The Woman, the Legend, the Power: Fictional Representations of Marie Laveau in Twentieth-Century Literature

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THE WOMAN, THE LEGEND, THE POWER:
Fictional Representations of Marie Laveau in Twentieth-Century Literature

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Elizabeth Clark Neidenbach

2005
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Elizabeth Clark Neidenbach

Approved by the Committee, December 2005

M. Lynn Weiss, Chair

Grey Gundaker

Kimberley Phillips
To my Mama and Daddy for filling my childhood with stories of New Orleans and to the Crescent City - may she rise once again from the destruction and heartbreak
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I spent the summer of 2004 in New Orleans where I researched Marie Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo in various archives throughout the city. These were familiar places to me since I spent a good deal of time in the archives for my Honors Thesis at Tulane. I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Charles Nolan at the New Orleans Archdiocese Archives. Dr. Nolan remembered me from my undergraduate research and as always was extremely kind and helpful. The staff at the Amistad Research Center was also very helpful, and it was good to be remembered by the director, Mrs. Brenda Square. In addition, the staff at the New Orleans Notarial Archives could not have been more patient with me, particularly Charles who carried pounds and pounds of notary books for me. I would also like to thank the staffs at the New Orleans Public Library, Howard Tilton Memorial Library and the Louisiana Collection at Tulane University, Earl K. Long Memorial Library at the University of New Orleans, J. Edgar and Louise S. Monroe Library at Loyola University, and Xavier University library.

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ABSTRACT

Marie Laveau was a free woman of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans who is best known as the Voodoo Queen. Her life has become legend beginning while she was still alive. In the literary world, from nineteenth century newspaper and journal articles to twentieth century novels, poetry, song, and even comic books, Laveau has been a popular subject for writers to explore. Most of this interest stems from her apparent exoticness— a woman of color, a *Voodoienne*, and a resident of antebellum New Orleans. An historical inquiry into the facts about Marie Laveau’s life is difficult due to the years of rumors that have constructed the legend around her name. The fact that “Marie Laveau” was actually two women, mother and daughter, further complicates the story, especially when sources often confuse them and popular culture melds them into one.

Laveau has been called both a saint and a witch, but the literature on the Voodoo Queen agrees on two things: her beauty and her power. Laveau’s power seems to be the most attractive aspect of this woman to writers. As a free woman of color in an antebellum slave society, a position of power, particularly to the extent that Laveau was said to have had, is remarkable. Furthermore, Laveau’s power can be defined on multiple levels. Marie Laveau has become an icon who holds different meanings for various individuals or groups. The books studied in this thesis clearly demonstrate the multiple purposes Laveau has served for writers in the twentieth century. Often the authors have utilized Laveau to represent their politics or as something against which to define their politics. In all of the texts discussed in this thesis, issues of race, gender, and sexuality infuse the fictional representations of Laveau and the authors engage these racial, sexual, and gender discourses in their own interesting ways. As an iconic figure, Laveau becomes a site of negotiations over race, gender, and sexuality as these categories relate to a free black woman in nineteenth-century New Orleans and to each authors’ own time period and subject position.
THE WOMAN, THE LEGEND, THE POWER:

FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MARIE LAVEAU IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE
INTRODUCTION

If you walk down Decatur street today in New Orleans’ French Quarter you may notice a little grog shop with skulls and dolls pierced with pins in the window. Curious, you may enter into a tiny room known as the Marie Laveau Voodoo Bar– “Where your wish is my command.”¹ The bar’s proprietors, of course, are not alone in this vulgar commercialization of New Orleans’ Voodoo and its most (in)famous queen. The city boasts numerous tours and shops brimming with paraphernalia, all claiming to have some authentic connection to Marie Laveau. The free woman of color who “lends” her name to these sites of unadulterated capitalism lived in New Orleans during the nineteenth century. Her life has become legend beginning while she was still alive. In the literary world, from nineteenth-century newspaper and journal articles to twentieth-century novels, poetry, song, and even comic books, Laveau has been a popular subject for writers to explore. Most of this interest stems from her apparent exoticness- a woman of color, a *Voodooienne*, and a resident of antebellum New Orleans.

A quick glance at the literature on Marie Laveau will reveal that she was a walking contradiction. She has been described as both a witch and a saint. According to a French woman who claimed to live across the street from Laveau in 1880, “[s]he was an evil woman...She killed babies that were not wanted by their mothers...Oh she killed lots

¹ See TownNews.com Travel at http://townnews.atevo.com/guides/gallery/item/0,3693,4503135,00.html.
of children. They say her armoire was filled with skeletons...She was awful!"² At her
death in 1881, Lafcadio Hearn published an article in the City Item in which he says
Laveau’s “connection with voudouism was very mythical” and that she “was certainly a
very wonderful old woman with a very kind heart...she enjoyed the respect and affection
of thousands who knew her, of numbers whom she befriended in times of dire distress, of
sick folks...nursed by her to health and strength again with that old Creole skill and
knowledge of natural medicines...”³

Despite the apparent schizophrenia of these characterizations, there are two things
that the literature agrees upon: Laveau’s physical beauty and her power. In the above
mentioned City Item article, Hearn writes, “In her youth she was a very beautiful
woman,- one of the most beautiful perhaps, of those famous free women of color.”⁴
Willie Thomas, an elderly African American man who told the Louisiana Federal
Writers’ Project interviewer that he attended a Voodoo “meeting” in 1885, described
Laveau as “the most beautiful woman I ever seen in my life.”⁵ Tony Miller, another
Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project informant, called her “a great woman. She was big
and well-built, and the mens used to go kind of crazy lookin’ at her...She walked just like
a queen.”⁶

More remarkable than her beauty, however, was her power. In his book, Voodoo
in New Orleans (1946), Robert Tallant quotes Tom Bragg, an elderly man who was born
a slave: “She come walkin’ into Congo Square wit’ her head up in the air like a

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Publishing, 2003), 89.
³ S. Frederick Starr, ed., Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn (Jackson: University Press
of Mississippi, 2001), 70-71.
⁴ Starr, 71.
⁵ Tallant, 51.
⁶ Tallant, 76.
queen... All the people—white and colored—start sayin’ that’s the most powerful woman there is. They say, ‘There goes Marie Laveau!’ Her obituary printed in the New York Times reported that Laveau’s knowledge of healing herbs, her common sense, valuable advice, and beauty combined to give her “great influence in her youth and attracted the attention of Louisiana’s greatest men and most distinguished visitors.” However, the description of Laveau that best sums up the conflicting views of the Voodoo Queen comes from an “ancient Negress” recorded by Tallant: “Marie Laveau?...Sure I heard of her. I don’t know if she was good or bad; folks says both ways. But I know this: she was a powerful woman.” It is precisely this aspect of Laveau that seems to be the most attractive to writers. As a free woman of color in an antebellum slave society, a position of power, particularly to the extent that Laveau was said to have had, is remarkable. Furthermore, Laveau’s power can be defined on multiple levels. Her power could be seen as supernatural or spiritual. It could come from her economic success. She could derive her power from being well-respected or from being feared. Her power might have come from her sensuality as a beautiful woman of color. As we will see, authors have employed all of these definitions and more in their fictional representations of Laveau. However it is characterized, Marie Laveau’s power is clearly important to her popularity as a figure in literature.

An historical inquiry into the facts about Marie Laveau’s life is difficult due to the years of rumors that have constructed the legend around her name. The fact that “Marie Laveau” was actually two women, mother and daughter, further complicates the story, especially when sources often confuse them and popular culture melds them into one.

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7 Tallant, 56.
9 Tallant, 47.
For fifty years, Robert Tallant’s study of New Orleans Voodoo, which centered on Marie Laveau, remained the authority on the subject. *Voodoo in New Orleans* synthesized previous work on Laveau, much of it from the nineteenth century, supplemented by oral histories from the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project of the 1930s. It was not until Ina Frandrich’s dissertation on Laveau in 1994 that Tallant’s book was challenged through serious scholarship. Since Fandrich, several other scholars have written about Laveau. This scholarship has added tremendously to what we know about the historic Marie Laveau and her daughters, Marie Eucharist and Marie Philomène.

Marie Laveau has become an icon who holds different meanings for various individuals or groups. The books studied in this thesis clearly demonstrate the multiple purposes Laveau has served for writers in the twentieth century. Often the writers have utilized Laveau to represent their politics or as something against which to define their politics. In all of the texts discussed below, issues of race, gender, and sexuality infuse the fictional representations of Laveau and the authors engage these racial, sexual, and gender discourses in their own interesting ways. As an iconic figure, Laveau has become a site of negotiations over race, gender, and sexuality as these categories relate to a free black woman in nineteenth-century New Orleans and to each authors’ own time period and subject position.

The first chapter traces the story of Marie Laveau and her daughters historiographically through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources. Beyond the web of legends that enmesh these women’s historical lives, the usual documents consulted by scholars to track someone through the archives are often missing or incomplete. (Although, recent scholarship proves that diligence does pay off, in this
regard.) This chapter provides a synthesis of the recent scholarship in addition to discussing earlier work on the two Laveaux in order to provide a base of information on the historical and mythical figure of the Voodoo Queen(s). This “background” on Laveau and Voodoo will place the discussions of the novels that follow in context.

The next chapter looks at Robert Tallant’s works on Marie Laveau. A native white New Orleanian, Tallant first published his (for better or for worse) oft-cited study of Voodoo in New Orleans in 1946. Not surprisingly, then, *Voodoo in New Orleans* serves as a source, if not the main one, for the novels on Laveau that followed it. Ten years later, Tallant fictionalized the story of Marie Laveau, *mère* (“Marie I”) in *The Voodoo Queen*. As a white male, Tallant is drawn to Laveau as a powerful black woman whose contradictory actions and attributes frighten and fascinate him. Despite his chaste portrayal of Laveau, Tallant ultimately defines her power as her sexuality. Although he presents himself as wanting to do Laveau justice in his books, Tallant belittles her power by believing that it came from her beauty and sexual allure as a black woman.

The third chapter forms the centerpiece of the thesis. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political and cultural movements of Black Power, Black Arts, and Women’s Liberation brought issues of race and gender, specifically related to the empowerment of African Americans and women, to the nation’s attention. The 1970s saw the publication of three novels that concern Laveau: African American author, Ishmael Reed’s *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*; white novelist, Francine Prose’s *Marie Laveau*; and *Marie* by another white writer, Margot Arnold. To varying degrees, these books exhibit the influence of the Black Power/Black Arts and the Women’s Liberation movements as well as African American feminists’ responses to these movements. I have chosen to discuss
Prose’s novel and not Arnold’s because the connections that can be drawn from Prose’s portrayal of Laveau to the politics of Black Power and feminism are more clear. (I do, however, feel Arnold’s book is important, particularly for its “feminist” depiction of Laveau.) For some of the authors discussed in this chapter, Marie Laveau becomes a representative of these political calls for empowerment. Certainly in all of these novels Laveau serves as a figure through which conflicts over race, gender, and sexuality are fought.

The second part of the third chapter compares Reed’s representation of Marie Laveau in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* to African American author Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Voodoo Dreams* published in 1994. Both writers base their stories on a relationship between Marie Laveau and her contemporary, a Voodoo priest known as Doctor John. Reed uses this relationship to critique black feminists of the 1970s, whom he feared were allied with white men to keep black men disempowered. He portrays Laveau as undeserving of her title as the Voodoo Queen because of her co-optation by white males. For Reed, Laveau’s power came from this “alliance” with the city’s elite–an alliance secured through men’s slavish obsession with women and sex. Reed, however, does not deny Laveau’s spiritual power as a Voodoo priestess, but he believes that of the two, Doctor John, as the man, deserves the most recognition.

Rhodes attempts to continue the legacy of black feminist authors from the 1970s with her story of Marie Laveau, and to a certain extent, she builds a defense of African American feminism against Reed. However, Rhodes “feminist” tale consists of Marie Laveau as an abject victim of black and white men, most importantly, Doctor John, who abuses her physically, sexually, and psychologically. Rhodes perpetuates the perceptions
of Voodoo and black women as exotic and (hyper)sexual through her graphic sex scenes. Sexuality becomes the defining aspect of Rhodes’ Laveau, yet, unlike in Tallant’s novel (or even Reed), it does not give her power. In the end, Laveau gains self-empowerment through the recognition of her inner strength as a woman. Yet, even this is questionable, and quite arguably, Rhodes’ Laveau remains powerless to the end.

Barbara Hambly’s detective series set in nineteenth-century New Orleans, specifically her books that include Laveau as a character—A Free Man of Color, Fever Season, Wet Grave, and most centrally, Graveyard Dust—form the subject of the last chapter. Hambly, a white author, includes Laveau in her stories as part of her commitment to presenting an accurate depiction of antebellum New Orleans. She uses Laveau to illustrate the different perspectives of Voodoo and the role it played in New Orleans during this time period. For Hambly, Laveau’s power is action-based, not gender-based. Her personality, rather than her sexuality, has much to do with her influence among (not over) the city’s inhabitants. Hambly also attempts to present a sympathetic portrayal of Voodoo despite her reliance on nineteenth century sources.

Marie Laveau clearly proves to be a fascinating subject for writers and readers, alike, judging from the large volume of texts that have been written on Laveau, in her own lifetime to the present. All of these authors contribute to the legend of Marie Laveau through their fictional portrayals of her. In their own ways, they each perpetuate the myths that surround the Voodoo Queen.
CHAPTER I

"AND MARIE LAVEAU WAS A WOMAN IN NEW ORLEANS":
A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MARIE LAVEAU, THE WOMAN AND THE LEGEND

On March 19, 1946 the Macmillan Company published a book by native New Orleanian, Robert Tallant. Voodoo in New Orleans was the result of several years of research by Tallant who most likely became interested in the subject after his work on the Works Progress Administration’s Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project during the 1930s. Tallant’s book combines popular legends with historical facts, and it relies heavily on newspaper articles from the late nineteenth century and interviews with old New Orleans residents who were children during that same period. Tales concerning two women named Marie Laveau, mother and daughter Voodoo Queens, form the centerpiece of the text. Overall, Voodoo in New Orleans met with good reviews. Representative of the opinion of most reviewers, the Montgomery, Alabama Advertiser wrote: “Here is a book, written by a Louisiana native, that presents the full story of Voodoo worship, so far as white man has been able to learn it...Around the story of that worship, a strange blending of blood sacrifice, abandoned dance, snake-worshipping, and lust, Robert Tallant has written a factual, fascinating book.”

This description succinctly captures the ways in which Tallant’s book continues to be an important text in the study of Marie Laveau. When *Voodoo in New Orleans* appeared in 1946 it was the first full-length book that studied both Marie Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo. Tallant synthesized previous treatments of the subject from an eighteenth-century description of Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, including newspaper articles in New Orleans and other national publications, serial articles, travel guides, and romantic histories of the Crescent City. These sources put popular perceptions of Voodoo into print. It is these descriptions of sacrifice, snakes, wild dancing, and sex that enthralled readers in the nineteenth century onward. To these sources, Tallant added the reminisces of elderly African American and white New Orleanians who claimed to have first-hand knowledge of the Voodoo Queen from their childhood. These “eyewitness” accounts gathered by Tallant and other members of the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project lend an aura of credibility to *Voodoo in New Orleans* that the other secondary sources lack. Thus, Tallant’s book is important because it continues to be the “most frequently cited authority on the subject [of Voodoo and Laveau].”

But New Orleans scholar Marcus B. Christian rightly complains in his review of *Voodoo in New Orleans* when he writes: “If one expects to find in Mr. Tallant the scientific coordination and astringency of the inquiring scholar or relentless probings, siftings, and the evaluations of the trained historian, one will be disappointed.” Rather than analyze or challenge previous scholarship on Marie Laveau and New Orleans

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Voodoo, Tallant merely restates what has been written before. The book reveals the legacy of white male authors who wrote before Tallant combined with his own fascination of the exotic racial Other. His portrayal of Marie Laveau embodies this fascination. Christian admits that “racially speaking” Tallant treats the subject of Voodoo with “restraint and sympathy,” but the opening paragraph of *Voodoo in New Orleans*, which will be described in detail later, reveals Tallant as a white man mesmerized by the enigmatic African American world.⁴

The descriptions of Marie Laveau that Tallant includes in *Voodoo in New Orleans* are often contradictory. She is both a saint and a witch. According to Tom Bragg, a ninety-five year old African American born in slavery, Marie Laveau “could make anybody do anything and sometimes she made ‘em do terrible things...She made people disappear. She made wives turn on their husbands and run off wit’ other men. She made fine white ladies lie on the ground and roll on their bellies.”⁵ On the other hand, an 1871 article in the *Daily Picayune* states: “For more than twenty years, whenever a human being has suffered the final penalty in the Parish Prison, an old colored woman has come to their cell and prepared an altar for them. This woman is Marie Laveau, better known as priestess of the Voudous.”⁶ The article goes on to describe the altar which contained a Spanish prayer book, framed excerpts from the Bible, pictures of angels and a statue of the Virgin Mary. There is no indication that the author of the article believed the “religious rites” represented by this altar to be anything but that of the Catholic faith.⁷

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⁵ Tallant, 57.
⁶ Tallant, 73.
Laveau was also known for her expertise as a nurse during the devastating outbreaks of yellow fever throughout the city which, according to Tallant, "had given her a reputation for being in reality a very kind woman."\(^8\)

In her study of New Orleans in literature, Violet Harrington Bryan argues that "[t]he Marie Laveau story is an important part of the myth of New Orleans, and Tallant was instrumental in perpetuating her image as both saint and sinner."\(^9\) Research on Marie Laveau echoes this paradox of description. There is seemingly little known about the historical Laveau, while, at the same time, there are plenty of sources on the Voodoo Queen that stretch from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. This is due, in part, to the fact that rumors and legends shroud much of the historical Marie Laveau, beginning in her own lifetime. In fact, most of the sources on Laveau are marked by their similar or borrowed, sometimes verbatim, descriptions. While citations rarely meet the standard of the academy today, it becomes easy after spending enough time among these sources to trace where the author found his (and, less often, her) information.

In fact, it was not until the publication of Ina Fandrich's PhD dissertation in 1994 that a scholar undertook any serious archival research on Marie Laveau.\(^10\) Since then, two other scholars, Carolyn Morrow Long and Martha Ward, have published their own work on Marie Laveau and Voodoo in New Orleans.\(^11\) These authors do not ignore the folklore that surrounds the name of Laveau, but their main objective is to focus on the historical

\(^8\) Tallant, 68.
\(^9\) Bryan, 107.
\(^10\) Ina Fandrich's dissertation, "The Mysterious Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux: A Study of Spiritual Power and Female Leadership in Nineteenth Century New Orleans," is the first scholarly approach to the historical Marie Laveau to fully utilize the archives of New Orleans. Despite its faults, Fandrich's study remains, to date, the most in-depth study of Laveau.
rather than the legendary woman through meticulous research in the archives of New Orleans. These scholars have found errors in some of Tallant’s claims.

This chapter will historiographically trace perceptions of Marie Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, epitomized by Robert Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* to provide a background to the depictions of Marie Laveau in the novels analyzed in the subsequent chapters. An examination of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources on Voodoo in New Orleans, and specifically, on Marie Laveau will provide a better understanding of the way in which the legends of Laveau continue to circulate. Many of these sources and the stories they tell have clearly left their imprint on the novels examined in this thesis. A synthesis of the most recent scholarship on the historical Marie Laveau will help put the fictional representations of Laveau in perspective.

On June 17, 1881, the *New Orleans Democrat* and the *Daily Picayune* published an obituary for Marie Laveau who had been buried the previous evening. According to these newspapers, Laveau passed away at the age of ninety-eight. The source for Laveau’s age at her death most likely came from her death certificate. Although a transcription of this article can be found in the Robert Tallant Papers at the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, Tallant’s book, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, claims that Laveau died on June 24, 1881 at the age of eighty-five. This discrepancy is indicative of the difficulty in reconstructing Marie Laveau’s life.

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13 Tallant, 51. On this page Tallant claims that Laveau died on June 24, 1881. Later, however, he cites the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* which published her obituary on June 17, 1881 the day after her burial as well as another article on her death in the *New Orleans Democrat* printed the following day. See pages 113,
If Laveau was ninety-eight in 1881, she would have been born in 1783. At the time that she wrote her dissertation, Ina Fandrich found no record, namely a birth certificate, which disproved the age listed on Laveau’s death certificate. Other authors cite her birth date as 1794 and 1796. In her research on Laveau, Carolyn Morrow Long found that none of these dates seemed plausible. Using archival records of Laveau’s marriage contract and her daughter’s birth, Long posits that Laveau’s birth more likely occurred in 1801. Long’s supposition proved to be correct when, in 2001 after fifteen years of research, Fandrich found what she believes to be Marie Laveau’s birth record. Written in Spanish, the document states that “Maria,” a free mulatto was the daughter of “Margarita” also a free mulatto born on September 10, 1801. In the most recent book on Laveau, Martha Ward agrees with Fandrich’s find, listing the 1801 date as the birth of Marie Laveau mère.

Laveau was the daughter of Marguerite Darcantel and Charles Trudeau Laveaux, both free people of color. Henry Darcantel, a prominent white man, rewarded Laveau’s mother, as well as Laveau’s half sister, Marie Louise Darcantel, in his will for nursing him during an illness. Most likely, Marie Laveau gained her nursing expertise and

116. There are numerous confusing discrepancies like this throughout Tallant’s book. The *New York Times* published Laveau’s obituary on June 23, 1881 and states in the first sentence that she died “last Wednesday.” The article’s dateline reads “New Orleans June 21.” See “The Dead Voudou Queen,” *New York Times*, 23 June 1881. It is clear that the source for the *New York Times* obituary is the article from the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* cited in Tallant page 113-116. The *New Orleans Democrat* article mentioned in the note above was reprinted in the *Washington Post* on June 21, 1881.

14 Fandrich, 242.

15 Herbert Asbury, *The French Quarter* (New York: Pocket Books, 1949), 195; Raymond J. Martinez, *Mysterious Marie Laveau Voodoo Queen and Folk Tales Along the Mississippi* (New Orleans: Hope Publications, 1956), 6. According to Tallant’s first claim that she was eighty-five when she died, Laveau would have been born in 1796.


possibly her knowledge of Voodoo from her mother. Laveau’s half-sister, Marie Louise Darcantel married Louis Foucher, a free man of color in 1815.\(^\text{18}\)

Tallant reports that Marie’s father, Charles Laveaux, was a wealthy white man; however, Long, Fandrich and Ward agree that he was a free man of color who owned several pieces of property in the city including a grocery store in the Faubourg Marigny. Charles Trudeau Laveaux was the son of a free woman of color, Marie Laveaux, and a leading white citizen, Charles Trudeau. Trudeau was the Royal Surveyor under the Spanish colonial government and President of the New Orleans City Council after the city came under American rule. Marie’s parents never married, making her their “natural” or illegitimate daughter. Charles Trudeau Laveaux made it public record that Marie was his natural daughter which gave her permission to use his surname.\(^\text{19}\)

On August 4, 1819, Marie Laveau married Jacques Paris, a free man of color from Saint Domingue. In the marriage agreement, Charles Trudeau Laveaux gave his daughter a piece of property on Rue D’Amour (Love Street) where the newlywed couple lived. Marie gave the property to her daughter, Marie Eucharist, in 1832.\(^\text{20}\) Jacques Paris...

\(^{18}\) Fandrich, 242; Ward, 34, see 40-43 for Ward’s explanation of Marie’s nursing skills as taught to her by her mother; Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 45. Ward claims that “the *gumbo ya-ya* [gossip] says” Marie’s mother, Marguerite Darcantel was a “hoodoo doctor and Voodoo practitioner.” She is unclear from what source this “gossip” came exactly. See page 40. However, it does make sense that Marie Laveau would have learned such religious and healing skills from her mother.

