Marie's daughter of the same name took over for her mother, creating an eternally youthful image of Laveau. Having trained the Haitians, the American Marines left Haiti in 1947, temporarily ending the United States' influence in the island nation. Since 1991, revisionist scholars Barbara Duggan Rosendale, Ina Johanna Fandrich, and current Voodoo priestess Sallie Ann Glassman, have proposed the role of Laveau as a female religious leader, an abolitionist, and an lwa, or an intermediary between the Creator and humanity, respectively.⁵⁶ The ongoing debate gives further credence to Laveau's role as one of the most influential women in New Orleans history. The fluid nature of her identity continues to capture the minds of scholars today.

Conclusion

Although no new stories have been added, the legend of Marie Laveau has not grown since 1956 in the traditional sense.

⁵⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 2nd ed. (New York: Perennial Library, 1990.)

⁵⁵ Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946.)

⁵⁶ Barbara Duggan Rosendale, "Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen Repossessed." In *Creole The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, edited by Sybil Kein. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.)

Ina Johanna Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*. (New York: Routledge, 2004.)

Sallie Ann Glassman, *Vodou Visions: An Encounter with Divine Mystery*. (New York: Villard, 2000.)

Additionally, there have been no real embellishments made to her identity that did not summarize previous works as far as revisions since 2007. So while Laveau's legend may grow somewhat in the future, the origins of her legend are more set. Scholars should view Laveau's myth, at least in part, as an extension of American attitudes toward Voodoo. She was regarded as a powerful woman, no doubt, before her death. No scholars would argue otherwise. As the figurehead of Voodoo in the United States, Laveau will forever be attached to its legacy. No other figures are remotely as notorious, with the possible exception of Dr. John, who was widely seen as a fraudulent ego-maniac, who had very little legitimate sway over the population.⁵⁷ Her rise to infamy really began after her death. While she did hold real authority in New Orleans, her notoriety did not reach the nation until well after her death. Outside of the obituary in the *New York Times*, she was not written about in another national publication, *Century Magazine*, until five years after her death. The negative overtones and connotations surrounding Voodoo helped shape the more fearsome and outlandish parts of Laveau's legend, and sometimes, myth. The average United States citizen's frame of reference surrounding Voodoo was shaped by racial fears and articles such as "Cannibalism in Hayti" [*sic*]. Americans were afraid of this "new" faith coming in and having animal sacrifices and cannibalistic feasts on United States soil, when in reality, many practicing followers of Voodoo had been in the United States since the late 18th century. Voodoo also possessed many counter-cultural aspects such as entrenched feminism—by all accounts, the woman was much more important than the man in all Voodoo ceremonies. The challenge to male hegemony in the United States social structure,

⁵⁷ For scholarship on Dr. John see the eponymous chapter in Carolyn Morrow Long's *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.)

unsubstantiated contemporary reports of cannibalism, and its differences from Christianity, made Voodoo unpalatable for mainstream America. Marie Laveau was unquestionably powerful in New Orleans, but not to the extent that her legend grandly proclaimed. Almost all of her legend was created by writers after her death. Authors such as Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant were the main driving force behind the outlandish parts of this myth, and largely successful in intimating and integrating their additions to the legend. If the myth and attitudes are stripped away, Marie Laveau was one of the *de facto* leaders in New Orleans, but she most likely did not hold the ability to walk on water or control the minds of police officers, as has been added to her legend. She was a smart, most likely wealthy, multi-ethnic woman who had much of New Orleans within her grasp due to her charisma and social connections, not because of powers granted by the Devil. American attitudes toward Voodoo, the “forbidden fruit” of the Caribbean, led the authors to write to a receptive audience, which created the legend behind one of the most notorious figures in New Orleans history.

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