\(^{19}\) Tallant, 53. Tallant admits that he gleaned this information from newspapers, but reasons that while “these accounts may not be accurate, the racial mixture sounds logical.” As will be discussed later, in his novel, *The Voodoo Queen*, Tallant makes Marie’s father a wealthy white man. Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 45, 273n; Fandrich, 243-244; Ward, 34-35; Roulhac Toledano, Sally Kittredge Evans, and Mary Louise Christovich, *New Orleans Architecture, Vol. 4: The Creole Faubourgs* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1974), 7, 34. Charles Trudeau Laveaux married Françoise Dupart, a free woman of color and had another (legitimate) daughter named Marie Laveaux. This paternal half-sister of the Voodoo Queen married a free man of color, François Auguste in 1818. See Ward, 37-38. This illustrates the difficulty of tracking down information on Marie Laveau because there were multiple women who share that name in some form or another.

\(^{20}\) Marriage of Marie Laveau and Jacques Paris: *St. Louis Cathedral Book of Marriages of Persons of Color*, vol. 1, 1777-1830, 4 August 1819, Book 1, Folio 60-A, New Orleans Archdiocesan Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana; Contract of Marriage, 27 July 1819, H. Lavergne, New Orleans Notarial Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana. See also Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 45, 273n; Fandrich, 244, 305n; Ward, 34-36,
disappeared a few years after the couple wed; Marie Laveau began to call herself the Widow Paris. Accounts of what happened to Jacques vary. Some say he returned to Haiti, while others say Marie Laveau separated herself from him and perhaps caused him to disappear. Some sources give specific dates for his death, namely 1822 and 1826. However, no archival research has revealed any death certificate or other proof of what happened to Jacques Paris.

Shortly after the disappearance of her husband, Marie Laveau began a relationship with Louis Christophe Dominic Duminy de Glapion. Tallant claims that de Glapion was a “quadroon” from Saint Domingue. Most likely he acquired this information from Laveau’s obituary in the *Daily Picayune* which he includes in his book. The 1881 article reports that “Capt. Christophe Glapion...was also very prominent [in New Orleans], and served with the distinction in the battalion of men of Santo Domingo, under D’Aquin, with Jackson in the war of 1815...” Previous studies of Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo also insist that de Glapion was a free man of color. After diligent research in New Orleans archives, however, Fandrich, Long and Ward agree that Marie Laveau’s second...
significant other was Jean Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion, a white Creole.  
Christophe de Glapion was of noble descent. His grandfather, the Chevalier Christophe de Glapion, Seigneur du Mesnil-Gauche, served under the Spanish colonial government as did his father, also named Christophe de Glapion. In addition, Jean Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion’s mother, Jeanne Sophie Lalande Ferrière, came from a prominent New Orleans family.

Relationships between white men and women of African descent, enslaved and free, were not unusual in colonial and antebellum New Orleans. In her article, “Coping In a Complex World,” Kimberly Hanger shows that in the Spanish colonial period free black women outnumbered free black men two to one, limiting their choices of free black spouses significantly. At the same time, white males outnumbered white women, creating a situation that fostered interracial relationships. Without denying the exploitation and power dynamic inherent in these relationships, scholars such as Hanger, Virginia Meacham Gould, and Joan M. Martin argue that free women of color used these relationships with white men to their advantage by securing benefits for themselves and

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23 Long, 46. Long lists de Glapion’s full name as Louis Christophe Dominic Duminy de Glapion. Both Fandrich and Ward agree his name was Jean Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion. The discrepancy in the two full names given for Christophe de Glapion most likely stems from the confusing of father and son. Laveau’s Christophe shared at least part of his name with his grandfather, Chevalier Christophe de Glapion, Seigneur du Mesnil-Gauche and his father, Christophe de Glapion. Fandrich, 245-246; Ward, 44-47. Fandrich, 245 claims that no texts on Marie Laveau, prior to her own dissertation describe Christophe de Glapion as a white man. However, I found a typed, seemingly unpublished, and undated manuscript in the Robert Tallant Collection entitled “Marie Laveau, Inc.” This paper describes Marie Laveau’s new lover after the disappearance of Jacques Paris as “Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion, a white gentleman of imposing name and family...” It is possible that Tallant wrote this paper, and since it is in his collection, it is probable that he at least had knowledge of it. It is unclear when “Marie Laveau, Inc.” was written.

24 Long, 46; Fandrich, 245, 306n; Ward, 45.

their children from wealthy white partners. Interracial relationships not only potentially led to freedom for enslaved women and their children, but also property and money to women both enslaved and free.

A formal system, known as *placage*, that encouraged and supported these interracial relationships existed in the city. A *placage* relationship was set up by the mother or guardian of a free woman of color and a white man who was usually financially well-off. These arrangements were often forged at elaborate parties known as quadroon balls. Often the white man would provide a residence for the free woman of color and support her and the children they had together. Sometimes these relationships lasted for years; however, interracial marriages could not be legally sanctioned. Other times *placage* arrangements ended when the man married a white woman.

Scholars have debated over the true nature of these relationships. Some have concluded that *placage* is a fancy term for prostitution, whereas, others see it more as a common-law marriage.

The relationship between Marie Laveau and Christophe de Glapion was not a *placage* arrangement. Instead it seems to have been every bit a marriage without the

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27 Joan Martin points out that there is a difference between the private *Bal de Cordon Bleu* where the *placage* arrangements were made by the upper crust of the free black population and the public quadroon balls where white men paid a fee to party with free women of color. See Martin, “*Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*,” 65-66.

28 *Plaçage* was a complex situation that has been considered by historians in a variety of ways that include prostitution or rape as well as a source of empowerment for the women involved. John Blassingame argues that *placage* was a common law marriage: Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880*. For arguments on interracial relationships as a way for free black women to gain advantages for themselves and their children despite the exploitation inherent in these relationships see: Hanger, “Coping in a Complex World”; Gould, “‘A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord;’” Martin, “*Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*;” Fandrich, 158-160.
sanctions of the church or state. This is, perhaps, not so unusual in a city like New Orleans except that it does not satisfactorily explain why Christophe de Glapion was considered a free man of color in much of the literature on Marie Laveau and even in some of the public records. After much careful research Martha Ward comes to the conclusion that Christophe de Glapion, in order to live with Marie Laveau as her husband, "passed" for a free man of color. With the help of his half-brother, the offspring of a *plaçage* relationship, and other free people of color whom the couple counted as friends, Christophe de Glapion convinced the city that he was of African descent—sometimes going so far as to attach the tell-tale initials, fmc, behind his name on documents.29

De Glapion's change in social status and racial identity gave the couple and their children a more secure existence. It allowed the couple to skirt around the stricter American laws against black/white cohabitation. It gave de Glapion access to the Creole of Color benevolent societies which aided their members and their members' families in times of need. The change also allowed de Glapion to guarantee that the children he had with Marie Laveau would be taken care of after his death. Through a crafty use of the laws and the city's public notaries, the couple put the properties they owned in their children's names. In 1832, Marie Laveau put her eldest daughter in possession of the house on Love Street, the property which had served as her dowry in her marriage to Jacques Paris. That same year, Christophe bought a piece of property on St. Ann Street from the estate of Catherine Henry, a free woman of color. Christophe, in turn, sold the St. Ann Street house to a free man of color named Pierre Charles Marioux in 1838. The

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29 Ward, 45. Free people of color were forced, by law, to include the initials "fmc" or "fwc" for free man of color or free woman of color after their names when signing documents.
following year, Marioux’s wife, Marie Françoise Mahon, gave the St. Ann Street house as gift to the children of Marie Laveau. Although confusing, this scheme put the property on St. Ann Street in the names of Marie Philomène and Archange Glapion free and clear. Perhaps this story is not as exciting as the oft-repeated legend of how Marie Laveau acquired the house on St. Ann from a grateful white Creole client, but it is certainly more daring.30

These acts of documentary legerdemain circumvented the laws that denied children of color an inheritance from their white father.31 In addition to these practical advantages, Ward concludes that it was ultimately Christophe de Glapion’s devotion to Marie Laveau that led him to make himself out to be a free man of color. She writes, “In becoming ‘biracial’ and by giving up the status for stigma, he proclaimed himself her equal partner in color and marital politics— a gift of love for any time or place.”32

Ward and Fandrich also found evidence of Marie Laveau and Christophe de Glapion pulling a similar act of deceitful documentation in regards to at least three enslaved women whom they purchased separately at different times during the 1830s. Either Christophe or Marie purchased and then later sold the women, each time with the strict stipulation of Statue libre, or, in other words, their freedom. One woman,

30 The story usually goes something like this: A wealthy, white gentleman asks Marie Laveau to save his son who has been accused of a crime. Through the use of guinea peppers under her tongue, Laveau gained the son an acquittal. In return, the father gave Laveau the St. Ann Street property. The earliest account of this story I have found is in G. William Nott’s article on Laveau in the Times-Picayune. According to Nott, the story came from an “octogenarian mammy.” See G. William Nott, “Marie Laveau, Long High Priestess of Voudouism in New Orleans,” Times-Picayune, 19 November 1922. Lyle Saxon includes Nott’s article in Fabulous New Orleans (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1995), 244. Other authors who include the story of the house include Edward Larocque Tinker, Lafcadio Hearn’s American Days (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1925), 136-137; Asbury, 196; Tallant, 58; Christian, “Voodooism and Mumbo Jumbo,” in “A History of the Negro in Louisiana,” unpublished manuscript, Marcus B. Christian Papers, Louisiana and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana, 33; Martinez, 17-18.

31 Ward, 45-47, 66-70; Fandrich, 246-247. Ward points out that a law passed in 1831 made it illegal for a white man to pass property to his mixed race children in his will. See Ward, 66-68.

32 Ward, 45.
Alexandrine, was sold to a white man, Dumartrait. Once she paid Dumartrait the amount of her purchase, she was free. Ward believes that the two were lovers. Marie sold twenty-two year old Juliette to a free woman of color, perhaps a relative of Juliette. Juliette gained her freedom on her twenty-fifth birthday. Marie purchased Irma in 1838. It seems that she did not resell the woman, but made sure that the records clearly stated Irma’s freedom, even in the event that something happened to Laveau. Perhaps Irma began her life as a free woman the day Laveau bought her. While the full story of these transactions can never be known, the purchase of enslaved women with the condition that they be freed suggests Marie Laveau used her social position to help fellow women of color.

The Widow Paris and Christophe de Glapion lived together in the St. Ann Street house until his death in 1855. According to legend, the couple had fifteen children in eight years. It seems that few people, before and after Tallant, found this to be an amazing feat. Instead, creative combinations of twins and triplets are concocted to make it possible for Marie Laveau to have had fifteen children “in rapid succession.” These tales might add another element of the fantastic to Marie Laveau’s story as the tour

33 Ward, 84-88; Fandrich, 253.
34 “Death Notice of Christophe Duminy Glapion,” L’Abeille de la Nouvelle Orleans, 27 June 1855 in RTC; “The Dead Voudou Queen,” New York Times, 23 June 1881; Fandrich, 246, 306n; Long, 46, 273n; Ward, 65-66, 102. In Voodoo in New Orleans Tallant claims that Christophe de Glapion died in 1835; see page 55. Later, on page 59 he quotes de Glapion’s death notice in the New Orleans Times from June 27, 1835. I find this baffling because this is the exact same date of the death notice for de Glapion in L’Abeille, another New Orleans newspaper, only the latter is twenty years later. The notice that Tallant quotes in the book also contains the exact same information as does the one in L’Abeille. This is especially strange because I found a typed transcript of L’Abeille notice in the Robert Tallant Collection. It is difficult to understand how Tallant made this mistake twice. Either way, Tallant insists that in the short time that the Widow Paris and Christophe de Glapion were together they had fifteen children. See page 55.
35 The claim that Marie Laveau and Christophe de Glapion had fifteen children began with the obituary of the Voodoo Queen in the Daily Picayune. (This information is also in the New York Times obituary.) It seems most likely that the source of the information on Marie Laveau for this article was her daughter, Marie Philomène also known as Madame Legendre.
36 Ward, 65; quote from Tallant, 55.
guides who repeat them evidently wish. Implicitly, however, the idea that Marie Laveau, who by all accounts was busy as the Voodoo Queen, spent almost a decade pregnant not to mention the time spent raising fifteen children perpetuates the racial stereotype of black women as promiscuous and overly fecund. Long, Fandrich and Ward have all found only five children belonging to Marie Laveau and Christophe de Glapion in the city records. Ward concludes that the fifteen children of Marie Laveau are really her five children and ten grandchildren. Between 1827 and 1838, the Widow Paris had three daughters and two sons: Marie Eucharist Heloise, Marie Louise Caroline, François Auguste, Marie Philomène, and Archange. Only Marie Eucharist Heloise and Marie Philomène lived past childhood.

It is difficult to precisely pinpoint when Marie Laveau became the Voodoo Queen; however, it seems that by 1850 New Orleans newspapers referred to her by that title. On July 3, 1850, for example, the *Daily Picayune* reported that “Marie Laveau, otherwise Widow Paris, fwc, the head of the Voudou women” accused Watchman Alreo

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37 Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 150-151. Jordan points out that black women were sometimes described as being able to birth children more easily than white women. See page 151. The contemporary example of this belief would be the image of the “welfare queen.” This stereotype also relies on the supposedly excessive fertility and “uncontrolled sexuality” of African American women. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 76-78.

38 Long, 46; Fandrich, 248; Ward, 66. Two of Marie’s daughters had five children each. Ward believes that there was a miscommunication between the reporter and Marie’s daughter, Marie Philomène (Madame Legendre) concerning the number of children that her mother had with de Glapion.

39 Long 46; Fandrich, 248; Ward, 67, 98. Marie Heloise Eucharist and Marie Philomène can be found under various spellings in the public records including Eloise, Euchariste, Eucharis, Epicaris, and Philomise, Phelomise, Philome, respectively. See Fandrich, 248; Long, 46, 273-274n; and Ward, 48.

40 Further research within the New Orleans newspapers will be necessary to determine the earliest that Marie Laveau is referred to as the Voodoo Queen in print. Most sources claim that by 1830 Laveau was the recognized leader of Voodoo in the city, but where the information came from is unclear. Ward is especially vague on this point. See Tallant, 51, 55; Thomas H. Furlong, *Marie Laveau* (New Orleans: by the author, 1947), 1; Fandrich, 244; Duggal, 166. Long, 47 cites 1850 as the date of Laveau’s recognition as Voodoo Queen. Although none of these sources can clearly substantiate their claims, it seems that by “recognition” they mean by New Orleans at large (whites and blacks not involved in Voodoo) through the newspapers. Thus, New Orleanians involved in Voodoo at the time might tell a completely different story of how Marie Laveau “became Queen.”
of “having by fraud come into possession of a statue of a virgin” which belonged to her. The *Daily Picayune* reporter clearly did not agree with Laveau that the statue was worth fifty dollars: “We saw the thing called a ‘statue’- it is a bad looking rag baby, worth about four dimes.” Whether or not the statue had anything to do with Voodoo is difficult to say with certainty, but clearly these two things were linked in the minds of the reporters and most likely their white readers as well.

As Queen of the Voodoos, Marie Laveau is reported to have been a very busy woman. She sold *gris-gris*—love charms to high society ladies and luck charms to gamblers; she aided defendants to win their cases and politicians to win their campaigns. She had the police force and the city judges in her back pocket. She earned cash and secrets as a hairdresser for the most prominent women in the city. A network of slaves and free blacks provided her with another important source of information. She led the slave dances in Congo Square on Sundays and the annual St. John’s Eve celebrations on Lake Pontchartrain where she danced with a snake, in addition to the private Voodoo ceremonies she led throughout the year. She attended Mass at St. Louis Cathedral, visited inmates at the Parish Prison, and nursed yellow fever victims. On the side, she ran a brothel known as Maison Blanche, a cabin on the lake. Marie Laveau died an extremely wealthy, old woman but was “reborn” through her daughter who was also known as

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41 “Curious Charge of Swindling,” *Daily Picayune*, 3 July 1850, quoted in Fandrich, 254 and in Tallant, 67. This report is corroborated in the Third Municipality Judicial Records where an entry of the accusation can be found. See Fandrich, 255. The value of the doll may have been its power as it may have been used in rituals.

42 *Gris-gris* denotes a charm created for various purposes including protection, luck, healing, and love. The word originates from the Mande language. As early as 1758, Antoine Le Page du Pratz described the enslaved Africans as greatly attached to their *gris-gris* in the first published history of Louisiana. See Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 38-39. In 1773, four male slaves were accused of plotting to poison an overseer. One of the accused used the word “*gris-gris*” to describe the poison he made in the trial. The word is used throughout the record of the trial by several participants on both sides of the case including the judge. It seems that the word was known and understood by all parties present. See Laura Porteus, “The Gri-Gri Case,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 17 (1934): 50.
Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen. This is a brief synthesis of the descriptions of Marie Laveau found in sources from the late nineteenth century on.  

Much of the information on Marie Laveau as a *Voodooienne* is difficult to substantiate through historical documents such as notary records or birth certificates. Instead, newspaper reports and oral histories have to be relied upon to discern what this part of her life was like. These are tricky sources to use. The newspaper articles written during the nineteenth century were authored by white males. These reporters, as outsiders to the Voodoo community, have little authority in writing about what they saw. It is questionable if these authors actually witnessed Voodoo ceremonies at all or if those they did witness were “real.” However, as white males in nineteenth-century New Orleans, these writers had the authority to write whatever they wanted about African Americans. The sensationalistic and sexualized depictions of many of these ceremonies demonstrate this power as the authors’ own racist perceptions permeate their descriptions.

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The oral histories collected by the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project and quoted heavily by Tallant must also be analyzed with caution. Most of the interviewees were old, and in their attempts to remember events that they witnessed decades earlier as children, there is considerable room for error. These oral sources are important, however, because legends are created by gossip and stories passed down through generations. The case becomes even more muddled as Marie Laveau mère becomes confused with her daughters, Marie Eucharist and Marie Philomène, who, in turn, are confused with one another.

The one thing that these reports and oral histories do make clear is that Marie Laveau practiced the Voodoo religion in some capacity. Voodoo or Vodou is the result of a mixture of religious traditions created by West African slaves brought to the Americas as they came in contact with European religious traditions as well as those of Native Americans. It developed in parts of the Francophone Caribbean, namely in Saint Domingue (Haiti) and in Louisiana. In his 1797 tract, *Description Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique, et Historique de la Partie Francais de l’Isle Saint-Domingue*, M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry used the word “vaudoux” to describe both a dance and a religious idea or “superstition” of African slaves and their descendants in colonial Saint Domingue. A white Creole born in Martinique, Moreau de Saint-Méry later settled in

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Saint Domingue and became a member of the Superior Council of the Colony.\textsuperscript{45} He describes Vaudoux as “an all-powerful, supernatural being” which comes in the form of a snake. The snake communicates its knowledge of the past, present and future through a priest or priestess.\textsuperscript{46} He was partly correct; in the Fon language spoken in Dahomey, \textit{vodun}, means “god” or “spirit” and refers to a pantheon of deities who act as intermediaries between humans and the spirit world. (In Yoruba they are called \textit{òrisà}.)\textsuperscript{47}

Likewise, in Haitian Vodou there is belief in one supreme being accompanied by a variety of lesser spirits called \textit{lwa}.\textsuperscript{48} The \textit{lwa} and spirits of ancestors aid humans with their spiritual health and everyday problems. Honored through elaborate altars, sacrifice, and ceremonies that incorporate dance and music, these spirits communicate to the worshippers through possession. Vodou is marked by its adaptive nature. In the introduction to \textit{The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou}, Donald Cosentino writes, “Fon and Haiti share an ancient and ongoing history of inducting foreign deities into their heavens.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus, all sorts of religious and material culture from a variety of African, European and other sources have been incorporated into Vodou religious practices. One


\textsuperscript{46} Spencer, 1.


\textsuperscript{48} “Lwa” is the standard Kreyòl spelling as set by the Institut Pedagogique National. Some sources use “\textit{loa}.”

of the most obvious examples of this is the relation of Catholic saints, through their symbolic chromolithographs, to different lwa.\(^5^0\)

The connection between Voodoo and Catholicism can be found in accounts of Marie Laveau in nineteenth-century New Orleans. In many ways Laveau was a devout Catholic. Her marriage to Jacques Paris was recorded by the Catholic Church, and each of her children was baptized. She also served as godmother to her grandchildren and children of other relatives and friends. According to her obituary, Marie Laveau was close to Père Antoine, a Capuchin priest appointed pastor of St. Louis Cathedral in 1785. In addition to serving as her spiritual mentor, the two worked together during the yellow fever seasons nursing patients back to health or making their passage to death more comfortable.\(^5^1\) Although most sources on Laveau see Catholicism and Voodoo as incompatible, Voodoo worshippers do not understand it that way. Instead, the two coexist easily as means to a spiritual end.\(^5^2\)

\(^5^0\) Cosentino, “Imagine Heaven,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou 30-32, 36-37, 40-42, 44, 47; Donald Cosentino, “It’s All for You, Sen Jak!” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, 253; Long, Spiritual Merchants, 13, 18-19.

\(^5^1\) Ward, 23-24, 27, 61-62, 72; Fandrich, 117, 180, 294; Long, Spiritual Merchants, 45; “Death of Marie Laveau,” Daily Picayune, 17 June 1881. The Spanish Père Antoine’s full name was Antonio Ildefonso Morenory Arze de Sedella. See Mary Louise Points, “Archdiocese of New Orleans,” Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XI [online], (Robert Appleton Company, 1911), New Advent accessed 19 January 2005; available from http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11005b.htm. In their article, “The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852,” Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould argue that by the nineteenth-century the Catholic Church in New Orleans had become both Africanized and feminized through a process of “religious creolization” that began with the founding of the colony. African women and their descendants made the Church their own and the white male clergy recognized the importance of these women to their work. Clark and Gould also see godparenting as an important example of this process. “Godparenting was the most formal way people of African descent laid claim to the resources and spaces of one of the city’s chief institutions and made them their own. Enslavement resulted in the violent rupture with family and community that necessitated the refabrication of identity and social affiliation. Godparenting was an effective form of fictive kinship that helped recreate community and familial bonds, knit together the fractured polity of the enslaved, and advanced both individual and group interests.” See Clark and Gould, “The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism,” William and Mary Quarterly 59, no. 2 (2002): 410, 412, 428.

\(^5^2\) Cosentino, “Imagine Heaven,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou 36.
Numerous sources also credit Marie Laveau with the introduction of Catholicism into New Orleans Voodoo, in particular the worship of the Virgin Mary. In fact, a recurring theme in the novels discussed later in this paper is that of a Catholic Marie’s transition to a *Voodooienne*, as if the two identities were mutually exclusive. Often this change causes a crisis in which she must reconcile the two religions. It seems unlikely that Laveau would have been the first to incorporate Catholic symbols into Voodoo, as she was neither the first nor the only Voodoo leader in the city. Tallant cites two *Voodooiennes*, Sanité Dédé and Marie Saloppé, who lived and practiced in New Orleans before Laveau. Supposedly Saloppé led Laveau through her initiation.\textsuperscript{53}

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Voodoo and its variable spellings (Voodoo, Vaudoux, Vodou, Vodun, etc.) came to be used by whites as an umbrella term that covers a variety of African-derived religious and healing traditions, better known as “superstitions” and “folk medicine” practiced by both African Americans and people of African descent in the Caribbean. In her book *Spiritual Merchants*, Long differentiates “Voodoo” and “Vodou” as organized religions in New Orleans and Haiti, respectively from “Hoodoo” as “the magical practices of ‘workers’ or ‘doctors’ who serve individual clients.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{53} Tallant, 44, 46.

\textsuperscript{54} Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, xvi. Fandrich, 200. Joseph Murphy points out that the single term “vaudoux” is deceiving in regards to Haiti because of the variety among Haitians who practice these religious rites throughout the country. Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1994), 14-15. In his introduction to *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Cosentino also argues that there is not just one type of Vodou practiced in Haiti. He writes, “Clearly there are regional Vodous with significant variation in custom and belief. There is the Vodou shaped during slavery, and sketched by early travelers such as Labat. There is the Vodou of the Revolution described by Moreau de Saint-Méry. There is the Vodou of the epoch between Dessalines and Solouque, when the churches were emptied of foreign priests, and Vodou was free to reimagine a chromo-lit and sequined heaven. And there is the Vodou that developed after the 1860 concordat with Rome, which opened Haiti to a boundless emporium of ideas and images.” See page 53.
Untangling Haitian Vodou from Voodoo practiced in New Orleans is a difficult task. Until recently, scholarship has given all of the credit for New Orleans Voodoo to Haiti and the 3,000 plus slaves who fled the Revolution with their masters to settle in New Orleans.\(^\text{55}\) Certainly these enslaved men and women made an impact on black culture in New Orleans. However, in her study of Afro-Creole culture Gwendolyn Midlo Hall found that there existed in New Orleans similar practices created by the African slaves who had lived in the Louisiana colony since 1721.\(^\text{56}\) Ina Fandrich agrees: “Hence, despite the widespread assumption that urban New Orleanian Voodoo is an odd, somewhat corrupted continuity of Haitian popular religion, it is now possible, in my view, to suggest that Louisiana developed its own unique African-based religion, into which Caribbean elements were woven only later.”\(^\text{57}\) The cultures developed in the two French colonies were similar, but the majority of slaves in Saint Domingue came from Dahomey in the Bight of Benin area, while the largest population of Africans in Louisiana was the Bambara from Senegambia.\(^\text{58}\) Nevertheless, black culture in Haiti and New Orleans was forever linked together in the minds of most whites, despite these demographic differences. Fandrich explains that “since the Haitian revolution in which Vodun rituals played a crucial part, every kind of what was called ‘Negro superstitions,’

\(^{55}\) Paul F. Lachance, “The Foreign French,” in Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization, eds., Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1992), 117. The influx of Haitian \textit{émigrés}—whites, free people of color, and enslaved blacks—came in waves: late 1790s, 1803, and then via Cuba, 1809-1810. As a representative example of the idea that Voodoo came to Louisiana via Saint Domingue can be found in Grace King, New Orleans: The Place and the People, (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 341: “Among the African slaves, under any applications or assumptions of Christianity, there was always Voudou superstition, lying dormant, with their past, but in the early days of slavery there was little chance or opportunity to practise the rites of Voudouism...Their formal introduction in the city can be plausibly traced to the immigrant St. Domingo slaves.”


\(^{57}\) Fandrich, 200.

\(^{58}\) Hall, 31; Fandrich, 199-201, 210.
i.e., every form of African religiosity involving drums, dance, chants and charms, or ‘fetishes,’ was collectively labeled ‘Voodoo’ by Anglo-North Americans.”

Moreau de Saint-Méry’s book on Saint Domingue portrays the French colony as he saw it in the late 1780s, on the eve of the Haitian Revolution. Description contains a detailed passage that describes a Voodoo ceremony. It is not clear whether Moreau de Saint-Méry was an actual witness to a Voodoo ceremony or if the knowledge was second-hand. In his book, Voodoo in Haiti, Alfred Métraux reviews the “summary but valuable description” from Moreau de Saint-Méry. He concludes that the passage leaves “no room for doubt that there existed in Saint-Domingue, towards the end of the eighteenth century, rites and practices which have scarcely changed up to modern times. The authority of the priest, his dress, the importance of trance, signs drawn on the ground are familiar now as then.”

In the accounts of New Orleans Voodoo, from the nineteenth century to present-day scholarship, Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description of a ceremony recurs over and over again despite the fact that it portrays eighteenth-century Saint Domingue. Even in her 1994 dissertation on Laveau, Fandrich discusses Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description as if it was about New Orleans. In almost every description of New Orleans Voodoo, often

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59 Fandrich, 200.
60 It is difficult to know how Moreau de Saint-Méry acquired his description, especially in light of his own admission that “the meeting of true disciples of Voodoo, or at least the ones which have lost least of their primitive purity, is always secret. It is held in the dark of night and in a place closed and sheltered from all profane eyes.” See Spencer, 2.
61 Métraux, 20, 38.
62 Fandrich feels that in order to better understand Marie Laveau and the New Orleans Voodoo in which she participated, African cultural elements and traditions must be at the center of the study. See Fandrich, 10, 14. Thus, she is interested in tracing aspects of New Orleans Voodoo to their West African sources. One way she does this is through an “Afrocentric” reading of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description of a Voodoo ceremony through a comparison of components in the description to West African religious traditions. She also asked linguistic experts in Malinke/Bambara languages and in the Kikongo language to “translate” a song included in the quote. The song in question is quoted by Moreau de Saint-Méry as Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! hen!
in conjunction with narratives on Marie Laveau, Moreau de Saint-Méry’s account of a Voodoo ceremony can be found in some form. An obvious consequence of its pervasive occurrence in the literature on Voodoo in New Orleans is that the description sets the tone for the many that followed. On one hand, Moreau de Saint-Méry’s verbal depiction of possession during a Vodou ceremony is comparable to anthropologist Alfred Métraux’s observations of the entrance of a *Iwa* in the body of a participant during his study of Haitian Vodou in the late 1940s.\(^63\) Moreau de Saint-Méry writes:

> The rite over, the King puts his hand or his foot on the adder’s cage and soon is possessed. He then transmits this mood to the Queen, who in turn passes it on to those in the circle. Each makes movements, in which the upper part of the body, the head and shoulders, seem to be dislocated...Faintings and raptures take over some of them and a sort of fury some of the others, but for all there is a nervous trembling which they cannot master. They spin around ceaselessly. And there are some in this species of bacchanal who tear their clothing and even bite their flesh. Others who are deprived of their senses and fall in their tracks, are taken...into the darkness of a neighboring room, where a disgusting prostitution exercises a most hideous empire.\(^64\)

Métraux’s version of the beginnings of a possession written over a hundred and fifty years later is as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Canga bafio té} \\
\text{Canga moune de lê} \\
\text{Canga do ki la} \\
\text{Canga li.}
\end{align*}
\]


Fandrich concludes: “In any case, whatever the correct translation is, whether it is the Malinke version or the Kikongo version, or both, it is clear that this song has no connection to the Bight of Benin and that its common usages have no parallel in Haiti. Nor is it of Haitian origin...” See Fandrich, 210. Instead of Moreau de Saint-Méry, Fandrich cites an 1883 travel book, *Souvenirs d’Amerique et de France par une Créole*, as the source for her carefully analyzed description. Fandrich failed to realize, however, that the author of *Souvenirs* took this passage straight from Moreau de Saint-Méry’s tract on St. Domingue. See Hélène d’Aquin Allain, *Souvenirs d’Amerique et de France par une Créole*, (Paris: Perisse Frères, 1883). Allain specifically says that she is quoting Moreau de Saint-Méry’s passages on whites and blacks. The passages taken from *Description* are verbatim. I cannot understand how Fandrich missed this, especially since she seemingly did her own translations of Allain.

\(^63\) The person possessed by a *Iwa* during a ceremony is often referred to as a horse. The *Iwa* is said to ride the person during possession. See Métraux, 120.

\(^64\) Spencer, 5.
People possessed start by giving an impression of having lost control of their motor system. Shaken by spasmodic convulsions, they pitch forward, as though projected by a spring, turn frantically round and round, stiffen and stay still with body bent forward, sway, stagger, save themselves, again lose balance, only to fall finally in a state of semi-consciousness. Sometimes such attacks are sudden, sometimes they are heralded by preliminary signs: a vacant or anguished expression, mild tremblings, panting breath or drops of sweat on the brow; the face becomes tense or suffering.65

The main difference between the two descriptions is Moreau de Saint-Méry’s insistence on the sexual nature of the ceremony which ends, according to him, with an orgy. His observation that worshippers under possession rip their clothes and bite themselves like animals appears to be more a product of his racist expectations of people of African descent than an accurate description.66 Africans were thought to be uncivilized savages prone to superstition and sexual excess. These same sexually tantalizing and beastly disgusting descriptions are found in depictions of New Orleans Voodoo- those that clearly bear the mark of Moreau de Saint-Méry and those where his influence is not so apparent. As Carolyn Morrow Long writes: “The description is now, unfortunately, accepted as the classic New Orleans Voodoo ceremony, complete with queen, snake, gris-gris, bloody animal sacrifice, and sexual debauchery.”67

65 Métraux, 120-121.
66 Métraux, 135 writes, “Too often people imagine that a crowd exalted by mystic enthusiasm is the usual setting for Voodoo possessions. In fact those who attend ceremonies as spectators only cast an occasional absentminded glance at the goings on...At no time is the crowd subject to collective delirium, or even to a degree of excitement propitious to ecstasy. The traditional dances of Voodoo...all carried out with great seriousness, a subtle sense of rhythm and admirable suppleness- are far from being dionysian.”
As early as 1820, New Orleans newspapers reported on Voodoo in the city. Throughout the 1850s, the papers printed numerous articles on Voodoo. Most of these articles discuss raids of Voodoo gatherings and the arrests that usually followed. As the Civil War approached, panic over the divisive issue of slavery led to the restriction of the rights of free people of color across the South.\(^6^8\) New Orleans historian Marcus B. Christian came to the conclusion in his own study of newspaper articles on Voodoo that “...the frequent charges of voodooism against the Negroes were made during periods of turbulence and stress. These charges grew in volume as the years advanced towards the Civil War...”\(^6^9\)

For example, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* reports on July 31, 1850 that “unlawful assembling of slaves” for Voodoo meetings was on the rise. These clandestine meetings brought “the slaves in contact with disorderly free negroes and mischievous whites.”\(^7^0\) White slave owners’ fear of insurrection underlies this report; the connection between Voodoo and slave rebellion had become particularly pertinent after the Haitian Revolution.\(^7^1\) Many whites believed that their otherwise obedient slaves learned defiant and rebellious behavior from contact with white troublemakers and, especially free blacks. The article continues to describe what occurs at these Voodoo meetings: “The public may have learned from the [recent] Voudou disclosures what takes place at such

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meetings- the mystic ceremonies, wild orgies, dancing, singing, etc...” It concludes that “[t]he police should have their attention continually alive to the importance of breaking up such unlawful practices.” 72 The brief description of what occurs at these ceremonies hits the highlights- weird rites, a dance, and sex- further reasons to put a stop to such gatherings, as well as to keep African Americans enslaved. Reports on “unlawful assemblies” for Voodoo meetings are found throughout the 1850s and into the 1860s; most of the participants were women.

Marie Laveau supposedly held her own “unlawful assemblies” at her house on St. Ann Street and on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain on St. John’s Eve. She also was said to have led the dances in Congo Square on Sunday afternoons. Gerald July described to the interviewer from the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project what his grandfather had told him about Voodoo meetings held in the backyard of Marie Laveau’s house.

They used to meet there every Friday night...A white sheet was spread out on the ground, and lighted candles was stuck up all around the edge of it, and in the middle was about five empty bottles. All the dancers, men and women, was naked....Then they would begin to do another kind of dance, cross’ hands from one side to the other, and all the time singin’ them Creole songs. Marie Laveau used to stand in the middle, and she was the only one wit’ clothes on... My grandpa said that she would call her snake and make it crawl all over the dancers’ legs...When the dance got faster the people would holler all kinds of things... They would turn around so fast that they’d get dizzy and fall down...Marie Laveau had a dance she did all by herself. She would wrap that snake around her shoulders and she’d shake and twist herself like she was a snake. Her feet would never move. She had another dance she did wit’ a fish. She’d hold a big red fish behind her head and do her snake dance. My grandpa said that was something to see.73

Almost every description of Marie Laveau includes the fact that she kept a snake in a box and incorporated snakes into her Voodoo ceremonies in various ways. Because a

73 Tallant, 61-62.
version of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description often accompanies information on Marie
Laveau, it is probable that it influenced the idea of Laveau’s use of a live snake in
ceremonies. Moreau de Saint-Méry believed that “Vaudoux” was a snake god which the
enslaved Africans worshipped. In Haitian Vodou, “the supreme Rada serpent divinity” is
Damballah who is often pictured with his wife Ayida Wédo, the rainbow spirit, as two
snakes. Damballah is also a water spirit.74 Métraux points out that live snakes are no
longer used to symbolize Damballah; however, he believes that it must have been
different during the eighteenth century because, in addition to Moreau de Saint-Méry,
another account of Saint Domingue written around the same time also described slaves
worshipping with live snakes. Métraux concludes, “But this is as maybe, snake-worship
died out in the nineteenth century during which there is no further mention of it.”75 The
image of the live snake might persist in accounts of New Orleans Voodoo due to the
recycling of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description of Saint Domingue, in which case,

74 Quote from Cosentino, “Interleaf C: Danbala and Ayida Wédo,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, 88; Métraux, 38, 104-105; Long, Spiritual Merchants, 20, 22; Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of
Haiti, (New York: Delta Publishing, 1970), 114-116. The pantheon of iwa are divided into two groups:
Rada and Petwo. The Rada iwa are derived from Dahomey deities. The Petwo is said to be of Haitian
origin; however, it is influenced by Kongo religious traditions. See Cosentino, “Interleaf B: Rada Altar,” in
Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, 58; Cosentino, “Interleaf H: Petwo/Kongo Altar,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian
Vodou, 203; Métraux, 39, 86; Thompson, 164; Long, Spiritual Merchants, 20. In Dahomey, the “good
serpent of the sky” is Da who is often depicted with his female side as Da Ayido Hwedo, a rainbow snake.
In Kikongo, the word for the rainbow snake is ndamba which describes the way two snakes intertwine
around a tree to mate. Thompson writes, “Thus, in a commonsensical way, the iconographies of two
classical African religions came together; the center post, a ritual site around which vodun devotees dance,
is often painted with rainbow stripes or embellished with relief representations of serpents intertwined.”
See Thompson, 176-179, quote on 179.

75 Métraux, 38. In her study of Haitian Vodou, Zora Neale Hurston claims that every altar for Damballah
that she came across in Haiti either contained a snake made of iron or a real green snake. She points out
that Haitians do not worship the physical snake; rather, the snake was merely the "'bonne' (maid servant)
of Damballah and was therefore protected and honored.” See Hurston, Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in
Haiti and Jamaica, (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 118.
Marie Laveau or other Voodoo leaders in New Orleans may have never used real snakes in their ceremonies.\textsuperscript{76}

On the other hand, the practice may have come to Louisiana via the free blacks and slaves brought from Saint Domingue by their masters as they fled the Revolution. If this occurred, the name Damballah seemingly did not make the journey; there is no mention of the name “Damballah” in any source on Laveau. Instead, Marie Laveau supposedly referred to her snake as \textit{Le Grand Zombi}.\textsuperscript{77} Fandrich and Ward suggest that \textit{Le Grand Zombi} is derived from \textit{Zambi a Mpungu} the name of the Supreme God in the KiKongo language.\textsuperscript{78} The Kingdom of Kongo had its share of people shipped to Louisiana as slaves near the end of the colonial period.\textsuperscript{79} It is quite possible, then, for Laveau and other Voodoo leaders to have mixed the image of Damballah with the Kongo God \textit{Zambi a Mpungu} to form their own, Great Serpent Spirit or \textit{Le Grand Zombi}. Yet, the figure of a snake does not represent \textit{Zambi a Mpungu} in Kongo iconography. There is, however, a snake spirit in the Kongo religion that is also found in Haitian Vodou. In KiKongo, \textit{Simbi} is a collective term for spirit. In Haiti there are numerous \textit{Simbi Iwa} who come in the form of a snake and are also associated with water.\textsuperscript{80} Thus, Zombi as the name of a snake could have come from the KiKongo word \textit{Simbi}. More investigation is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{76} I would like to thank Dr. Grey Gundaker for bringing her suspicions of the use of live snakes in New Orleans Voodoo to my attention.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} According to Tallant, the queen would begin a Voodoo ceremony with the words: “\textit{"L' Appé vini, le Grand Zombi, "L' Appé vini, pou fe gris-gris!}” ("He is coming, the Great Zombi, he is coming, to make gris-gris!"). See page 13. Fandrich cites George Washington Cable’s articles, “The Dance in Place Congo” and “Creole Slave Songs” in \textit{Century Magazine}, Vol. 31, February and April, respectively, (1886) as one source for \textit{le Grand Zombi}; however, I can find no reference to this in either article. It should be noted that the use of the term Zombi in reference to New Orleans Voodoo is not the same as the idea of the “living dead” whose soulless bodies are worked like slaves found in Haiti (or horror movies). See Hurston, 179-198 and Wade Davis, \textit{The Serpent and the Rainbow}, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Fandrich, 206; Ward, 91-92. Thompson, 107 spells the Supreme God of the Kongo religion \textit{Nzambi Mpungu}.
  \item \textsuperscript{79} Fandrich, 67-68.
  \item \textsuperscript{80} Thompson, 111; Métraux, 105; Deren, 116-119.
\end{itemize}
needed to confirm these hypotheses. It is important to remember that enslaved Africans and their descendants did create their own mixed culture in Louisiana and did not depend completely on people brought from Saint Domingue. Either way, the snake is one of the most pervasive images in the literature of Marie Laveau, and, if anything, shows the creativity and adaptability of Africans as their different cultures meshed together in the New World to create new religious traditions.

One place where Marie Laveau supposedly danced in honor of *le Grand Zombi* was Congo Square. Early in the French colonial period, slaves began to utilize an area at the rear of the city as a market place on Saturdays and Sundays. This practice continued throughout the Spanish period and into the middle of the nineteenth century. In addition to acting as vendors, the enslaved Africans and their descendants used the space and the free time to commune socially through music and dance. In 1817 the city council passed a law that officially sanctioned these dances, but confined them to Sunday afternoons in this public space. Commonly referred to as Circus Square due to its use by traveling circuses, the open space, also used as a market and for dances, later gained the nickname Congo Square (*Place Congo*). Through the 1840s changes were made in the city that restricted the dances and altered the physical space of Congo Square. By the Civil War the dances stopped completely due to these changes.81

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81 Jerah Johnson, “New Orleans’ Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation,” *Louisiana History*, Vol. 32 (Spring 1991): 121-122, 125, 128, 132, 136-138, 141, 148-151; Gary A. Donaldson, “A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862,” *Journal of Negro History*, 69, no. 2, (1984): 64, 67; Asbury, 178,187. When the Americans took control of Louisiana, the Spanish fort St. Ferdinand which stood behind the marketplace was torn down. The new area was designated as a public commons and officially named *Place Publique*. Mr. Gaetano’s “Congo Circus” from Cuba gave the square one of its nicknames, Circus Square. Johnson argues that enslaved blacks and free people color shortened the name of the Congo Circus (which was for whites only) to Congo which eventually led to the square to be known as Congo Square. Clearly, the dances performed weekly by black slaves and free people color also had something to do with the nickname Congo Square. Congo was a generic name for Africa in Louisiana. The square was sometimes referred to as *Place des Negres*. See
Numerous visitors to New Orleans commented on the dances held at Congo Square. In 1819 architect Benjamin Latrobe came upon the common during a walk on a Sunday afternoon. The arrangement of the dancers that Latrobe described in his journal suggests the idea of nation dances practiced in the Caribbean where enslaved Africans gathered together by nation and took turns performing their own dances. Latrobe called one song he heard “uncouth” and decided that it was sung “in some African language, for it was not French,...”\(^8\)\(^2\) At the time of Latrobe’s visit, the number of Africans in the slave population was still large, but by the next decade or two, most enslaved and free blacks in New Orleans were born in the New World. With this change in demographics came a change in the dances and music. One newspaper article on Congo Square claimed that “[t]hese dances were kept up until about 1819, but not later. Subsequently, however, the descendants of the original Africans got up an imitation, but it could not compare to the weird orgie of their progenitors.”\(^8\)\(^3\)

Because the written descriptions of Congo Square in the nineteenth century came from white observers, it is difficult to know the true nature of these dances and what they meant to the participants. According to some sources, these dances had connections to Voodoo. This idea finds precedence in Moreau de Saint-Méry when he introduces his section on Vodou with the description of a dance by the same name performed by enslaved Africans on Saint Domingue. A century later George Washington Cable

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\(^8\)\(^3\) Quote from “The Congo Dance,” *New York Times*, 3 November 1879; Johnson, 145-146.
published two articles on dances and songs performed at Congo Square. It is clear that he used Moreau de Saint-Méry as a reference.84 In his article, “Creole Slave Songs,” Cable introduces his discussion of New Orleans Voodoo with a description of his visit to Marie Laveau who “sat, quaking with feebleness in an ill-looking old rocking chair, her head bowed, and her wild gray witch’s tresses hanging about her shriveled, yellow neck...”85 Cable goes on to cite Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description of a Voodoo ceremony. By including an explanation of Voodoo in his article on slave songs and mentioning a dance called “Voudou” in “The Dance at Place Congo,” Cable emphasizes a connection between Voodoo, dance and music. He was correct to do so in that music and dance play an integral part in Voodoo ceremonies. For the white spectators who crowded around Congo Square each Sunday to watch the dances and the white reporters, like Cable, who wrote exposés on these performances, however, the differences between dances for pleasure or Voodoo dances were not discernable. The similar ways in which dances at Congo Square and Voodoo ceremonies are described further reflects whites’ lack of understanding of the religion.86

84 George Washington Cable, “The Dance in Place Congo,” Century Magazine, Vol. 31, no. 4 (1886): 517-532 and “Creole Slave Songs,” Century Magazine, Vol. 31, no. 6 (1886): 807-828. In “Creole Slave Songs” Cable explicitly mentions Moreau de Saint-Méry, while some of his descriptions of the dances in “The Dance at Place Congo” read very much like Moreau de Saint-Méry’s own descriptions of Saint Domingue dances. The dances performed at Congo Square were probably similar to those written about by Moreau de Saint-Méry, especially because of the influx of black people from the island in the early nineteenth century. However, I agree with Jerah Johnson’s admonition to not rely on Cable too heavily. Johnson writes, “However carefully Cable used [Moreau de Saint-Méry’s] works, probably to fill in details lacking in the descriptions of Congo Square dances he gleaned from elderly New Orleanians, the fact remains that he was writing long after the dances ceased in Congo Square and using some materials from a questionable source. Thus while Cable’s descriptions probably are not misleading in their essentials, they have to be used with care.” See Johnson, 144n.
85 Cable, “Creole Slave Songs,” 817.
86 “The Congo Dance,” New York Times, 3 November 1879 reports that it took a while for the drums to “arouse the dull and sluggish dancers, but when the point of excitement came, nothing can faithfully portray the wild and frenzied motions they would go through.” Compare that quote to an account of a Voodoo ceremony said to have taken place in the 1830s: “A scene of the orgies of Voodoo at that period was a building in the centre of an abandoned brickyard...When the excitement is at its height it is impossible to portray the wild and frenzied motions of the dancers...As the orgies progress the dancers
It is impossible to know for sure whether or not Congo Square was a space utilized for Voodoo worship. One man interviewed for the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project adamantly claimed, “People thought [the Congo Square Dances] was Voodoo dances and it’s true that a lot of the people who danced there was Voodooos, but they really wasn’t the real thing. The regular dances wasn’t ever held in public.” However, the connection between Voodoo and Congo Square made by whites writing during the nineteenth century about people of African descent in New Orleans helps explain why sources claim that Marie Laveau led the dances at Congo Square. From what can be gathered from the available sources, most dancers at Congo Square were African and later Creole (French-speaking, born in the Americas) slaves. Some dancers were probably free, but it seems that the majority were not of mixed race.

As a free woman of color, Marie Laveau’s social status may have kept her from attending the dances at Congo Square. In her study of free women of color in Southern gulf port cities, Virginia Meacham Gould argues that free women of color, the majority of whom were of mixed racial descent, created their own identity separate from those of white women and enslaved women who were mostly not biracial. The social status of these free women of color depended on several factors all of which removed the woman

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frequently faint from ecstasy and exhaustion.” See “Old Southern Voodooism. Amulets, Magic Potions, Witch Hazel, Serpents, and Toads,” New York Times, 19 November 1894. While some of the overlap may be due to lax standards concerning plagiarism in newspapers of the time, the similarities in these descriptions also point to the connection between Voodoo and dance in Congo Square in the minds of the white authors, if not in actual practice.

Tallant, 18.

It is difficult to discern the make-up of the Congo Square dancers. Latrobe mentions that he “did not observe a dozen yellow faces” when he came upon Congo Square in 1819. See Latrobe, 49. The only distinction Johnson makes is that not many slaves from the American parts of the city came to Congo Square. While he is not specific about whether the majority of the dancers were more enslaved or free or whether there was an even mix, Johnson points out that Congo Square was adjacent to Faubourg Tremé, “antebellum New Orleans’ largest and most important free-colored neighborhood.” He seems to believe that the free people of color who lived in the neighborhood came to the dances at Congo Square. See Johnson, 139.
in question from slavery. Most important, of course, would be the woman’s freedom and whether or not she was born free. Other factors include the woman’s phenotype, her family background, her financial resources, her access to education, and her religion.\(^8^9\)

The research by Fandrich, Long, and Ward suggests that Marie Laveau possessed many of the qualities which would have set her apart from the majority of dancers at Congo Square: as the daughter of a well-to-do free man of color and a free woman of color, the life partner of a white Creole (although he passed for a Creole of color), the owner of several properties (shrewdly placed in her children’s names), and, by most accounts, light-skinned. The rumors that suggest Laveau’s Voodoo and hairdressing businesses made her a wealthy woman does not match the public records, but neither did she live in poverty.\(^9^0\) Because she only made her mark (X) on public records, it seems likely that Laveau did not receive much education. Congo Square most likely attracted people who were below Laveau socially as poorer free people of color and free blacks (not biracial) or as slaves. However, by all accounts, Laveau’s position as the Voodoo Queen brought her into contact with and gained her the respect of people of African descent, enslaved and free, rich and poor. In fact, many of her secrets came from a “tightly knit network” of blacks throughout the city.\(^9^1\) With her house on St. Ann Street a short walk from Congo Square, it is not difficult to imagine her going there, if only, because it was an area in the city where a majority of her fellow Voodoo believers concentrated at given times.


\(^{9^0}\) Fandrich, 247; Ward, 76; Long, 52.

\(^{9^1}\) Fandrich, 280.
As a free woman of color, Marie Laveau had access to the white, in addition to the colored and black communities in New Orleans. According to numerous sources, Laveau worked as a hairdresser serving prominent white ladies throughout the Creole and American sections of the city. This position allowed her to acquire gossip and family secrets that she would then use to her advantage. Carolyn Morrow Long found no documental evidence that supports the idea that Laveau was a hairdresser. However, it is not implausible for Laveau to have earned a living dressing hair, as it was an occupation held by free women of color in antebellum New Orleans.  

In addition to its practical advantages as a source of income and information, hairdressing may have had further significance to Marie Laveau. In the Yoruba religious tradition, one of the characteristics of the òrìṣà, (akin to the lwa) Òsun, is that of expert hair-plaider. In his essay, “Hidden Power: Òsun, the Seventeenth Odu,” Rowland Abiodun explains:

> Besides adding to the power and beauty of the human face and the head which is the focus of much aesthetic interest in Yorùbá art, hair-plaiting carries an important religious significance in Yorùbá tradition. The hair-plaider (hairdresser) is seen as one who honors and beautifies ori (ori-imù), the ‘inner-head,’ the ‘divinity’ of the head. One’s head is also taken to be the visible representation of one’s destiny and the essence of one’s personality. Hair-plaiting is thus highly regarded, as a good ori will, to some extent, depend on how well its physical counterpart has been treated.  

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92 Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 46-47. It seems the earliest source that states Laveau was a hairdresser is Henry Castellanos’ *New Orleans As It Was*, (1895), 97. A couple of people interviewed for the Louisiana Writers’ Project also mention that she worked as a hairdresser. See Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 274n. Tallant includes specific addresses for the business when it was practiced by Marie Laveau’s daughter. Fandrich and Ward both repeat that Laveau held this occupation without any further proof than the typical sources on Laveau, i.e. Tallant. Free women of color worked such jobs in the domestic service industry. See Kimberly Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 57-69. Ward uses Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experiences in the High Life*, (Cincinnati: by the author, 1869) to describe what Laveau most likely experienced as a hairdresser. Potter was a Francophone free woman of color who dressed hair in New Orleans in the 1850s. See Ward, 73-75, 80-81.

This may seem like a stretch, and, clearly, more research needs to be done on such a connection between Laveau as hairdresser and her spiritual work. However, Robert Farris Thompson explains how Yoruba *ôrìṣà* and Dahomey *vodun* blended together in the Bight of Benin centuries before Europeans brought enslaved Africans to Saint Domingue and Louisiana. He writes, “Fusion and refusion of Yoruba spirits, first in Dahomey and then all over again in Haiti, go a long way toward explaining the phenomenon of multiple avatars of the same Dahomean-Yoruba god...The very Afro-Haitian term for spirit, *loa*, encapsulates the subtle nature of the syncretions that took place.” Thus, similarities can be drawn between Yoruba’s Ôsûn, Fon’s Aziri, and Haiti’s Erzulie.94 In her study of Afro-Creole culture in colonial Louisiana, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argues Fon and Yoruba cultures had a significant impact on Louisiana slave culture, “accounting for the emergence and resilience of voodoo in Louisiana.”95 Perhaps Marie Laveau became a hairdresser for elite white women because of her skills among women of color in a more spiritual context. If some of her white “beauty shop” clients were also Voodoo clients, as reportedly they were, then Laveau’s arrangement of their hair could also have the significance of the arrangement of their destiny.

Beginning in the 1870s, annual articles appeared in New Orleans newspapers that described the St. John’s Eve ceremonies held on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain the night of June 23. On one hand, these articles express the entertainment value of Voodoo

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94 Thompson, 166-167. Erzulie (Ezili, Ezilie, Erzili) is the female *lwa* of love. In Haiti she has two “personalities”. Ezili Freda is the Rada spirit of love. She is a Creole woman who likes to flirt. Ezili Dantò is the Petro “mother-warrior spirit, usually imaged as dark-skinned (in contrast to Ezili Freda) and known for her fierce protectiveness.” See Cosentino, “Interleaf J: Ezili Freda,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 240, quote on 430.

95 Hall, 302.
ceremonies, as journalists and other white spectators flocked to the shore in search of the Voo-dos. With the fear of slave insurrections no longer pertinent in the post-Civil War South, Voodoo ceremonies lost much of their threatening aspect. On the other hand, between Reconstruction and the turn of the century white leaders in New Orleans fought to keep African Americans in a subordinate position, legally and socially. In his analysis of articles on Voodoo during the 1870s, Blake Touchstone argues that the press used Voodoo to prove that blacks were incapable of participating as full citizens.96 These articles continued through the 1890s. Newspapers and serials outside of New Orleans such as the New York Times and the Washington Post also began to run such descriptions of Voodoo in New Orleans.

According to sources, Marie Laveau led the ceremonies on St. John’s Eve on the lake near the resort town of Milneburg. Tallant claims that Marie’s daughter took over leading the St. John’s Eve festivities in the early 1870s because of her mother’s old age. Ward and Long agree that the Marie Laveau mentioned in the newspaper articles and in the WPA interviews in reference to St. John’s Eve after the Civil War must have been the daughter.97 As the newspaper articles during the 1870s attest, the annual festivities at the lake became popular and well-attended affairs by blacks and whites, supposedly by Laveau’s design. (If, indeed, Marie fille reigned as Queen during this time then it follows

97 Tallant, 73; Ward, 140-153; Long, 51. A New Orleans Times article published on March 21, 1869 describes a ceremony over which Marie Laveau presided. The article reports that this was the last ceremony that Laveau led before she retired. Tallant, 73, claims that “on June 7, 1869, the cult held a meeting and reached a decision that since Marie Laveau was now past seventy she should be retired.” Fandrich doubts that a formal meeting decided Laveau’s “retirement” date but suggests that rumors of such a meeting may indicate that it was around this time that Marie Laveau’s daughter began to preside over the ceremonies. See Fandrich, 259.
that she is responsible for the popularizing of St. John’s Eve rather than her mother.) In 1873 and 1874, for example, the Pontchartrain Railroad extended its hours, as well as, added cars to its Milneburg runs on June 23 and 24. According to Henry Castellanos, “[Marie Laveau] was the first to popularize— I should say, vulgarize— voudouism in New Orleans. She would invite the reporters of the press, the magnates of the police force, the swells of the sporting fraternity to their [the Voodoos’] public dances and drinking bouts where a snake in a box, a beheaded white rooster and other emblems of their religious belief were conspicuously exposed.” With these open invitations to the public came entrance fees. Rather than reading Laveau’s popularizing and commercializing of Voodoo as “vulgar,” Tallant sees her as “intelligent, shrewd and an excellent showman, with a strong business sense, [who] seems to have recognized the possibilities in the situation.”

The “shows” held for white spectators on the lakeshore did not replace “authentic” Voodoo rites, for even Castellanos admits that “her secret conclaves were usually held in a retired spot” in which outsiders were not permitted to watch or participate. Besides the financial benefits of opening the St. John’s Eve ceremonies to the public, Laveau also openly flaunted her power by inviting reporters and the police, who she had “dancing...naked as jaybirds,” according to one WPA informant. Actively seeking the authorities’ cooperation and participation also may have guaranteed the continuation of the annual ceremonies.

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98 Touchstone, 377. One article in the Picayune, “Voudou Nonsense” dated June 26, 1874 claims that thousands of people came to the lake in hopes to witness the Voodoo ceremony. See Touchstone, 378.

99 Castellanos, 97-98. The New Orleans Times printed an invitation from Laveau to attend the St. John’s Eve celebration on June 21, 1874. See Ward, 149-150.

100 Tallant, 55.

101 Castellanos, 98.

102 Mattie O’Hara quoted in Tallant, 82.
While some of the articles published on the St. John’s Eve festivities during the 1870s describe a ceremony, many relate stories of the reporters frustrated in their search for “authentic” Voodoo rituals. In fact, only a few of the articles claim that Marie Laveau was present at the rituals. What most of the journalists found on their trips to the lake were large parties where blacks and whites drank and danced together. Ward concludes that “Marie the Second used her organizational skills and spiritual contacts to lead the weekly good-fortune ritual baths on Bayou St. John and throw the yearly parties at the lake...She served good liquor and fine food at her gatherings. The citizens of the city danced...And when the media of her time stalked her, she and [St.] John ‘hooodooed’ them.”

According to Castellanos, the “retired spot” where Voodoo rituals were conducted in private consisted of a “frame cabin...used as a summer resort.” Tallant suggests this edifice was known as Maison Blanche, described by various informants as either a one-room shack or a six-room abode. As a place away from prying eyes, Maison Blanche not only housed Voodoo rituals in which outsiders could not attend, it also supposedly served as a house of assignation, specifically for white men’s enjoyment of “mulatto or quadroon” prostitutes. Marie Laveau mère began this business, according to Tallant, but her daughter brought the role of procuress “to its epitome of notoriety.” Ward suggests that this unsubstantiated gossip came from the fact that Marie fille aided “businesswomen who ran houses of pleasure and employment” and that both Marie Laveaux “had reason to sympathize with lovers who found each other across race, class, or religious

103 Ward, 151.
104 Castellanos, 98.
105 Tallant, 65. Tallant includes several WPA informants who claim to have witnessed the sexual goings-on at Maison Blanche under the watchful eye of Marie II. One man called it “nothing but a fancy kind of whorehouse.” See Tallant, 85-87, quote on 85.
boundaries."\textsuperscript{106} These explanations may account for the immediate circumstances that led to these rumors, but they do not begin to grasp the larger implications of such charges. In concluding the section on the quadroon balls in her history of New Orleans, Grace King remarks, "Those brilliant balls, in their way, are as incredible now as the slave marts and the Voudou dances; which, in their way, they seem subtly, indissolubly connected with."\textsuperscript{107} Three important threads--sex, race, and gender--connect these things in the mind of King and likely in the minds of many whites who lived in nineteenth-century New Orleans. It has been demonstrated that white writers sexualized Voodoo in their descriptions of the rituals. Take, for example, the depiction of a Voodoo dancer in J. W. Buel's travel book, \textit{Metropolitan Life Unveiled}, told from the point of view of a young white boy brought to the ceremony by an enslaved woman.

Then came a general call for the dance...Up sprang a magnificent specimen of human flesh- Ajona, a lithe, tall, black woman, with a body waving and undulating like Zozo's snake- a perfect Semiamis from the jungles of Africa. Confining herself to a spot not more than two feet in space, she began to sway on one to the other side. Gradually the undulating motion was imparted to her body from the ankles to the hips...The beat of the drum, the thrum of the banjo, swelled louder and louder. Under the passion of the hour, the women tore off their garments, and entirely nude, went on dancing- no, not dancing, but wriggling like snakes.

After observing this dance, the boy fled because the "orgies were becoming frightening."\textsuperscript{108} While this description very well may describe the movements of a Voodoo dance which could be recognized today, the sexualized language cannot be ignored.\textsuperscript{109} To a Victorian sensibility, this description of a supple, young black girl who

\textsuperscript{106} Ward, 146.
\textsuperscript{107} King, 344.
\textsuperscript{108} Buel, 528.
\textsuperscript{109} A twentieth-century description of the \textit{Yanvalou} dance in Haiti by Maya Deren, sounds strikingly familiar: "Before me the bodies of the dancers undulate with a wave-like motion, which begins at the shoulders, divides itself to run separately along the arms and down the spine, is once more unified where
slowly and sensually moves her hips like a snake serves to both shock and arouse. The descriptions of New Orleans Voodoo that circulated the nation through travel books, newspapers, and serials during the last part of the nineteenth century created an exotic Other. Voodoo, as portrayed in these articles, was the opposite of the white middle class reader. The former represented blackness, irrationality, emotion, overt sexuality, and a lack of self-control. The latter defined its image against that of the black Voodoo practitioners as white, rational, reserved sexually, and in full control of self and body. The descriptions provided titillating sexual images that entertain while reinforcing white racist ideologies of African Americans as Jim Crow laws settled across the South during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to note that in another version of the description of the female dancer quoted from Buel, above, the girl is described as a mulatto. \(^{110}\) Visitors to New Orleans during the antebellum period often commented on the beauty of the free women of color, most notably the ones of mixed race who had *plaçage* relationships with white men. In fact, Laveau’s beauty is one of the few things that all the sources agree upon. Of all of these women’s charms, their sensual nature seemed to be the most attractive and most vilified. White men were obviously attracted to these women for many white men had relationships with them; however, free women of color were thought of as aggressive sexual Sirens who tricked white men into liaisons with them. Historian Winthrop Jordan writes: “Not only did the Negro woman’s warmth constitute a logical explanation for the white man’s infidelity, but much more important, it helped shift responsibility from

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himself to her."\textsuperscript{111} Clearly by doing this, white males projected their sexual desires onto black women as not only receptacles of their desires, but as naturally willing partners in these sexual encounters. Writing in 1894, P. F. de Gournay suggested three racist reasons why free women of color could not seem to help themselves when it came to sex: "Ignorance, the attraction possessed by a superior race, the warm African blood that flowed in their veins, all combined to ruin these women..."\textsuperscript{112}

The slave market was another space where white men performed their sexual fantasies of black women.\textsuperscript{113} The validation for such a performance, a validation that disguised sexual desires as business deals, was the supposed hypersexuality of black women. New Orleans, as a bustling port city was the site of the largest slave market in America. Enslaved men, women and children were put on display for potential buyers. Often their clothes were removed and the buyers touched the slaves in order to better gauge their health and overall condition. This was a sexualized act, especially when the slave being examined was a female. In fact, there were a number of enslaved women sold expressly for the purpose of a sexual partner for the white buyer. Known as "fancy girls," these women were of varying proportions of mixed race and touted as beautiful.\textsuperscript{114} These women were bought for exorbitant prices, and as Joseph Roach argues, the public sales of fancy girls were highly-charged sexual spaces that privileged white males.\textsuperscript{115}

Thus, Grace King had every reason to link the quadroon balls, Voodoo dances, and slave markets together, dictated by a racial discourse that justified the enslavement of

\textsuperscript{111} Jordan, 151.
\textsuperscript{114} Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 2, 113-144, 139, 141, 147, 155; Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 32.
\textsuperscript{115} Roach, 174; Johnson, 113.
a people because they were “superstitious” and “hypersexual.” As a beautiful free woman
of color with the title of Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau embodied the sexualized image of
Voodoo. It is not difficult to see how the belief in Voodoo ceremonies that end in sexual
orgies translated into Marie Laveau as a procuress. In a city with the history of slavery,
plaçage, and later, Storyville, the city’s “legalized” Red Light district, Laveau making
money off of white men’s desires for mixed race women would only be the “American”
thing to do.

Marie Laveau, also known as the Widow Paris, passed away on June 15, 1881.116
The only child to have survived her mother (in the records) was Marie Philomène (1836-
1896).117 Marie Philomène (Madame Legendre in the obituaries) took care of the funeral
arrangements and spoke with the reporters who came by to gather information for the
obituaries published throughout the city. Fandrich and Ward believe that Marie
Philomène took advantage of the chance to tell her mother’s story. Not only did she keep
family secrets safe, such as the racial identity of her father, Marie Philomène insisted that
her mother was a devout Catholic and a nurse with knowledge of healing herbs. The
absence of Laveau’s connection with Voodoo in the obituaries published by the Daily
Picayune and the Daily Item along with a description of an interview with Laveau two
years before prompted a writer for the New Orleans Democrat to respond on June 18.

Who has been stuffing our contemporaries in the matter of the defunct
Voudou queen, Marie Lavoux? For they have undoubtedly been
stuffed, nay crammed, by some huge practical joker...According to
these esteemed but deluded contemporaries, Marie Lavoux was a
saint...The fact is that the least is said about Marie Lavoux’s sainted life,
etc., the better. She was, up to an advanced age, the prime mover and soul

116 Ward, 157; Long, 47; Fandrich, 263. Her death certificate reads, “Dame Christophe Glapion
Certificate of Dr. J. Dellorto, MD  I certify that Mrs. C. Glapion, a native of New Orleans, aged 98 years,
died of diarrhea on the 15th of June at 8 o’clock at her residence at No. 152 St. Anne Street, buried in the
117 Long, 46.
of the indecent orgies of the ignoble Voudous; and to her influence may be
attributed the fall of many a virtuous woman. It is true that she had redeeming
traits. It is a peculiar quality of the old race of Creole Negroes that they
are invariably kind-hearted and charitable. Marie Lavoux made no exception. But
talk about her morality and kiss her sainted brow—puah!!118

Arguably, together these articles written at Marie Laveau’s death set the tone by which
subsequent writers have represented Marie Laveau as most elements of her legendary life
and presence can be found within them.

As stated earlier, Marie Laveau’s daughter succeeded her as Voodoo Queen and
also went by the name Marie Laveau. Tallant never gives the name of the daughter who
took her mother’s name beyond “Marie”, but he claims she was born February 2, 1827.119
This birth date indicates that Marie fille (or Marie II) was the Widow Paris’ first-born
daughter, Marie Eucharist Heloise. Using their archival research, Ina Fandrich and
Martha Ward agree with this assessment.120 Supposedly Marie Eucharist looked so much
like her mother that people thought Marie Laveau was immortal. In addition to following
her mother’s footsteps as Voodoo Queen, Marie Eucharist worked as a hairdresser.
Tallant lists multiple addresses in which she ran this business. As mentioned above,
Marie fille also purportedly made money as a procuress or madam of Maison Blanche.
According to Tallant, one quality Marie Eucharist did not seem to inherit from her
mother was her charity. The unmarried Marie Eucharist was said to be more promiscuous
than her mother. One of many lovers was allegedly Lafcadio Hearn, a white reporter and

119 Tallant, 75. In his novel, The Voodoo Queen, Tallant names Marie II, Marie Philome, a variable
spelling of Philomène.
120 Ward, 61, 67; Fandrich, 249, 268.
writer. In fact, Tallant makes Marie fille out to be the opposite of her mother in personality. Unlike her mother, Marie Eucharist did not attend Catholic Mass.\footnote{121}{Tallant, 75-77, 84-87, 103-106; Ward, 70, 73, 146; Fandrich, 249, 276.}

Thanks to her parents' surreptitious manipulation of the public record, Marie Eucharist became the owner of the Love Street property at age five. A decade later, she was pregnant with her first son, Joseph Eugene Crocker. Marie Eucharist had three more children with the father of Joseph, a free man of color named Pierre Crocker. Her fifth child was a young girl whom she seemingly adopted after the death of her own daughter, Esmeralda. Marie Eucharist left few clues to the identity of the father of her children in the public record. Perhaps this is because Pierre Crocker was a well-to-do Creole of Color who happened to be married. Despite the family he created with free woman of color Rose Gignac, Crocker seemed to be fully involved with his other family. He signed as a witness on the death certificate of Christophe de Glapion, grandfather to his children with Marie Eucharist. By the late 1830s, Marie Eucharist lived with her children in the house on Love Street.\footnote{122}{On page 246 Fandrich mentions that Pierre Crocker was the lover of Marie Eucharist. She found a notary act that confirms Marie Eucharist residence at the house on Love Street in 1836. See Fandrich, 268 and Theodore Seghers, Notary, Vol.1, 1836, Act 200, July 30, 1836, New Orleans Notarial Archives. Ward, 68, 70-72, 102-103, 105.}

In 1859 a newspaper article describes a complaint put forth by a Mr. Bernardo Rodriguez of the activities of his female neighbor. According to the New Orleans Daily Crescent, “Marie Clarisse Laveau, f.w.c., the notorious hag who reigns over the ignorant and superstitious as the Queen of the Voudous” and her followers disturbed the neighborhood with their “infernal singing and yelling” during the “hellish observance of
the mysterious rites of Voudou."¹²³ In an article in the Daily Crescent which describes the same events points out that Marie Clarisse Laveau’s “disorderly house” was located “in the neighborhood of Rampart, Bagatelle and Union” streets.¹²⁴ Fandrich, Long, and Ward agree that “Marie Clarisse Laveau” was Marie Eucharist Heloise. The Love Street house is in the location described in the article.¹²⁵

Marie Eucharist proves harder to locate in the public records than her mother. It seems likely that the middle-aged Marie Laveau described by newspaper articles and WPA informants as leading the St. John’s Eve ceremonies during the 1870s referred to Marie Eucharist. Beyond these sources, she “was an enigma.” Ward found that Marie Eucharist’s daughter, Aldina, passed away in 1871. Indicative of Marie Eucharist’ absence in the records, the Widow Paris, Aldina’s grandmother, took care of the funeral arrangements and signed the necessary documents, in lieu of her mother.¹²⁶

The facts, or lack thereof, surrounding Marie Eucharist’ death prove to be even more mysterious. On November 29, 1881, only a few months after the Widow Paris passed away, Victor Pierre Christophe Dieudonné Duminy de Glapion filed a court order granting him ownership of the Love Street house. In order to declare himself the legal owner of the property, Victor had to claim himself as the sole heir of his mother, Marie Eucharist Glapion. His aunt and godmother, Marie Philomène, testified to this claim on

¹²³ “Recorder Long’s Court,” New Orleans Daily Crescent, 12 July 1859, 1, quoted in Long, “Perceptions of Voodoo,” 89. Also see similar article in Daily Picayune, 12 July 1859, quoted in Fandrich, 268 and in an article “Flashback” in the Times Picayune in the Marcus B. Christian Papers.


¹²⁵ Fandrich, 268; Long, 48, 275n; Ward, 136. Ward quotes a similar article in the Picayune from the same date, 12 July 1859.

¹²⁶ Ward, 154-156. Quote on 155.
Victor’s behalf. She swore that Victor’s mother, her sister, died in the summer of 1862. This date, however, does not make sense in light of the newspaper articles and memories of elderly New Orleanians gathered in the 1930s. In addition, Marie Eucharist appeared before the court because she failed to pay her taxes in 1865 and 1866. Thus, Ward does not believe that this document speaks the truth. Instead, she believes that Victor and Marie Philomène, for reasons still unknown, made the documents read what they wished. Ward suggests that Marie Eucharist died sometime between 1874 and 1875, after which, she cannot be found in public records and newspaper articles.

As should be expected by now, the WPA informants had several fantastic stories concerning the death of Marie fille. One man claimed that a 200 pound Marie Laveau had a heart attack leaving a ball in 1897. Christine Harris told the interviewer that Marie Laveau lived until 1918. Several people believe she drowned in Lake Pontchartrain when a huge storm washed away her house. Others contend she drowned while walking on water or taking a ceremonial dip in the lake. Louise Walters claims that when she was a little girl she found Marie Laveau, half-dead on the shore of the lake. Her body washed up there after the big storm. Walters brought Laveau to her house where she nursed her back to health. She told the interviewer: “After that we was good friends. I went to see her in that white cabin she had all the time, and she would come see me. She taught me a lot of her secrets. But about two years after that she disappeared. God knows what

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127 Ward, 163-165; Long, 48; Fandrich, 270-271.
128 Fandrich, 255; Ward, 166.
129 Ward, 165. Ward offers several possible reasons for Marie II’s son and sister to have given a false date for her death including suicide, moved away, or went insane.
became of her. She was a strange woman and a great mystic. I never did hear of her
dying."\textsuperscript{130}

In opposition to Marie Eucharist’s supposed exploits as Marie Laveau the Second
Voodoo Queen, Marie Philomène, by all accounts, was the “stable,” dutiful daughter.\textsuperscript{131}
Eight years her sister’s junior, Marie Philomène also had five children. While she did not
legally marry their father, she made very clear who the man in her life was by referring to
herself as Madame Legendre. Emile Alexandre (or George) Legendre was a white
banker, and according to city directories, he lived at St. Ann Street with Marie Philomène
until after the Civil War.\textsuperscript{132} Marie Philomène lived in the St. Ann Street house her whole
life taking care of children, grandchildren, and her mother when the Widow Paris reached
her last years. Through her interviews with curious reporters after her mother’s death,
Marie Philomène stressed her family’s devotion to Catholicism in attempts to distance
them from the taint of Voodoo. Ward believes this was Madame Legendre’s way of
making her children’s lives easier as they passed for white.\textsuperscript{133} Marie Philomène died on
June 11, 1897 and was buried in the family vault. The inscription reads: “Marie Philomé
Glapion, died the 11\textsuperscript{th} of June 1897, age sixty-two years. She was a good mother, a good
friend, and missed by all who knew her. Those who pass pray for her.”\textsuperscript{134}

This overview of the historiography of Marie Laveau and nineteenth-century New
Orleans Voodoo provides a backdrop for the twentieth-century fictional accounts of
Laveau’s life analyzed in the rest of this thesis. With the exception of Barbara Hambly,

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\textsuperscript{130} Tallant, 125. The other stories come from Tallant, 122-126.
\textsuperscript{131} Ward, 156.
\textsuperscript{132} Ward, 105-107, 159; Fandrich, 248-250; Long, 48. Fandrich and Long cite Legendre’s first name as
Emile Alexandre. Ward says it is George. Most likely all three names are correct.
\textsuperscript{133} Ward, 107, 159, 170; Fandrich, 269; Long, 48.
\textsuperscript{134} Tallant, 127; Ward, 106.
the authors of these novels did not have access to the recent scholarship on Laveau by Fandrich, Long, and Ward. Rather, it quickly becomes obvious that Robert Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* served as a central source for most of these novels. Discourses of race, sexuality, and gender weave in and out of the literature on Marie Laveau and Voodoo in New Orleans. The fictionalized representations of Laveau expound upon the ways the earlier sources interpret conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality through Marie Laveau, as well as construct their own response to these discourses as delineated in the time periods in which they write.

Scholars remain thwarted to a certain extent in their search for the “truth” about Marie Laveau because of the thick web of legends, stories, and confusing or missing historical records. Indicative of the difficulty of separating fact from fiction in regards to Marie Laveau’s life is Martha Ward’s *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*. Ward’s study reads like more a novel in places than a scholarly work. Her frustrating, half-hearted citations seem to indicate that the book was marketed for a public audience, but her text certainly advances the scholarship on Marie Laveau. Ward’s book illustrates the difficulty in telling the full story of Marie Laveau as it, too, perpetuates the legends of the Voodoo Queen.
CHAPERN II

“MAGNETISM AS A WOMAN...FOR FROM THAT CAME HER REAL POWER WITHOUT A DOUBT”:

ROBERT TALLANT’S *VOODOO IN NEW ORLEANS* AND *THE VOODOO QUEEN*

Ten years after the success of *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Robert Tallant took, what was to him, the next logical step in his interest in Marie Laveau with the publication of a novel entitled, *The Voodoo Queen*. He explains in the introduction to the book that his fascination with Laveau began as a child hearing stories of her and continued as he gathered information from elderly New Orleanians about her for *Voodoo in New Orleans*. While, according to Tallant, his study of New Orleans Voodoo “included... all the stories, fact and legend, that [he] knew about Marie,” his novel is “as factual as possible” in spite of the “confusion in regard to the truths of her life.”¹ Thus, Tallant incorporates many of the stories recorded in *Voodoo in New Orleans* into *The Voodoo Queen*, but there are interesting differences between the portrayals of Marie and her daughter in the novel. As the chance to tell his version of Marie Laveau, a “wise, mysterious, beautiful woman,” *The Voodoo Queen* presents an upright and charitable Laveau.² Yet, ultimately Tallant’s definition of her power betrays his fascination with Marie Laveau as a beautiful free woman of color.

Born in New Orleans in 1909, Robert Tallant attended public schools then worked odd jobs around the city as a bank teller, office clerk, and a copywriter at an advertising company. During his short life, Tallant was a prolific writer who published over fifteen books including novels, juvenile books and romantic histories of New Orleans and Louisiana. He died in 1957, a year after publishing *The Voodoo Queen*.

As a young adult, Tallant became close to Lyle Saxon, a friendship which surely facilitated his interest in writing on the distinctive aspects of New Orleans history and culture. Known as “Mr. New Orleans,” Saxon was a novelist, journalist, historian and the director of the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project during the 1930s. Tallant worked with Saxon on the project and earned a co-authorship for *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, one of the project’s published products. The two men also belonged to a group of local writers that met at Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches, Louisiana.

Tallant’s work fits into a literary tradition that stretches back to the nineteenth century which created and sustained the popular perception of New Orleans today as a romantic, sensual, and unique city marked by overindulgence and reckless abandon. S. Frederick Starr claims that the popular image of New Orleans as the “composite vision of fading grandeur, cultural hybridization, noble simplicity, eroticism, authenticity of expression (and a hint of danger)” was generated in the late nineteenth century. In the years following the Civil War through the 1890s, local color stories proliferated in American literature. Much of this genre was produced by Southerners or focused on life

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in the South. Often set in an agrarian locale, local color fiction romanticized regional peculiarities and expressed nostalgia for a simpler time. In a Southern setting, this nostalgia most often took the form of the antebellum times of heroic slave owners and their happy, dialect-speaking slaves. New Orleans authors who participated in the local color movement and the myth of the city include Grace King and Charles Gayarre. However, probably the two most important writers to propagate the mythological New Orleans and bring it to national attention were George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn, incidentally two commonly cited sources on Voodoo and Marie Laveau.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Cable published several short stories, novels and expository essays on New Orleans. His local color literature met popular acclaim. Cable began his writing career as a journalist. He scoured old newspaper files to find articles on which he based many of his stories. Cable was especially taken with the Creoles, both white Creoles and Creoles of color, who figured prominently in his stories. Cable’s depiction of New Orleans as a crumbling, old town filled with exotic scenery and even more exotic people has become a lasting perception of the city. In her book, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, Joy Jackson writes that Cable’s “sensitive genius created the image of ‘romantic old New Orleans’ which was to captivate and draw visitors into the city by the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was on the basis of this image that later writers have enlarged and embellished the legends of Creoles, quadroons, pirates,

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and voodoo until the ‘romance’ of old New Orleans has become a robust tourist industry.”

A contemporary of Cable, Lafcadio Hearn came to New Orleans in 1877 as a correspondent of the Cincinnati Commercial. He was so taken by the city that he decided to stay and work first for the New Orleans City Item and later the Times-Democrat. As his 1883 article, “The Scenes of Cable’s Romances,” published in Century Illustrated Magazine indicates, Hearn initially became fond of the city through Cable’s stories. He, however, quickly began to experience the city through his own eyes and publish his perspectives in the local newspapers and in national serials. Hearn continued the romanticization of the “Queen of the South” as he spoke “with enthusiasm of the beauty of New Orleans [and] with pain of her decay.” In fact, Starr believes that “it was Hearn who, more than anyone else, identified the elements of what became the prevailing image of New Orleans and commanded the literary skills needed to communicate that composite to a large, general readership.” Whether Hearn or Cable is more responsible for the popular perception of New Orleans is not as important as the legacy of their portrayals.

The romantic image of New Orleans pervades the literature on the city; it can be found in texts ranging from novels to tourist guides to histories of the city from the late nineteenth century to present day.

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8 Jackson, 284.
9 Starr, xiii.
10 Lafcadio Hearn, “The Scenes of Cable’s Romances,” Century Magazine 27, no. 1 (1883): 40. Hearn opens the article with “When I first viewed New Orleans from the deck of the great steam-boat...my impressions of the city...were oddly connected with the memories of “Jean- ah Poquelin” [a story set in New Orleans by Cable]. That strange little tale had appeared in this magazine a few months previously; and its exotic picturesqueness had considerably influenced my anticipations of the Southern metropolis, and prepared me to idealize everything peculiar and semi-tropical that I might see.”
11 Starr, 47, 45.
12 Starr, xxv.
Tallant and his contemporaries, specifically Lyle Saxon, clearly inherited the myth of New Orleans from writers like George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn. Marie Laveau, as the Voodoo Queen and a free woman of color, embodied the exotic aura of New Orleans, making her a prime subject to be included in the literature on the city. However, there is another facet of Tallant’s work that has its roots in the late nineteenth century: an interest in African American folklore in Louisiana. The all-white Louisiana Association of the American Folk-Lore Society founded in 1892 met monthly in New Orleans to talk about the folklore they had gathered. The majority of the stories collected by the society came from African Americans or made African Americans the subject, especially in connection with the plantation. In their analysis of the society’s minutes and other texts by its members, Rosan Augusta Jordan and Frank de Caro argue that the society’s obsession with African American folklore enabled the members to create a collective identity as white elites, successors of the plantation masters in opposition to the African Americans, descendants of slaves. Just as the society’s members viewed African Americans as the sole possessors of folklore and the plantation as the quintessential space for folklore, Jordan and de Caro argue that Lyle Saxon presented a similar perception of folklore in his writing.\textsuperscript{13}

While Tallant’s work on Voodoo and Marie Laveau centered on the urban environment of New Orleans, he also makes such divisions between black folklore and

\textsuperscript{13} Rosan Augusta Jordan and Frank de Caro, “‘In this Folk-Lore Land’: Race, Class, Identity and Folklore Studies in Louisiana,” The Journal of American Folklore 109 (1996): 33-35, 45-46, 53. In his study of African American music and the construction of cultural interpretation, Jon Cruz comes to a similar conclusion about the way the “folk” was defined as black. The formation of cultural interpretation involved a process of recognizing that African Americans had culture, but, in the creation of professional scholars such as folklorists who collected and analyzed this culture, the cultural objects studied became disengaged from the African Americans who produced the object. Thus, white professionals created their identities in opposition to the black subjects whose culture they collected. The whites became experts while African Americans became objects of study. See Jon Cruz, Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
white collectors of that folklore. His opening to *Voodoo in New Orleans* describes the experience of a white man walking down South Rampart Street, an African American area of New Orleans. Tallant writes:

The white man walking on South Rampart Street is a foreigner...It seems to the white man that on South Rampart Street the Negro has in his mysterious way built a world for himself, and an amazing and colorful one at that. There is much that duplicates all the streets in which white men conduct and patronize their own business...Yet there is something else here that is different and of another race...If [the white man] is at all intelligent and has had many contacts with Negroes he does not believe them to be the "the happiest people on earth"...He knows that they suffer a great deal...He knows that they are ridden with many superstitions and many fears.14

Clearly, for Tallant, white and black comprise two separate worlds, and, to him, the black world is infinitely enigmatic and fascinating. Tallant roots the difference between the two worlds in the "mysterious way" of African Americans. Because the black world is not readily understandable by whites, it is necessary for "experts" like to Tallant to infiltrate and then explain that world to his white readers. Tallant, in his expertise, recognizes the plight of African Americans in the Jim Crow South, but rather than acknowledge the institutionalized racial discrimination responsible for their "suffering," he blames blacks themselves with their "superstitions and fears."

According to Tallant, not only do whites have no such superstitions, these superstitions have everything to do with Voodoo. Tallant’s white man on South Rampart Street notices vendors selling vials, roots and candles “and he will wonder at the sight of queer old women who stop to buy them. He may even speculate on whether or not these people are Voodoos.” But when the white man inquires he is denied the answers because “[h]ere he has reached a barrier. He cannot cross the line beyond which lies the occultism

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of this South Rampart Street world.\textsuperscript{15} The white man has to search for folklore, in this case, Voodoo, on the black side of town, but the color line keeps him from gaining full access to that folklore. Thus, like the Louisiana Association of the American Folk-Lore Society of the 1890s and his friend and contemporary, Lyle Saxon, Tallant views folklore as belonging solely to blacks and his own role as a privileged white man charged with the difficult task of collecting this folklore and reporting it to his white audience.

Robert Tallant’s portrayal of Voodoo in \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans} is sensationalistic. In his description of the ceremonies held by Marie Laveau in her cabin on Lake Pontchartrain, he writes, “It seems to have been only in the Maison Blanche that Marie Laveau would depart from her modernization of the ceremonies and allow the devotees to return to the ways of the immigrants from Santo Domingo. Here, lips smeared with the blood of freshly slaughtered animals and fowl, they took their terrible oaths. Here was the snake, and here the breast was torn from a living chicken and presented to the queen.”\textsuperscript{16} His descriptions of Marie Laveau and her daughter (“Marie II”) are often sexualized. Marie II “undoubtedly...did have many lovers, both white and colored” who must have been attracted to her “thick black hair that curled, but slightly, a thin, straight nose and sensual lips.”\textsuperscript{17} In her review of his book, Zora Neale Hurston asserts that Tallant has not only added nothing new to the scholarship of Voodoo, he has used the work of herself and other’s on the subject without any acknowledgement. Complaining that Tallant fails to give any explicit definition of Voodoo, Hurston notes that “[i]t is apparent that [he] defines the functions of Hoodoo as a mere stimulation to

\textsuperscript{15} Tallant, \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}, 5.  
\textsuperscript{16} Tallant, \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}, 66.  
\textsuperscript{17} Tallant, \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}, 105, 75.
Indeed much of *Voodoo in New Orleans* does center on the sordid description of Voodoo ceremonies which supposedly ended in orgies and on the attractiveness of the two Maries. Drawing an explicit distinction between black and white participants at Voodoo ceremonies, Tallant claims that “[t]he white visitors usually depart as the climax of the sexual orgy began.”

This same obsession with the supposed sexual nature of Voodoo comes through in Tallant’s fictionalized version of Marie Laveau’s (“Marie I”) life: *The Voodoo Queen*. Marie Saloppe, Marie’s mentor, leads the first St. John’s Eve ceremony that the young Laveau attends. Taking his cues directly from Moreau de Saint-Méry, Tallant describes how the Queen and King, in this case, Marie Saloppe and Doctor John (another historical New Orleans Voodoo leader and contemporary of Marie Laveau), become possessed upon contact with the box containing “the god, the Vodu, the holy snake, the zombie.”

“Saloppe suddenly thrust out a hand, and Doctor John seized it. At once they both began jerking violently. Their hands remained grasped, but they writhed and twisted convulsively. Saloppe threw her head back and cried out wildly. Her head bobbed about, back and forth and from side to side, as she sent cry after cry up into the night.”

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20 According to Tallant, Marie Saloppe was not just a fictional character but the Voodoo Queen who reigned prior to Marie Laveau. Saloppe was one of several other female Voodoo leaders briefly discussed in *Voodoo in New Orleans*. Supposedly Laveau put a curse of Saloppe who then became known as Zozo LaBrique, “a well-known New Orleans street character, an apparently half-demented creature, who peddled buckets of brick dust.” Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 47. In his novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, Ishmael Reed has a character named Zozo LaBrique, a Hoodoo woman from New Orleans who was run out of town by Marie. See Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, (Garden City, NY: Double Day and Co., 1969), 12-13. Alexander Augustin, an informant for the Louisiana Federal Writers’ Project mentioned Marie Saloppe when questioned about Voodoo. See Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 272, fn 23. It is interesting to note that in French *salope* means “slut” or “bitch” and *saloperie* means “filth.”
21 Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen*, 55.
22 Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen*, 55.
orgasmic possession then passes from person to person through clasped hands. The sight of a chain of people holding hands and "writhing like a snake in the moonlight...shaking and jerking" made Marie feel "warm and excited. She wanted to plunge forward and join them. Once when the screams went up, screams so loud in the night that they must have been heard from miles about, her mouth opened too, and she restrained herself with effort from screaming also."\textsuperscript{23} With all of this screaming and writhing it is not difficult to translate this description of group possession to that of sexual climax.\textsuperscript{24}

The excitement, however, heightens when the King slits the throat of a goat and the crowd catches the blood with whatever they have available, "licking greedily at the scarlet liquid with which they stained their fingers."\textsuperscript{25} After Laveau's initiation the dance begins. She sits at the feet of Saloppé watching "as the dance grew wilder and wilder. Some of the dancers fell back on the ground and lay there shaking violently, some clawed at each other with their nails, bit with their teeth. Clothes were in shreds. Blood glowed on their skin...Couples began disappearing in the shadows. Wild outcries came from the clumps of trees."\textsuperscript{26} As Hurston suggests, the excitement of possession, drinking blood, and dancing leads to an animalistic sexual orgy according to Tallant. It is clear that Tallant took this scene from Moreau de Saint-Méry and added in the characters Doctor John, Marie Saloppé, and Marie Laveau. Rather than investigate this one hundred and

\textsuperscript{23} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 56.
\textsuperscript{24} Alfred Métraux explains that a group possession like that described above by Tallant is not accurate. He writes, "Too often people imagine that a crowd exalted by mystic enthusiasm is the usual setting for Voodoo possession. In fact those who attend ceremonies as spectators only cast an occasional absentminded glance at the goings-on...At no time is the crowd subject to collective delirium, or even to a degree of excitement propitious to ecstasy. The traditional dances of Voodoo- \textit{yanvalou, doba, Dahomey, petro}- all carried out with great seriousness, a subtle sense of rhythm and admirable suppleness- are far from being dionysian. Only at certain ceremonial moments does the degree of excitement reach enthusiasm." See Métraux, \textit{Voodoo in Haiti}, trans. Hugo Charteris, (New York: Schoken Books, 1972), 135.
\textsuperscript{25} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 57.
\textsuperscript{26} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 59.
fifty year old description for its accuracy or relevancy to nineteenth-century New Orleans Voodoo, Tallant accepts it as fact. In doing so, he accepts and perpetuates the racial stereotypes of African Americans as hypersexual, savage, and primitive.

Marie, however, does not participate in these orgies as an initiate or when she becomes queen. In fact, throughout the novel Marie Laveau is rather chaste. Her sexual relationships only occur within marriage to free men of color. When the novel opens, Marie is happily engaged to Jacques Paris, a carpenter. When they meet in the market, “They did not kiss. [Jacques] put his hands on her shoulders for a moment. Their bodies did not touch, but the yearning was in both, and it hurt.”27 This statement is representative of the reserve with which Tallant describes Marie’s sexuality throughout the novel. Tallant recognizes that Laveau has sexual relations with men (he believes that she had fifteen children with Glapion), but he refuses to be explicit about them. After the death of her second husband, Christophe de Glapion, Marie “quickly repulsed” any would-be lovers because “she prided herself always upon her respectability.”28 By the end of the novel, her relationship with men has become strictly platonic. She develops a deep friendship with Baptiste Dudevant, a free man of color, and eventually confesses her love for him, but refuses his marriage proposal stating, “I need a friend, but not a husband, my dear. Or a lover.”29

While Tallant subdues any sexuality Laveau may have had, he makes her power a prominent feature of the novel. In some contexts Tallant uses “power” to mean Laveau’s spiritual power that allows her to be a successful Voodooienne. This is a “great inward

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27 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 8.
28 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 216.
29 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 225.
power” that comes from a mixture of sources.\textsuperscript{30} Primarily, Marie derives this power from the spiritual world, embodied in the live snake she dances with at ceremonies. Marie essentially inherits her spiritual power from her mother, Marguerite. Born in “Santo Domingo,” Marguerite came from a family with “great power.” Marie’s grandmother was a “famous worker” who “taught [Marguerite] a great deal of knowledge, but she never used it.”\textsuperscript{31} This could be because Marguerite was the placée of Charles Laveau, a rich, white planter. Marguerite, however, did not give up her belief in the power of Voodoo leaders. Early in the novel, she becomes sick and asks Marie to fetch Sanité Dédé, a Voodooienne, to cure her instead of the white doctor Marie’s father wants her to see.\textsuperscript{32}

Although Marie had “experimented” with Voodoo, both Sanité Dédé and the reigning queen, Marie Saloppé, scare her. Because Marguerite did not instruct her daughter about Voodoo, Marie must learn the work from someone else. She does not seek out this knowledge, but rather is chosen by Marie Saloppé, to be the Queen’s successor. When the time comes, Marie usurps the position of her mentor in a dramatic scene during the dances at Congo Square. Years later when her own daughter, Marie Philome, goes to a rival leader to learn “the work,” Marie does not fret knowing that “only [she] could pass on the power that was her own.”\textsuperscript{33}

At other times Tallant uses “power” to suggest a social influence that allows Laveau to get what she wants including clients, information, and money. As a hairdresser for elite white women, Marie has access to secrets of their world which she puts to good

\textsuperscript{30} Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 150.
\textsuperscript{31} Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 25.
\textsuperscript{32} Sanité Dédé is another female Voodoo leader from New Orleans mentioned by Tallant in Voodoo in New Orleans. From St. Domingue, Dédé led the ceremony in the brickyard described in J. W. Buel’s Metropolitan Life Unveiled. (St. Louis: Historical Publishing Company, 1882. See Tallant, 44 and Buel, 521.
\textsuperscript{33} Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 274.
use. She also utilizes the “grapevine” of information passed throughout the city by slaves. With these sources, Marie wins court cases, helps politicians get elected, and makes love connections, all of which earn her favors from white elites.

Through both of these avenues, word of Marie’s successful work gains her much respect. But a fear of her also travels these channels, especially among the enslaved. Marie “became more and more conscious of...her power over the slaves.” While both whites and blacks believed in the power of Marie, this statement implies that enslaved blacks would cater to her out of fear, again, “suffering” because of their “superstitions.” Marie realizes she can use her power “for any purpose she chose, for good, for evil.” In *The Voodoo Queen*, Marie only uses her power for good.

In his introduction to the novel, however, Tallant suggests another source of power for Marie: her “magnetism as a woman.” He explains in the introduction to the novel: “Apparently no one who saw her once ever forgot her. It is this about her that interests me most, for from that came her real power, without a doubt.” The adjective “magnetism” often denotes charisma, a strong and persuasive personality, which many leaders possess. Tallant, however, qualifies Laveau’s “magnetism” with her gender, moving the description from a universal personality trait of charisma to something specific to women. Thus, according to Tallant, without her sexual allure and physical beauty, the quintessential sources of feminine power, Marie Laveau would not have been the dominant and influential leader of the Voodoo community.

From “fancy” slave girls to *placées* at quadroon balls, multiracial women in New Orleans were a commodity renowned for their beauty and charms. Historian Deborah

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34 Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen*, 92.
Grey White describes the Jezebel character as “a person governed almost entirely by her libido,” and points out that in America’s discourse on race, black women are commonly thought to be Jezebels.36 Tallant writes, “[A]ccording to the standards of her time and class, [Laveau] seems to have been a moral woman, at least sexually. She bore fifteen children to the same man. At her rites, of course, there were the usual practices of all voodoo rites, but the queen did not take part in these.”37 By using the phrase “standards of her time and class,” Tallant does not step out of the boundaries of the hypersexual black female stereotype; he only makes Marie Laveau exceptional for her class, a free (beautiful) woman of color, and her time, when most black women were enslaved and could be had by any white man with no repercussions.

While Tallant’s fictionalized Marie Laveau leads a respectable sexual life, her magnetism exerts itself in her power over the otherwise influential male characters. She easily woos Doctor John away from the reigning queen at the time despite his hatred for “brown people.” After their first successful ceremony, Marie treats him rudely and reduces his percentage of the collection, but he agrees to continue serving with her.

The actual Doctor John was as a Voodoo leader in New Orleans during the nineteenth century. According to Lafcadio Hearn’s article, “The Last of the Voudous,” Jean Montanet died in August of 1885 at the age of 100. Known by numerous aliases, including “Doctor John,” “Jean Bayou,” and “Jean Grisgris,” Montanet was a Bambara from Senegal, possibly a prince, indicated by the scarification on his cheeks. Enslaved by the Spanish and brought to Cuba, John earned his freedom, became a sailor, and

36 Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 29.

37 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 4.
eventually settled in New Orleans. He was adept in herbal medicine, fortune telling, and “arts still more mysterious,” which made him a fortune.\textsuperscript{38} Montanet lived on Bayou Road close to Prieur Street with his fifteen wives and numerous children. One of his wives was a “white woman of the lowest class,” and he bought the other fourteen women as slaves.\textsuperscript{39} John eventually lost his fortune, but as a wealthy man he dressed in a “gaudy Spanish costume” and rode horseback around town in an “elaborately decorated Mexican saddle.”\textsuperscript{40} According to Tallant in \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}, Doctor John hated mulattoes. Tallant quotes Nathan Barnes, an elderly New Orleanian who remembered John telling him: “‘Son, thank God you is black. I got children that ain’t nothing but mules- jest plain mules.’”\textsuperscript{41} Nevertheless, Doctor John had clients from all ranks of New Orleans society and a network of secret-gatherers, like Laveau. He also helped the sick and poor. Supposedly, Doctor John taught Marie Laveau about Voodoo.\textsuperscript{42}

Carolyn Morrow Long found a John Montane listed in the city directories and the censuses of 1850-1880. Montane (Montanet and Montance), an African, was listed as a free man and a doctor who lived on the intersection of Bayou Road and Prieur Street. In 1860 he had seven children and his real estate was worth $12,000. He died at the age of eighty-four in 1885.\textsuperscript{43}

In \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, Marie first sees Doctor John at her initiation ceremony. He was “an old black man with red and blue lines that curved and swayed when the firelight fell upon his face, tattooed on his forehead and his cheeks...Marie realized that the

\textsuperscript{38} Hearn, “The Last of the Voudous,” in Starr, quote on 79, 77-79. The article was originally published in \textit{Harper's Weekly}, vol. 27 (1885).
\textsuperscript{39} Hearn, 80.
\textsuperscript{40} Hearn, 79.
\textsuperscript{41} Tallant, \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}, 36.
\textsuperscript{42} Tallant, \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}, 34-36; Hearn, 79-80.
tattooed lines represented snakes, and she could have vowed that those that reached from his temples to the corners of his mouth really writhed and twisted. He was naked but for a red loincloth, a dirty white rag tied about his forehead and the thick blue cord about his waist...and a bracelet formed of human bone bound his left wrist." As he becomes possessed, Doctor John “cried out so inhumanly that Marie felt a chill.” Emphasizing Doctor John’s “Africanness,” Tallant stereotypically portrays him as a savage. Later when Laveau goes to his house to ask him to join her, she finds his “dark and smelly” room covered with human skulls and candles. Marie, however, wins over the “mulatto-hating” Doctor John and the two become partners and friends until his death in 1840.

A few years after Doctor John’s death, another man calling himself by the same name arrives in New Orleans. This Doctor John bears a striking resemblance to the first Doctor John with the same red and blue snake tattoos on his cheeks. In addition, he has a third eye tattooed in the middle of his forehead. While the description of the first Doctor John gives him “savage” characteristics, Tallant’s portrayal of the second Doctor John hits all the racial stereotypes: “He was a huge man, tall, with broad shoulders and arms that bulged the sleeves of his coat, and with a barrel of a chest. He was hideous, and not only because of his tattooed face. He had a wide nose, so flat that he seemed to possess no nostrils, and when his heavy lips parted he showed jagged and yellowed teeth that seemed less than human. Marie noticed, too, that one of his ears was almost gone; only a ragged piece of flesh at the top remained." Marie immediately senses that this Doctor John will be her rival.

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44 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 54.
45 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 54.
46 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 107.
47 Tallant, The Voodoo Queen, 178.
He repeatedly asks Marie to join with him, but she refuses, denouncing him as a “mere fortuneteller” and a “charlatan.”\textsuperscript{48} Her hatred of the “black savage” makes her want to kill him or at least force him to leave New Orleans, but the \textit{gris-gris} she places in his yard in attempt to make him go away do not work.\textsuperscript{49} When Marie’s daughter, Marie Philome wants to learn the work and her mother refuses to teach her, she goes to Doctor John for help. Despite his rivalry with Marie, he sends Marie Philome home to her mother. Doctor John has plenty of clients, but he never really challenges Marie’s place as Voodoo Queen.

Although, Tallant introduces his reader to Marie Laveau as “the last great American witch,” throughout the novel, he portrays her much more like a saint.\textsuperscript{50} During the fever seasons, “Marie’s work was concerned with the protection of her people.”\textsuperscript{51} Upon visiting an African American man in jail, she heard about two white prisoners accused of raping and murdering a woman of color. Despite her opinion of their crime, Laveau says, “[p]erhaps the wicked need our help and mercy more than the good. I will take them gumbo.”\textsuperscript{52} Beyond her aiding the poor and nursing the sick, the novel’s Laveau only makes good charms for her clients. “[Marie] learned of more evil \textit{gris-gris}, too, but she refused to use them...’I do not need to use evil \textit{gris-gris}...’The good is enough. It is giving me power and money. I need no more.”\textsuperscript{53}

There is a tension between the way Robert Tallant discusses Marie Laveau in his introduction (and in \textit{Voodoo in New Orleans}) and the way he represents her in the novel.

\textsuperscript{48} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 183, 186. \\
\textsuperscript{49} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 189. \\
\textsuperscript{50} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 3. \\
\textsuperscript{51} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 239. \\
\textsuperscript{52} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 215-216. \\
\textsuperscript{53} Tallant, \textit{The Voodoo Queen}, 215-216.
These discrepancies suggest that he found it difficult to reconcile the contradictory stories of Marie as a witch and a saint. His one-dimensional characterization of Laveau could not accommodate the good witch/bad witch dichotomy implied in *Voodoo in New Orleans*. This partly stems from Tallant’s environment; writing at mid-century for a white audience, he did not want to delve into the seamier side of New Orleans history where issues of race and sex were embodied in light-skin black women from colonial times through the age of Storyville. For someone who wants to promote New Orleans to the rest of the world, Tallant’s chaste Marie Laveau would still attract readers because she is the Voodoo Queen without touching on deeper historical issues.

Unable to resolve the contradictory descriptions of Marie Laveau in one woman, Tallant employs the idea that there were two Marie Laveaus to explain the witch/saint phenomenon. Marie I, whose life is fictionalized in *The Voodoo Queen*, embodies the respectable qualities ascribed to Marie Laveau: the saint, the nurse, the pious mother, the good Voodoo Queen. Her daughter, known as Marie Philome in the novel, takes the indecent qualities of Laveau: the devil-worshipper, the whore and procuress, the evil Voodoo Queen. Marie Philome does not have a large role in *The Voodoo Queen*. However, in the end the mantle is passed on to her from her mother. As she grows up, she realizes that she wants to be the next Voodoo Queen. Bitten by jealousy, her mother refuses to teach Marie Philome or let her participate. She ends up going out on her own, but is forced back home during the Civil War due to economic factors. In the final scene, Marie has been imprisoned for supposedly having killed the second Doctor John. Knowing her mother has been set up by Doctor John’s many mistresses, Marie Philome publicly coerces their confessions through physical violence. This action contrasts with
that of her mother earlier in the novel when Marie I threatened to physically beat Marie Saloppé but does not do it.

As we have seen, Tallant claims in *Voodoo in New Orleans* that while Marie I started the Maison Blanche brothel in Milneburg, it was Marie II who really took on the business of procuring mixed race women for white men. Keeping his explicit sexual references to a bare minimum and Marie I’s pious demeanor intact, Tallant does not mention this practice in the novel. Also, unlike her moral-minded mother, according to Tallant, Marie II had numerous lovers from different races and classes. In the novel, Marie Philome’s lips are “red” and she “struts and swings her skirts. She lets all others see her power. She is magnificent.”54 In other words, Marie II openly displays her sexuality in order to gain power. White lovers were out of the question for Marie I. In the novel, her daughter, Marguerite is very light-skinned. Many of her clients often thought she was the product of Marie and a white man. Tallant writes, “This shocked neither them nor Marie, yet Marie did not like it. She considered herself a woman with high morals, and of that she was proud.”55 Race-mixing was clearly an issue at the time Tallant wrote his novel to both him and the white audience for whom he was writing. Of course, this quote becomes ironic with the knowledge that Christophe Glapion was a white Creole.

Barbara Rosendale Duggal writes that Tallant’s books on Marie Laveau and Voodoo “expose him as a privileged Christian white man caught in a web of attraction/repulsion, held, like generations of white men before him, by the exotic allure

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54 Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen*, 313-314.
55 Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen*, 161.
of the woman of color. And, one might argue, any woman of power.” Unable to reconcile the contradictions, he creates a wholesome Laveau who will appeal to his readers as a figure of romantic New Orleans. He cannot acknowledge the city’s entangled histories of race and sex. Although he presents himself as wanting to do Laveau justice in his books, Tallant belittles her power by believing that it came from her beauty and sexuality as a black woman.

Tallant’s efforts to be historically accurate as best he knew how should not go unnoticed. However, his “dramatic liberties” reveal his inability to look beyond stereotypes or to grant a woman power through avenues unrelated to her gender. He is both fascinated and fearful of powerful black women which can be seen through his inability to create a more complex Marie. By reducing Marie Laveau’s power to her sexuality he denies an historical figure her due credit as a free woman of color making her way in a world where her status circumscribed her access to social and political power.

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CHAPTER III
THE POWER OF A LEGEND:
NEGOTIATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF MARIE LAVEAU IN FRANCINE PROSE'S MARIE LAVEAU, ISHMAEL REED'S THE LAST DAYS OF LOUISIANA RED, AND JEWELL PARKER RHODES' VOODOO DREAMS

In 1935, Zora Neale Hurston published Mules and Men, the result of several years of travel through the South where she gathered stories, expressions, songs, and other examples of African American folk culture. Because an important part of Hurston's interest in black folk culture focused on Voodoo (or Hoodoo, according to Hurston), she visited New Orleans, "the hoodoo capital of America," where she became initiated by several Voodoo leaders.¹ Hurston quickly learned about the legacy of Marie Laveau upon her arrival in lower Louisiana. She writes:

Now I was in New Orleans and I asked. They told me Algiers, the part of New Orleans that is across the river...I went there...I found women reading cards and doing mail order business...Nothing worth putting on paper. But they all claimed some knowledge of and link with Marie Leveau [sic]. From so much hearing the name I asked everywhere for this Leveau and everybody told me differently. But from what they said I was eager to know the end of the talk. It carried me back across the river into the Vieux Carré. All agreed that she had lived and died in the French Quarter of New Orleans. So I went there to ask.²

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men, (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 183. Coincidentally, the publication of Mules and Men occurred the same year that the Works Progress Administration began its Federal Writers’ Project- a major source for Tallant’s Voodoo in New Orleans.
² Hurston, Mules and Men, 191.
Back in the Crescent City, Hurston found two “hoodoo doctors” who claimed relation to Laveau. Luke Turner, the alleged grand-nephew of the late Voodoo Queen (Marie Eucharist/Marie II), taught Hurston rituals, techniques, and cures created by Laveau as well as some of his own and eventually led Hurston through initiation because she was called by “the Great One.” It took Turner a few visits to accept Hurston as an apprentice during which she sought information on Laveau. Turner told Hurston all about his famous aunt- “the great name of Negro conjure in America”- including her love of dancing, her talking rattlesnake, and the feasts she held on St. John’s Eve. Despite the probability that Luke Turner had no biological tie to Marie Laveau, he certainly made clear her importance to the Voodoo community in New Orleans: “‘Time went around pointing out what God had already made. Moses had seen the Burning Bush. Solomon by magic knowed all wisdom. And Marie Leveau [sic] was a woman in New Orleans.’ ”

Despite her creative output including seven books and over fifty short pieces throughout her life, Zora Neale Hurston died in obscurity in 1960. Her work, too, was all but forgotten. Almost forty years passed between the publication of Mules and Men and Alice Walker’s discovery of Hurston in 1970 which launched a revival of interest in Hurston’s life and work. Significantly, it was Hurston’s work on Voodoo that brought her to the attention of Walker while doing research for a short story. In the foreword to Robert Hemenway’s biography of Hurston, Walker explains:

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3 Hurston, Mules and Men, 191-192, 198-200, 202; Zora Neale Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” The Journal of American Folk-Lore 44 (1931): 357-358. The “Hoodoo” section in Mules and Men is a reworked version of this previously published article.
4 Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” 326.
5 Hurston, Mules and Men, 192. According to a folktale that Hurston relates in Mules and Men that explains the creation of Hoodoo, Moses and Solomon were both great conjure men. See pages 184-185. Turner’s claim to be related to Laveau is the custom of Hoodoo doctors all over the country to claim succession to their predecessors.
I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston’s work some time before I knew her work existed. In late 1970 I was writing a story that required accurate material on voodoo practices among rural southern blacks of the thirties; there seemed to be none available I could trust. A number of white, racist anthropologists and folklorists of the period had, not surprisingly, disappointed and insulted me. They thought blacks inferior, peculiar, and comic, and for me this undermined—no, destroyed—the relevance of their books. Fortunately, it was then that I discovered *Mules and Men*, Zora’s book on folklore, collecting, herself, and her small, all-black community of Eatonville, Florida. Because she immersed herself in her own culture even as she recorded its ‘big old lies,’ i.e., folktales, it was possible to see how she and it (even after she had attended Barnard College and had become a respected writer and apprentice anthropologist) fit together. The authenticity of her material was verified by her familiarity with its context, and I was soothed by her assurance that she was exposing not simply an adequate culture, but a superior one. That black people can be on occasion peculiar and comic was knowledge she enjoyed. That they could be racially or culturally inferior to whites never seemed to have crossed her mind.7

Walker’s assessment of Hurston’s knowledge of a superior black folk culture as authentic shares many of the values of the Black Arts movement revealing its influence on Walker’s thinking. “The first major artistic movement involving African Americans since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and early 1930s,” the Black Arts movement took its cue from the radical political, social, and cultural movement known as Black Power.8 The Women’s Liberation movement also reached its height in the 1970s, inspired, in part, by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. In part in reaction to the Black Power and Women’s Liberation movements African American women, including Walker, began to define their own space as black feminists, particularly through literature.

The 1970s also saw the publication of several novels that include Marie Laveau as a character. African American writer, Ishmael Reed, was the first to do so in his novels *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974). An early participant of the Black Arts movement, Reed quickly found argument with the strict definition of the Black Aesthetic touted by critics within the movement.\(^9\) White novelists Francine Prose (*Marie Laveau* 1977) and Margot Arnold (*Marie* 1979) were clearly not participants in the Black Arts movement, yet their choice of subject matter reflects the movement’s creation of a new sensibility for black subjects and culture. Prose and Arnold’s novels on Marie Laveau come out of this Black Arts literature that celebrated folk traditions and strong black characters. The novels also display the influence of the Women’s Liberation movement in their feminist leanings.\(^10\)

The black feminist response to these movements initiated by writers like Alice Walker in the seventies critiqued the masculinist focus of the Black Power movement where racial unity superseded gender issues. At the same time, these women created a political stance, separate from the white, middle class-dominated feminist movement, which recognized the effects of racism and sexism on women of color. Attempting to carry on the legacy of African American feminist literature as well as the importance of

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\(^10\) In this chapter, I have chosen to only discuss Prose’s *Marie Laveau* and not Arnold’s *Marie* mainly due to constraints on the length of the thesis. Arnold relates the story of Marie II and basically fictionalizes Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* almost to the letter. Her book is less obvious about the influence of the Black Power/Black Arts movements beyond the subject matter. Thus, I think that Prose’s book is better in showing the connections between Marie Laveau and the politics of the seventies. In many ways, however, Arnold does create a “feminist” Marie Laveau who recognizes a bond between women (white and black) and often cites such solidarity and understanding of women’s plight as a reason to help a female client. Arnold also includes explicit statements about the position of women in the patriarchal antebellum New Orleans society. The novel ends in the 1980s when Jameson Reed, the Robert Tallant-like character who has been obsessed with Laveau all of his life, meets Laveau’s granddaughters who have begun the Spiritual Revitalization of America movement. Reed’s own granddaughter, “always involved with Women’s Lib,” introduces him to Laveau’s granddaughters. See Margot Arnold, *Marie,* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), 478.
African American culture espoused by the Black Arts movement, Jewell Parker Rhodes’ novel, *Voodoo Dreams* (1993) explores the theme of the strong black female character who must make her way in a world built on racial and gender hierarchies.

An examination of these texts accompanied by explanations of the Black Power/Black Arts, Women’s Liberation movements and black feminism, reveals Marie Laveau’s position as a site over which negotiations of racial and gender politics take place once these issues have been forced to the forefront of America’s consciousness. The chapter will center on a close reading that compares Reed’s *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and Rhodes’ *Voodoo Dreams*. An analysis of Rhodes’ definition of Marie’s power in *Voodoo Dreams* will show that her retelling of the Laveau legend fails as a feminist text. This failure is thrown into broad relief when the relationship between Marie and Dr. John in *Voodoo Dreams* is measured against Reed’s portrayal of the two Voodoo leaders. I argue that *Voodoo Dreams* can be read as a response, albeit a botched one, to Reed’s depiction of Marie Laveau and black feminists in general. Quite consciously, however, Rhodes’ novel is a response to Robert Tallant, yet, as will be shown, Rhodes’ and Tallant’s fictional Laveaux, while seemingly in opposition are ultimately two sides of the same coin.11

When Tallant published *The Voodoo Queen* in 1956 the Civil Rights movement, which had been building since the 1940s, exploded on the scene with the Montgomery

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11 I have no evidence through interviews or citations that Jewell Parker Rhodes has read Ishmael Reed’s *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and “Shrovetide in Old New Orleans.” I believe, however, that the two authors’ portrayals of Marie Laveau and Dr. John contain striking inverted parallels making an analysis of *Voodoo Dreams* as a response to Reed a viable and fruitful undertaking. In terms of *Voodoo Dreams* as a response to Tallant, Rhodes told an interviewer that she “wanted this notion of a white male to stand in for all the other people, all the other white males who had written about Marie Laveau.” See Barbara C. Rhodes and Allen Ramsey, “An Interview with Jewell Parker Rhodes,” *African American Review* 29, no. 4 (1995): 596. Rhodes does this through the character Louis DeLavier. The Louis character as a “stand in” for white male writers like Tallant will be explored in more detail later.
bus boycott. A decade later, Malcolm X had been assassinated, riots had broken out in
ghettos across the nation, and two Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee
(SNCC) members, Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks, had replaced the chant of
“Freedom Now” with that of “Black Power” in Greenwood, Mississippi. Despite the
passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, by mid-
decade, many African American activists had become disillusioned with the passive
resistance techniques of the black moderate- and white liberal-led movement. These
activists, many of them young, believed that the movement “had failed to make
significant inroads against two key components of black oppression—dependence and
powerlessness.”

Following the contention that only a “black-controlled, dominated, and led”
movement could lead to black freedom, membership demographics began to shift in
major Civil Rights organizations like SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
from interracial groups to decidedly black organizations. This shift corresponded with a
change in the goals and tactics of the movement. Integration, the main objective of the
Southern-based Civil Rights movement, began to be viewed as not only close to
impossible but ultimately a situation of continued dependence on whites. Like Civil
Rights workers, Black Power advocates desired political power for black people, yet
federal legislature against de jure segregation in the South did not solve all of the

12 William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture,
Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the
1950s Through the 1980s. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 18, 192, 244, 272, 289-292, 349;
13 Van Deburg, 43.
14 Quote by John Lewis in Van Deburg, 49, 32-33, 46-49, 133, 137; Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis,
eds., To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans, (New York: Oxford University Press,
2000), 531; Hampton, et. al., 288, 294. In 1968, CORE made its membership officially open only to
African Americans. See Van Deburg, 137.
problems facing African American communities across the nation. Particularly common in urban areas such as Harlem, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles, issues like poverty, unemployment, and police brutality plagued their black residents. Faced with continued violence against blacks by whites throughout the country, many Black Power activists advocated the use of retaliatory violence as a reasonable and perhaps necessary tactic to gain true freedom for African Americans.15

Although multiple ideologies, methods, and organizations fell under the rubric of Black Power, the movement's advocates sought power- political, economic, and perhaps most importantly, psychological- which would give them liberty, equality, respect, and control of their own destinies. Individuals involved in the Black Power movement viewed all African Americans as part of a unified group with its own culture, values, and needs, separate from white America. This idea of black nationalism, strongly espoused by the late Malcolm X, called for self-organization and self-determination of black Americans. As Malcolm put it, "We must take pride in the Afro-American community for it is our home and it is our power, the base of our power."16

Black Power also recognized the importance of self-definition. Black Power advocates believed that the path to black liberation began with jettisoning the psychological baggage of oppression and replacing it with positive definitions of blackness that came not from whites but from African Americans. Taking pride in being black as opposed to being a self-hating "Negro", "black consciousness" reversed

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15 Van Deburg, 2, 19, 40-41, 43-44, 64; Kelley and Lewis, 519, 521, 524, 534; Hampton, et. al., 280-281.
16 Quoted in Van Deburg, 113; Van Deburg, 23-28; Kelley and Lewis, 519-521.
characterizations of blackness as “ugly” to “beautiful,” recognized the worth of blacks as human beings, and celebrated African Americans’ distinctive culture.\footnote{Van Deburg, 23, 26-28, 51-53; Kelley and Lewis, 521, 536-537.}

Cultural nationalists, influenced by Frantz Fanon’s emphasis on culture as the basis of any liberation effort, deemed black culture the community’s greatest political weapon. African American culture developed out of the struggle of enslaved Africans brought to America where they came in contact with Western culture and white oppression. This unique culture served as a bastion of strength for blacks through centuries of racism and subjugation. Cultural nationalists not only celebrated the importance of black culture but emphasized its superiority over white culture. Black consciousness expressed itself through “natural” hairstyles, African-style dress, soul language and music.\footnote{Van Deburg, 60, 170-171; Kelley and Lewis, 537.} Maulana Ron Karenga’s US organization epitomized “the spirit of militant cultural nationalism” with its Kawaida theory. Through the adaptation of African cultures and traditions to African American needs, Kawaida posited that a cultural revolution must necessarily precede a political revolution by blacks in the United States. While not all Black Power advocates joined US, the centrality and importance of culture to black liberation was a widely shared aspect of the movement.\footnote{Van Deburg, 171-173, 176, quote on 171; Kelley and Lewis, 538. Obviously not everyone who thought of themselves as a part of the Black Power movement agreed with Karenga’s adoption of African traditions. In fact, ideological disagreements between US and the Black Panthers had escalated into armed violence by 1969. See Van Deburg, 174.} Historian William Van Deburg argues that the Black Power movement was “not exclusively cultural, but it was essentially cultural” and claims that the movement’s greatest legacy was precisely its cultural impact.\footnote{Van Deburg, 9-10.}
Out of this context of emphatic cultural expression emerged the Black Arts movement, a collection of poets, playwrights, novelists and critics who believed that all art was political, and, therefore, the African American artist was synonymous with the African American activist. In his 1968 essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” poet Larry Neal explains that

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconography. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood.

The idea of a black aesthetic followed the premise that African Americans shared a worldview distinct from that of white Americans. Recognizing the Eurocentric undercurrent of “universal” standards of value for art, the Black Arts movement sought to create an aesthetic that related to the African American experience. The movement’s proponents denounced white culture as stale, unoriginal, and devoid of any relevance to the black community. In opposition to this stagnant, art-for-art’s-sake white aesthetic, the black aesthetic focused on form and particularly content that not only related to the black community but assisted African Americans in developing unity, racial pride, and the psychological empowerment needed to bring about real social change. Therefore, a poem was not judged by qualities such as beauty but on its utility in the revolution. The Black Arts movement aimed to create art for the black community (especially the lower class)

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21 Decker, ix-x; Van Deburg, 177, 180-182, 184.
that was inspired by the black community and took as its main critics the members of the black community.\

In order to fulfill these requirements, Black Arts movement participants placed emphasis on oral culture and wrote their poetry and prose to reflect black colloquial speech and the rhythms of black music. Black Arts movement literature also looked to the past—both African American and African—to gain racial pride and freedom from white hegemonic standards that denigrated black culture and history. Reliving a history of oppression through art served to bring about black consciousness to its audience as well as to generate "a new appreciation for their ancestors' survival." Thus, heroic acts of resistance such as the revolts of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey or Harriet Tubman’s work on the Underground Railroad became stories of celebration. In returning to the past for inspiration, folklore became an important focal point for Black Arts movement artists. Literature, theatre, music, and visual art of the Black Power era incorporated folk traditions, rituals, songs, stories, and characters. These tactics not only paid homage to the black community but made the art accessible to the black masses.

One result of the celebration of folk traditions and an examination of the African American past in Black Power era literature was the incorporation of Voodoo or Hoodoo

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by some writers. As any research on Voodoo in the United States inevitably leads to some mention of Marie Laveau, it is not surprising that the 1970s saw several works that concern the Voodoo Queen in some capacity. The most vocal and significant proponent of the embracement of Voodoo was Ishmael Reed who developed his own “Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic.” In an interview Reed explains the origin of his employment of Hoodoo in his work:

Neo-Hoodoo begins in 1967, when I began to read about Marie Laveau’s work in New Orleans...Steve Cannon, Curtis Lyle, Jr., Quincy Troupe, Tom Dent, and I met in New Orleans about that time and made the traditional ‘Xs’ on her tombstone. While her contemporary Creole academics were in France copycatting French culture, she kept a tradition alive that extends back to the rain forests. She saw herself as a descendant of Yemoja. (‘She danced with the fish.’) I am a part of this tradition.25

Although she does not play a major role in any of his works, Marie Laveau and her contemporary, Dr. John, clearly represent a tradition that has deeply influenced Reed’s approach to writing. For Reed, Voodoo (or Hoodoo) epitomizes his multicultural aesthetic because of the religion’s ability to incorporate a wide variety of cultural traditions. In an interview, Reed said, “Voodoo is the perfect metaphor for the multicultural. Voodoo comes out of the fact that all these different tribes and cultures

were brought from Africa to Haiti. All of their mythologies, knowledges and herbal medicines, their folklores, jelled. It’s an amalgamation like this country. Voodoo also teaches that past is present. When I say I use a Voodoo aesthetic I’m not kidding around.”26 In addition to a Voodoo-inspired syncretism in his style and structure, Reed also employs a synchronic idea of time which is circular rather than linear.27 Reed develops his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic in the two novels that make mention of Marie Laveau, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red.*28

As part of the Umbra workshop in 1962, Reed was involved in the beginnings of what became the Black Arts movement; however, it was not long before he began to chafe under any restrictive delineation of what counted as “Black Aesthetic” literature. Referring to the Black Aesthetic as a “goon squad aesthetics” because of critics’ militant enforcement of conformity to its ideology, Reed proclaims his right to create beyond these borders when he calls his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic the “true Afro-American aesthetic.”29 In his study of Reed’s relationship with the Black Arts movement, Reginald Martin argues that beyond Reed’s insistence on “disobeying” the Black Aesthetic

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27 Martin, 71, 74.
28 In an interview with Peter Nazareth, Reed explains that the way he “draw[s] from different time periods, and put[s] them all together in a sort of simultaneous time” is what he calls “Neo-Hoodooism.” He continues, “And, so I came up with Neo-Hoodooism as a way of explaining my connection to ancient Afro-American culture, which is American culture, you know...So I came up with this term [New-Hoodooism] to make my connection, to place myself in this tradition. And one of the notions in this tradition is that the past, the future, and the present co-exist. As a matter of fact, in one of the classical works on Voudoun, *The Divine Horseman,* the author talks about tradition as a contemporary function. So there is a way, it’s out there somewhere in space, where the past, the present, and the future intersect. I use this notion in my novels...” See Dick and Singh, 197-198.
29 Mumbo Jumbo only briefly mentions Marie Laveau. In the novel, the Jes Grew epidemic, an anti-Western “anti-plague” that celebrates the spirit through dancing and music is spreading across the United States to the consternation of the governing Western faction known as the Atonists. The Wallflower Order, the Atonists’ muscle men, were the only people who “could defend the cherished traditions of the West against Jes Grew.” See Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo,* (New York: Scribner Paperback Edition, 1996), 6, 15. In the 1890s, New Orleans experienced an outbreak of Jes Grew during the slave dances held at Congo Square. It is in this context that Laveau, “19th-Century HooDoo Queen” is briefly mentioned. See page 3.
29 Decker, xi; Martin, 2, 42-43, 47,50. Quoted in Martin, 47, 2.
guidelines, his employment of satire to tackle issues that were otherwise treated with extreme seriousness during the Black Power era and his preference for surrealism over realism in his novels place him at odds with Black Arts critics, particularly Addison Gayle, Houston Baker, and Amiri Baraka.30

In fact, Baker praised *Mumbo Jumbo* for its offerings of “an entrancing ratiocinative tale, a conspiracy view of history, a critical handbook for the student of the Black Arts, and a guide for the contemporary Black consciousness intent on the discovery of its origins and meanings.”31 Three years later, however, Baker denounced Reed in his review of *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* because of the novel’s satirical rendering of black revolutionary politics of the 1960s and early 1970s. Baker writes, “It is sad that the chef who was bequeathed recipes by his culture and who came to the forefront as a result of its strident and demanding voice feels compelled to mock that culture.”32 While deeming Reed’s critical allusions to Black Aesthetic proponents as socially irresponsible, Baker finds Reed less at fault in his treatment of feminism in the novel when he admits that “there are surely a number of absurd positions crouching under the veil of women’s liberation.”33 Reed’s critique of feminism in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* will be discussed in detail later. The point for now is that Reed and Baker’s shared dismissal of feminist politics illustrates the male-centered focus of the Black Arts movement.

African Americans’ fight for liberation and equality in the sixties and seventies served as an important source of inspiration for the resurgence of the feminist movement.

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30 Martin, 42. The “new black aesthetic” Martin refers to is the literary criteria that developed within the Black Arts movement as opposed to older ideologies employed by African American authors. He explains this evolution in the first chapter. Throughout this paper, “Black Aesthetic” is the same as Martin’s “new black aesthetic.”


In 1964 an anonymous position paper was presented at a SNCC staff meeting on the roles and treatment of women in the movement. The paper highlighted “the assumption of male superiority” which relegated women in the organization to clerical jobs and housework rather than executive positions. After hearing the paper, Stokely Carmichael notoriously retorted, “The only position for women in SNCC is prone.” As this incident demonstrates, women’s experiences of discrimination in Civil Rights and New Left organizations provided an impetus for the Women’s Liberation movement. Historian Sara Evans explains, “Thus the fullest expressions of conscious feminism within the civil rights movement ricocheted off the fury of black power and landed with explosive force in the northern, white new left.” Feminists involved in the Women’s Liberation movement employed tactics of organization and ideological concepts such as self-definition learned from their work within SNCC and the New Left’s Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to expose the deeply ingrained sexism in American society.

The Women’s movement of the late twentieth century, also known as Second Wave feminism, is an umbrella term that includes multiple organizations, tactics, and political affiliations. In 1966, a group of feminists in Washington, D.C. recognized the failure of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce the anti-sex discrimination clause of the 1964 Civil Rights bill. This recognition resulted in the

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35 Evans, 87. It has been repeatedly pointed out that Carmichael most likely meant “supine” (lying face up) rather than “prone” (lying face down). Either way, the sexual metaphor of women on bottom clearly makes his point.

36 Evans, 101.

founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW). The hierarchically-organized NOW stressed equality for women and worked through traditional political tactics such as lobbying.\footnote{Lauret, 52-53; Rosen, 72, 74-75, 78, 83-84, 86-87.}

The Women's Liberation movement formed a radical branch of the Women's movement. In contrast to NOW, Women's Liberation operated on the level of small groups dispersed across the country. Like the New Left, Women's Liberation proponents worked "outside the system." Operating under the motto, "the personal is political," women involved in Women's Liberation sought social change through "consciousness-raising" in which women discussed their personal experiences in order to reveal the common oppression under which they suffered.\footnote{Lauret, 52-53, 61-64; Rosen, 84-85, 114, 196-198.} Maria Lauret explains, "Generalisations [sic] would lead women to a new understanding of their history and subjectivity, no longer in the self-blaming terms of popular psychology, but in a theoretical framework of male power and institutionalised [sic] sexism."\footnote{Lauret, 63.} Aligned with NOW on issues such as birth control, abortion rights, and equality, Women's Liberation, in addition, considered women "an oppressed caste" that must free itself from patriarchal control in all areas of life. The movement raised issues such as sexuality, female agency, and violence against women.\footnote{Lauret, 53, 57; Rosen, 87-88.}

As Lauret points out, Women's Liberation may have had the semblance of unity, but in reality, the movement contained multiple internal divisions along lines of class, race, sexuality, generation, and political ideologies.\footnote{Lauret, 54-55, 58-59.} In a lot of ways, Women's Liberation was a white, middle-class movement that considered all women's experiences
of gender oppression the same. African American feminists (among others) did not agree. Coming out of the same discriminatory conditions of Civil Rights and Black Power activism, a number of black women challenged the masculinist assumptions of female subordination. Black feminists, however, objected to the notion that all women shared a common experience of oppression. Many white feminist demands neglected the role that racism played in the lives of black women. For example, the white, middle-class feminist claim that a career would liberate housewives from the suffocating world of housework and raising children made little sense to most African American women who were forced to work for the survival of themselves and their family. In response, black feminists formed their own organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973.44

In addition to white feminists’ racism and lack of understanding of the experiences of women of color, black feminism was also a response to discrimination against black women by black men, particularly within the Black Power movement. As Madhu Dubey explains, “The black feminism of the 1970s enables an understanding not only of the racial definition of ‘woman’ in the discourse of Women’s Liberation, but also of the emphatically gendered definition of the word black in a nationalist discourse.”45 The Black Power and Black Arts movements centered on black men; black liberation meant the recovery of black manhood from centuries of emasculation. In this process of regaining their masculinity, many black activists thought black women should fulfill “traditional” roles as obedient wives and mothers. In her article, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” Frances Beale admonished African American men that “those

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43 Lauret, 54, 59-61, 67, 69; Rosen, 276-278; Dubey, 15-16.
44 Dubey, 16; Rosen, 277-278, 282; Lauret, 68.
45 Dubey, 16.
who are exerting their ‘manhood’ by telling Black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position.”

Not only did black male chauvinism relegate women to subordinate positions and make their concerns of secondary importance, many black men blamed their emasculation on African American women. This idea found support in the Moynihan Report’s declaration that black families were matriarchal which held black men back from economic and social progress. Black feminists found the matriarchy thesis and the idea that black women were at fault for the position of black men in American society, “at best, a cruel and twisted interpretation of [their] history.” Instead, they exposed the role of capitalism in the exploitation of blacks, spoke out against the discrimination and abuse of black women, and challenged the persistent stereotypes of black women as castrating matriarchs, insatiable Jezebels, and desexed mamies.

The rhetoric of the Black Arts movement echoed the idea of black women’s culpability in the plight of black men. Dubey explains, “In a direct reflection of black nationalist ideology, the Black Aesthetic often constructed the revolutionary black subject in explicit opposition to the black woman.” In response, black women writers in the 1970s such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison challenged the masculinist


49 Dubey, 20.
assumptions of the Black Power and Black Arts movements while placing similar emphasis on oral folk culture.  

Perhaps surprisingly, in light of these African American women writers’ dedication to black folk culture in their quest to produce well-developed black female characters as well as Zora Neale Hurston’s influence on many of these authors, the two novels on Marie Laveau produced at this time were written by white women. A college student during the 1960s, Francine Prose published her third novel, *Marie Laveau*, in 1977. The narrative tells the story of Marie I, and Tallant is an obvious source. Yet, unlike the realism of *The Voodoo Queen*, Prose’s novel is a fantasy where Voodoo is less spiritual and more supernatural and magical. For example, Marie is orphaned as a teenager because the ghost of a man killed in a duel haunts her parents to death. The night of her own death, Marie attends a “farewell” party in which everyone she has known, along with the *Iwa* appear in a tiny cabin. Eventually a flood washes the party away to the afterlife under water.

The most fantastic scene in the novel, however, comes at the climax. Completing her apprenticeship with the 200 year old Doctor John, Marie threatens his authority as Voodoo leader. Doctor John challenges her to a duel of magic in response. The duel consists of three rounds that include such techniques as controlling the weather, bringing back people from the dead, calling on angels, and shape-shifting into a werewolf. Marie, of course, emerges triumphant. Unfortunately, her talking snake is a casualty of the duel. The description of the ten foot, green cobra illustrates the fantastic in the book: “Its back is set with diamonds and tiny bells which jingle as it moves. On its pale belly are painted

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50 Dubey, 2, 20-21; Decker, xi.
pentacles, crosses, hearts pierced with daggers. Embedded in the center of its forehead is a giant ruby the blood color of Mars, of the setting sun.”51

Prose’s treatment of Voodoo as fantastic and magical shows a lack of understanding of Voodoo. Yet, this representation is refreshing in that its insufficient comprehension is not accompanied by the standard racist descriptions found in texts like Moreau de Saint-Méry or Tallant. Prose does not present Voodoo as “primitive,” “superstitious,” or “illegitimate.” Rather, it is a powerful practice that inhabitants of all races, sexes, and statuses in the city come to for help. While the use of fantasy does subtract from the seriousness of Voodoo as a religion, Voodoo is legitimated in the book by the acceptance of the supernatural by the characters as nothing out of the ordinary.

Following this depiction of Voodoo, Marie’s power could also be described as more magical than spiritual (Prose uses “magic” and “power” interchangeably) although she is not bereft of spirituality. Through her Voodoo mentors, Marie Saloppé and Doctor John, and her Catholic godfather, Father Antoine, Marie befriends the lwa and the saints, incorporating both into her list of spiritual helpers. Like Tallant’s Laveau, Marie was destined to be a Voodooienne by birth. Her grandfather was Makandal, the revolutionary leader of a maroon slave camp in Saint Domingue while her grandmother, Henriette, was his mistress and high priestess.52 Marie’s mother did not have “the power,” but the spirits

51 Francine Prose, Marie Laveau, (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1977), 3. The fact that the snake can talk is one detail in the novel that suggests Hurston’s Mules and Men as a source for Prose.
52 François Makandal, an African enslaved in Saint Domingue, was “by far the most extraordinary and awesome of [the] prerevolutionary voodoo maroon leaders.” In the 1750s he commanded a large group of runaway slaves along with allies on the plantations. He planned to poison the drinking water to kill the whites. He was captured but then escaped only to be recaptured and burned at the stake. Carolyn Fick explains that “[a]s a legendary figure [Makandal’s] name came to be identified with almost all forms of fetishism, with poisoning, sorcery and slave dances.” Voodoo priests were often called “makandals.” See Fick, The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 59-63, quotes on 59 and 63.
“picked [Marie] from the start” as much as she tried to ignore her prophetic dreams and the red rash around her eyes—“the sign of the double-sighted, the conjurer.”

In addition to Marie’s “black voodoo blood,” she needed to be educated about Voodoo in order to have “real power- the power to rule [the] city.” Spending time with Marie Saloppé, Laveau learns herbal cures, fixes, gris-gris, folktales, how to play the numbers, and the importance of her dreams. As Doctor John’s apprentice, Marie’s knowledge is expanded from “the basics” to “the theory and style.” He teaches her about the Iwa and possession, astrology, the weather, demons and the loup garou (werewolf), magic tricks, numbers and colors, healing, and about the Bible.

Doctor John’s first lesson, however, is that “knowledge is power,” and the assignment accompanying that lesson is for Marie to learn the hairdressing business. Apprenticed to the best hairdresser in the city, Sister Delilah (the name is a gimmick), Marie learns the secrets to be gained from dressing women’s hair across the city. At first she sells these secrets to Doctor John until she realizes their importance and keeps them to herself. Working with Sister Delilah also alerts Marie to the power of hair. Delilah warns her that “hairdressing’s serious business. Hair’s got magic- you’re getting close to people’s heads.” Of course, it is the women’s hair that Marie fixes, but it is through this female space of the boudoir and the private sharing between hairdresser and customer

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53 Prose, 130, 4.
54 Prose, 343, 135.
55 Prose, 173.
56 Prose writes, “[Doctor John] taught her about the Bible: Jethro, the first hoodoo man, Moses the sorcerer, Solomon the wizard, Jesus the biggest hoodoo of them all.” See Prose, 174. This is a reference to Zora Neale Hurston’s folktale explanation of the creation of Hoodoo in Mules and Men. According to Hurston, the Bible “is the great conjure book in the world.” See Hurston, 183-185, quote on 280. This reference, among others, reveals Hurston as a source for Prose’s novel and may suggest the influence of Walker’s promotion of Hurston and her work and perhaps the political views (feminism/Black Power) that came with it.
57 Prose, 170.
58 Prose, 151.
that Marie acquires the weapons with which to gain power over the male elite of the city. In other words, Marie messes with everyone’s head as a hairdresser and Voodooienne.

Hair as magic and a source power is a motif throughout the novel. Makandal bragged that Henriette’s magical hair made her impervious to French forces. The long, blond locks of Doctor John’s favorite wife, a white Voodooienne named Sweet Medicine, also hold powers. Wanting to leave him and return to Norway, Sweet Medicine gives her hair to Marie who uses it against Doctor John in the first round of the magic duel. In order to guarantee her continued legacy, Marie sleeps with Charles to have a child with the power.

But it is Marie’s own hair and her realization of its power that signals her acceptance of her destined role as Voodoo Queen. One night Marie envisions a history of famous hair- Samson, Eve, Absalom, Mary Magdalene, Rapunzel, Medusa- as she brushes her hair out before bed. “Looking at her hair, Marie saw it changing color, length and texture, keeping and revealing secrets. She saw it as a magic substance with mystery

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59 Removing hair often symbolizes disempowerment or castration, especially compulsory hair removal. See Penny Howell Jolly, “Hair Power,” in Hair: Untangling a Social History, ed. Penny Howell Jolly (Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2004), 61; Wendy Cooper, Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism. (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 45. When French soldiers captured Henriette they shaved her head in order to prove that her hair was not magic as Makandal claimed. Henriette’s shorn head symbolizes the soldiers’ "castration" of Makandal by revealing his powers as false. As they cut her hair they announced to the crowd, “This is the magic hair. This is the power of Makandal...” Allowed to return to Makandal’s camp, the revolutionary leader disowns her; yet, her departure inspired Makandal’s “people, more than any magic powers, to take what was rightfully theirs.” Later, French troops capture Makandal. He escapes and tries to continue the revolution but fails. He admits that “Madame Henriette had been his lucky charm.” By making a fetish of Henriette’s hair, Makandal does not realize the importance of his high priestess until it is too late. In contrast to Henriette, Sweet Medicine willingly cuts her hair so that Marie could fix Doctor John in order for Sweet Medicine to leave him “without a fight.” However, it is again the man in the relationship who ultimately suffers from his lover’s shorn head reflecting the power of the women symbolized by their hair. See Prose, 136, 138, 239.

60 Prose, 281, 290.
and power."\textsuperscript{61} The next day Marie fixes her hair "to look like the sky at night" and goes out on the town, leaving ripples of gossip in her wake.\textsuperscript{62} This episode results in Marie’s elevation to that of the most popular hairdresser in town when rich ladies inundate her with appointments. Privy to the secrets of these elite clients, Marie has the wherewithal to challenge Doctor John’s position as Voodoo leader.

As mentioned earlier, the head and hairbraiding have significance in the Yoruba religion. The head is also important in Haitian Vodou as the place in which spirits dwell. Karen McCarthy Brown explains that these spirits are seen as both specific \textit{lwa} attached to an individual and "the constituent parts of the self, principally the \textit{gwo bònaj} (big guardian angel), which is roughly the equivalent to the personality or consciousness of the individual." During times of stress, the \textit{gwo bònaj} may become restless causing the individual to "[lose] access to dreams as well as the waking powers of discrimination, insight, and understanding."\textsuperscript{63} When this occurs, a ritual headwashing aimed at appeasing the spirits may be prescribed.

Headwashing is also the first step of initiation into the religion. During initiation each person receives a head pot (\textit{po-tét}) which serves as a living space for the spirits outside of the body.\textsuperscript{64} Alfred Métraux explains that the articles placed in the head pot include "a lock of hair from the top of [the initiate’s] heads...hair from their arm-pits and pubes, and...nail parings from their left hands and feet. These bits of the body,...represent

\textsuperscript{61} Prose, 152.  
\textsuperscript{62} Prose, 154.  
the ‘good angel’ (*le bon-ange*) or the soul...”\(^{65}\) Body parts including hair and fingernails are also used in *gris-gris* or other cures and fixes.\(^{66}\)

Carolyn Morrow Long explains that “[t]he possession of bodily products and intimately associated articles from a living person...allows the maker of the charm to control the individual for whom they are derived” based on the notion that these personal articles remain connected to the individual even after physical separation.\(^{67}\) When Marie first visits Sister Delilah she refuses a trim. Delilah wonders if Marie is “suspicious” about what she will do with the trimmed hair. Marie explains, “I know what runs in *my* blood. I know that my hair is magic. It gives me luck in love and gambling.”\(^{68}\)

Through its connection to puberty and its self-regenerative ability, hair has been closely associated with sexuality in religions, myths, folklore, customs, and literature across time and cultures. For men, hair connotes virility and physical strength and power. For women, hair represents female sexuality. Particularly throughout Western culture, women’s long, loose hair symbolizes their sexuality and the power it has over men. However, this sexual symbolism could be interpreted as virginity or promiscuity depending on the woman and the situation.\(^{69}\) In her article, “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination,” Elisabeth Gitter explains the contradictory symbolism of women’s hair: “When she was saintly- a wife, nurse, mother, or victimized princess- the gold on her head was her aureole, her crown, the outward sign of her inner blessedness

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\(^{65}\) Métraux, 199-200.


\(^{67}\) Long, xvii.

\(^{68}\) Prose, 146.

and innocence. But when she was dangerous and corrupt, her gleaming hair was a weapon, web, or trap, a glittering symbolic fusion of the sexual lust and the lust for power that she embodied." The night she combs her own hair, Marie comes to understand the multiple meanings of women’s hair through the stories of Medusa and Mary Magdalene, Rapunzel and Eve.

Following these symbolic meanings of women’s hair, the image of Marie’s hair as magic and powerful signifies, on one level, her sexuality. This becomes clear when she first appears in public with her hair designed to look like the night sky. While it is the city’s prominent women who become Marie’s clients, it is their men who first notice her hair. Marie’s hair “struck the men of New Orleans like a plague,” and when they saw it “[t]hey felt the magic of women’s hair, of their own, of hair that grew before birth and beyond the grave, which kept and revealed the secrets of the mystery. For that instant they felt as if those secrets were finally revealed to them. An instant later, the men forgot their sudden flash of insight. They were left with the puzzled expression and vague discontent which their wives never understood.”

Marie’s presence always commands attention, yet she is not beautiful. When she first attends the quadroon balls, Marie understands that she will need “something besides youth or beauty” to gain the attention of the men. Instead of looks or charms, Marie lures the men through her magic- in both personality and Voodoo (she causes her dates to win at the gambling tables). The balls and the lovers who come with them are purely for Marie’s entertainment, whereas, for other free women of color, the main purpose of the balls is to find plaçage relationships. To Marie these women seem like vendors in the

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70 Gitter, 943.
71 Prose, 155.
72 Prose, 85. Neither her grandmother nor mother were beautiful, yet they, too, attracted men easily.
market, and “their stock was judged like the fishwomen’s tuna: blood and meat and skin...Marie saw it as a marketplace—lively as the Cotton Exchange, ugly as a slave auction, a cruel cutthroat buyer’s market.” In contrast, Marie never commits herself to one partner for long, maintaining her independence. She recognizes the exploitation found in the relationships at the balls but transcends it by remaining emotionally detached.

Through the symbolic meaning of hair as female sexual nature, one aspect of Marie’s power can be said to be her sexuality. But the importance of hair to Voodoo complicates this sexual symbolism, thus, emphasizing the magical properties of her power. Ultimately, Marie’s sexuality is not the basis of her power as Tallant claims. This is best illustrated by the two different strategies Marie employs to regain her power when it slips. Two years after her duel with Dr. John, Marie notices that her cures were not working as well as they had before. She dreams of Marie Saloppé who advises her: “Get yourself a man. Get loved good. That’s how to get your magic back.” Following Saloppé’s council, Marie takes on a slate of multicultural lovers including a Cajun convict, an Irish singer, and a Chinese emperor. While her power returns in small amounts with each lover, the men are not enough. Her last lover, Sonny, a Congo Square drummer, tells her of a dream he had about Jacques Paris. Marie met and fell in love with Jacques before she became the Voodoo Queen. On their wedding night, Freda-Erzili, the Haitian Iwa of love, claimed Jacques for herself, and he disappeared the next day. In the

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73 Prose, 86-87.
74 Prose, 257.
dream, Jacques asks Sonny to deliver a message to Marie: “Tell her these men aren’t what she needs. She needs solitude.”

Marie takes Jacques’ advice and moves out to the shack in the bayou where she defeated Doctor John. It is here that Marie’s power finally returns because, alone in the swamp, Marie comes to truly get to know and appreciate herself. “She learned to maintain that sense of completeness, of wonder at her own being...Now she saw that solitude was not a curse, but a blessing...It was a life of dignity...It was a life of courage...It was also a life of joy. She was satisfied. She had no regrets. Loneliness disappeared. And her magic was returning.” Coming to a sense of her own personal power as an individual recharges Marie’s magical, Voodoo-derived power. Importantly, her power did not return through love affairs with men but through the acquisition of her sense of self and a lesson in the benefits of solitude. In other words, Marie does not need a man to find happiness or a sense of completion- only love for herself.

Finally, Prose defines Marie Laveau’s power through her legacy. When the Iwa, Baron Cemetery, informs Marie that she will die within two years, she begins to train her daughter, Ti-Marie, in the business. After her mother’s death, Ti-Marie takes over as Voodoo Queen, and the town believes that she is Marie. The final chapter of the novel

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75 Prose, 264.
76 Prose, 268.
77 After this scene, Marie returns to town. She eventually meets, falls in love with, and marries Christophe Glapion, a free man of color. Marie remains monogamously committed to Glapion for the rest of her life. However, her marriage does not end her independence or her role as Voodoo Queen. In fact, when Marie discovers that she has only two years to live she leaves Glapion and her daughter to spend her final days alone in the shack in the bayou.
78 Baron Cemetery (Baron Samedi, Bawon Samdi) is the father of a group of Iwa known as the Guede (Gede). The Guede are the spirits of the “ancestral dead” and “the master of the two absolutes: fucking and dying.” In other words, Baron Cemetery and the Guede represent the cycle of life. He usually wears a top hat and sunglasses with one lens missing, and he smokes a cigar. See Donald J. Cosentino, “Interleaf R: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), first quote on 396. Cosentino, “Envoi: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, ed. Cosentino, second quote on 413; 399-414, 430; Métraux, 112-113.
traces Marie Laveau's legacy through the decades of the twentieth century following the trajectory of the Great Migration. "Marie Laveau has come back from the dead" as a woman in Algiers, Louisiana; as a woman who moves her family to Philadelphia; as a female blues singer in Chicago; as Zora Neale Hurston; as a woman in "wartime Harlem;" as Rosa Parks; as a young, black Puerto Rican girl in the Bronx; and as men and women planning a revolution in "Santo Domingo."79

Marie Laveau’s power as her legacy clearly exhibits the influences of the Black Power and Black Arts movements and the Women’s Liberation movement on the novel as it is traced through the narrative of African American women’s history, particularly through black female icons like Hurston and Rosa Parks. Not only does Laveau’s spirit continue through these women, but Voodoo, as African American folk culture does, too. The inclusion of a Puerto Rican immigrant and the men and women in “Santo Domingo” draws broader connections between the religions of the African diaspora, of which Voodoo and Hoodoo are a part. These same diasporan connections were made within the Black Power/Black Arts movements through the idea of “blackness” as a concept, a distinct culture, and worldview that links black people all over the world.80

Prose’s inclusion of Zora Neale Hurston as an embodiment of Laveau’s spirit is particularly important. Throughout the book, Prose references Hurston’s work on Voodoo and Laveau, revealing Hurston as an obvious source for the novel. This means that Prose did not rely solely on Tallant, but it also suggests the influence of Alice Walker’s black feminist writings. In looking to the past for a role model, Alice Walker claimed Zora Neale Hurston as the “maternal muse of [black women’s] collective artistic and historical

79 Prose, 370-374.
80 Van Deburg, 59, 188, 220-221, 274-275, 279.
memory.” A number of articles and books have discussed the profuse connections between the lives and work of Hurston and Walker. One of these connections is the importance of black folk culture, especially Hoodoo, to these authors’ work. Studies on Hurston and Walker explain the two writers’ shared interest and employment of Hoodoo (or “conjure”) in literal and metaphorical terms. In the introduction to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Pryse explains: “For like Hurston, Walker also finds ‘magic’ in combining folk and female material, transforming the power of the root-doctor’s conjure.”82 While there is not a direct association of Laveau with Walker as there is between the Voodoo Queen and Hurston, Marie Laveau’s presence underlies the link that Hoodoo provides between Hurston and Walker.

In her article, “Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston’s Strategies for Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment,” Cheryl Wall argues that the narrator, “Zora” is transformed through her journey South from a “naive and diffident” girl in her hometown where traditional gender roles are rigorously enforced to a woman who has found “her personal power, the power of the word” through her initiation with Luke Turner “under the providential guidance of the spirit of Marie Leveau [sic].”83 Hoodoo itself served as a space for female empowerment in its diffuse power structure and the control it allowed oppressed African Americans over their lives.84 In *Mules and Men* Hurston explains how Hoodoo began: Moses, who “made a nation and a book” learned God’s words and was then initiated by Jethro, “a great hoodoo man.” Later, the power

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81 Decker, xi.
84 Wall, 672-673.
was continued through Sheba who passed her knowledge to Solomon. Solomon, in turn, wrote the words down in books.⁸⁵ Thus, this folktale indicates that “[t]hose possessing spiritual power gain access to the power of the word.”⁸⁶ Through her journey, culminating in the initiation into Marie Laveau’s Voodoo tradition, Zora “earns the right to write the words by first seeking the power through which she may invest them with meaning.”⁸⁷

By writing down her people’s folktales in *Mules and Men*, Hurston dispelled the literary authority of white males and legitimated black women as writers. Marjorie Pryse explains it this way: “*Mules and Men* has the effect on Hurston’s own fiction and thereby, through Hurston to Alice Walker, the effect on the black woman novelist’s literary tradition that the Bible had on the earliest white male colonials. It gave her the authority to tell stories because in the act of writing down the old ‘lies,’ Hurston created a bridge between the ‘primitive’ authority of folk life and the literary power of written texts.”⁸⁸ Tellingly, Hurston points out in *Mules and Men* that the Bible “is the great conjure book in the world.”⁸⁹ Through her action of recording black folk culture, Hurston gained self-empowerment and authorized black women writers to add their own voices to an American literary culture that had so long ignored them. Highlighting this legacy, Prose writes, “Her body is buried in Florida, but her spirit keeps returning in the magic of her words.”⁹⁰

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⁸⁶ Wall, 674.  
⁸⁷ Wall, 675.  
⁸⁸ Pryse, 11-12. Wall agrees with Pryse on this point. Both critics see *Mules and Men* as a “mother-text” not only for other black women writers but for Hurston’s own fiction, specifically *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. See Wall, 677.  
⁹⁰ Prose, 372.
Several critics describe Zora Neale Hurston’s work, particularly her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as a “forerunner” of black women’s literature written in the 1970s and 1980s because of her employment of black folk culture and language to create fully developed black female characters.\(^9\) Clearly Hurston influenced no other African American woman writer more profoundly than Alice Walker. In claiming Hurston as her spiritual and literary foremother, Walker celebrated the importance of black maternal ancestors for black women writers. These ancestors include the women known to have been artists such as Hurston or Phillis Wheatley, but also all of the black women who were not allowed to develop their artistic side in the traditional ways yet found other outlets including storytelling, quilting, and, like Walker’s own mother, gardening.\(^9\)

Walker pays homage to both her mother and Hurston in her short story on Voodoo, “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff.” The plot came from a story told to Walker by her mother; it was in researching Voodoo for the story that Walker discovered Hurston. Much of the story finds its structure and details in Hurston’s *Mules and Men*.\(^9\)

The narrator of the story is the apprentice to Tante Rosie, a rootworker. To aid the client, Mrs. Kemhuff, the apprentice uses a “curse prayer,” the source of which is explicitly revealed to be *Mules and Men*. The young Hoodoo apprentice does not know the prayer by heart so she reads it from Hurston’s book. In *Mules and Men* Luke Turner teaches Hurston this curse prayer. He explains that it is Marie Laveau’s prayer and “when she put


the...curse on a person, it would be better if that man was dead, yes." As Mary Navarro and Mary Sims argue in their essay, “Settling the Dust: Tracking Zora Through Alice Walker’s ‘The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff,’ ” the narrator apprenticed to Tante Rosie to learn Hoodoo (as Hurston apprenticed herself to various Hoodoo doctors in New Orleans) represents Walker’s “apprenticeship” to Hurston as Walker’s literary role model and source of artistic inspiration. Navarro and Sims write, “Tante Rosie (Zora) is a spiritual mother who connects the apprentice (Alice) to her history and her culture. The conjurer invests her power and wisdom in the apprentice, who will avenge all blacks by passing on the traditions, teaching pride in the race.” Yet Walker’s indebtedness to Marie Laveau for the curse-prayer, specifically, and her spiritual knowledge of Voodoo, in general, remains only indirectly acknowledged through Hurston. Thus, when Prose makes Hurston the embodiment of Marie Laveau she encapsulates an historical and spiritual chain of black female empowerment through Hoodoo/Voodoo between Laveau, Hurston, and Walker.

Black (and white) women writers were not the only ones interested in Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s. In his novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, set during the Harlem Renaissance, Ishmael Reed bases his character, Earline, on Hurston. At the end of the book, Earline tells Papa LaBas: “Yes, I want to learn more, pop. I’m thinking about going to New Orleans and Haiti, Brazil and all over the South studying our ancient cultures, our Hoodoo cultures. Maybe by and by some future artists 30 to 40 years from now will benefit from my research. Who knows.” Reed thus lays claim to Hurston as one of the

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95 Navarro and , 21-22, quote on 26.
96 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 206. Earline is further connected to Hurston when she is possessed by the *Iwa Ezili*. This reflects Hurston's initiations in New Orleans.
“future artists” who will benefit from her work on Hoodoo. Through Hurston, Reed discovered Marie Laveau and found a source of information on Hoodoo that he certainly utilized to develop his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic. As mentioned earlier, Mumbo Jumbo and The Last Days of Louisiana Red both include Laveau and exhibit Reed’s Hoodoo-inspired aesthetic. His essay, “Shrovetide in Old New Orleans,” (1978) further explores the legends of Marie Laveau and Dr. John through Reed’s description of his trip to Mardi Gras.

Positioning himself as the rightful heir to Hurston’s legacy because of his appreciation of her work on black diasporan religious traditions, Reed decries black feminists’ primary claim to Hurston and their refusal to acknowledge black male writers, like himself, who were cognizant of Hurston in the sixties and seventies. Reed reveals his critical stance on feminism in The Last Days of Louisiana, in part through the relationship between Marie Laveau and Dr. John. In his retellings of Laveau’s story, Reed pits the Voodoo Queen against Dr. John, whom he calls her “chief rival.” In Reed’s final analysis of the two Voodoo leaders, Laveau has stolen the credit that rightly belongs to Dr. John as the most important figure in New Orleans Voodoo lore.

Set in Berkeley, California, The Last Days of Louisiana Red is a satirical look at revolutionary politics in the 1960s and early 1970s, particularly African American feminism and Black Power militancy. After Ed Yellings, the head of a group of Hoodoo practitioners known as the Solid Gumbo Works is murdered in Berkeley, his eldest son Wolf takes over “the Business” with the help of Papa LaBas, a Hoodoo worker from New

97 Dick and Singh, 187, 301.
York sent to the West Coast to solve Yellings’ murder. Yellings gained his knowledge of Hoodoo from the “effects of a certain astrologer, diviner and herbalist” in New Orleans. This astrologer “who had been done in by...the competition” is later revealed to be Dr. John. Through the teachings of Dr. John, Yellings’ Solid Gumbo Works creates a cure for cancer and is working on a treatment to end heroin addiction. The Gumbo Workers’ competition, the Louisiana Red Corporation, murders Yellings once it discovers the beneficial cures created by his operation.

A condition widespread among American workers, Louisiana Red causes them to accept their oppressed lot, inducing them to take their frustrations out on one another rather than the dominant elites who are responsible for their degraded situation. Papa LaBas describes Louisiana Red in the context of Hoodoo as “toad’s eyes, putting snakes in people, excrement, hostility, evilness, attitude, negroes stabbing negroes- Crabs in a Barrel.” An apt context, for while the Solid Gumbo Works inherited Dr. John’s practices, the Louisiana Red Corporation consists of the followers of Marie Laveau. Thus, as Violet Harrington Bryan suggests, “Reed chooses to emphasize the rumored rivalry between the historical Marie Laveau and Doctor John, and comes down on the side of the man, with the woman playing the role of the villain.”

Towards the end of the novel, a messenger from the spirit world visits Papa LaBas with an update on Yellings death. She relates the story to Papa LaBas; it is the

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100 In an interview with Al Young, Reed explains that he uses the term Hoodoo instead of Obeah or Voodoo because “they’re different things. Hoodooism is what Black Americans came up with.” See Dick and Singh, 45. Papa LaBas is another name for the Haitian lwa, Papa Legba. Papa Legba guards the crossroads between the human world and the spirit world including thresholds such as doors and gates. In Catholic iconography, St. Peter represents Legba because Peter holds the keys to heaven. Legba is a trickster figure. See Donald J. Cosentino, “Interleaf B: Rada Altar,” in Sacred Arts of Vodou, ed. Cosentino, 58, Cosentino, 430; Thompson, 19; Metraux, 360-361.


102 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 140.

103 Bryan, 144.
"true" story of the rivalry between Marie Laveau and Dr. John (I and II). According to the messenger, the first Dr. John, a man "of the primitive variety who wore loincloths," declared that the "young, sassy and beautiful" Marie Laveau would take over as Voodoo Queen for Marie Saloppé, "the dark-skinned queen of the Business and undisputed ruler." After dethroning the former Queen as predicted, Laveau fused Saloppé's Voodoo with Catholicism, producing a watered-down version that "replaced the African loas altogether" with Catholic saints which appealed to her (white) American clients. Laveau spent much of her time putting on shows for whites or catering to her elite white clients. Only occasionally would she "throw a real authentic rite for the colored people so they wouldn't dismiss her as Queen of the Business."

However, at the height of her power, the second Dr. John arrived in New Orleans and quickly gained numerous clients without the "Madison Avenue-styled show-biz tricks" employed by Laveau. Anxious over Dr. John's competition, Laveau began to put gris-gris in his yard or pay other Voodoo leaders to make charms against him. When people heard that Laveau attempted to use Voodoo to stop Dr. John they "began calling Marie's stuff Louisiana Red." Literary scholar, Patrick McGee, points out that "Louisiana Red" alludes to the "negative use of Hoodoo (based on Petro vodun, which foregrounds 'hot' militaristic skills and draws its energy from social anger and resentment.)" (It should be remembered, however, that such a clear-cut definition between Rada and Petro Vodou as "good" and "bad" is not quite accurate.) Either way, the messenger's story posits that Marie Laveau "misused the Business" to rid herself of
her most threatening competition, thus, spreading the apathetic, “Crabs in a barrel” attitude that plagues contemporary Berkeley.

It was then that Dr. John convinced Marie Philome, Laveau’s daughter, to pose as her mother in order to steal Laveau’s clients. It was also rumored that Dr. John impregnated Marie Philome. Enraged, Marie vowed revenge. When Dr. John was found dead Marie was arrested, but her connections with the city’s elite quickly freed her from jail and dropped the charges against her. The messenger concludes, “Marie had too much power, and that was the end of the first attempt by a brother to run the ‘Business’ in America; it was mama before and it’s been mama ever since.”

In his version of the Marie Laveau/Dr. John relationship, Reed sets the two Voodoo leaders in opposition to one another. There is Laveau on one side: a light-skinned female Voodoo leader whose practices are more influenced by Catholicism than West African religions; whose theatrical rites are meant more for whites than blacks; and whose legacy is the bad Louisiana Red. On the other side is Dr. John: a full-blooded African man who gains followers without the “sensational come-ons” and whose teachings eventually cured cancer. Implicit in these descriptions is the issue of authenticity. Laveau’s racial and spiritual mixture makes her inauthentic while Dr. John’s purity—racial, spiritual, and moral—deems him authentic and the rightful leader of Voodoo in New Orleans. The messenger attempts to right this wrong by replacing Laveau with Dr. John as “the founder of the American Business” and relegating Laveau to “the second vice-president in charge of wit and hustle.”

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109 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 141.
110 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 144.
This privileging of Dr. John over Marie Laveau contradicts Reed’s celebration of multicultural expressions, which is especially important to his Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic. However, in this novel, gender relations trump the multicultural issues that Laveau could potentially represent. Rather, it is implied that Laveau’s inauthenticity stems from her being a female, particularly a light-skinned black woman in New Orleans. According to the messenger, Laveau “was against the dark-skinned people,” and the idea that her daughter was to have a child with Dr. John incensed Marie so because “[h]e was too dark-skinned for her daughter.”

This conflict between dark-skinned Dr. John and light-skinned Marie Laveau finds its historical context in nineteenth-century New Orleans where the majority of the free people of color were of mixed racial descent and the majority of the enslaved people were of full African descent. There were a number of free people of color in Louisiana who owned slaves, and the majority of these slaveholders were of mixed racial heritage. Among these free people of color slaveholders were a large number of women, including CeCee Macarty, who owned the most slaves of any free person of color in New Orleans in 1850. In this context, the idea that Marie Laveau, as the representative of the population of free people of color, was responsible for Louisiana

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111 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 138, 141. It is interesting to note that in Tallant’s novel, The Voodoo Queen, the source for Reed’s version of Laveau’s story, Dr. John hates “mulattoes” with the passion that Reed suggests Laveau felt toward dark skinned people.


Red and its emphasis on using others for individual gain ("crabs in a barrel") reads as a critique of light-skinned slave owners.

Reed places this conflict in another historical context, one which he then uses to critique African American feminism. The messenger’s story of Marie Laveau suggests that her power came from being a “stunning creature” of a particular hue which reveals her racial mixture and attracts white men: “Marie was yellow, and the American men loved yellow women.”¹¹⁵ Thus, Marie’s beauty as a light-skinned free woman of color brought her the powerful white clients who supported her business, got her out of jail, and “awarded her a plaque for Woman of the Year.”¹¹⁶ Laveau’s connections with whites represent white co-optation of select African Americans based on their allegiance to the white community or their subscription to white values. Like the figure of the house slave rewarded for her loyalty this appropriation on the part of whites is specifically tied to Laveau’s mixed racial heritage. In Reed’s assessment, Marie’s Laveau’s importance to the history of the Business is diminished because she took advantage of white elites’ co-optation of her.¹¹⁷

Marie’s social and biological connections with white males also reflect the historical situation in which white men had, most often coerced, sexual relations with their female slaves. Sometimes these relationships led to the manumission of the enslaved woman and her biracial children, but not always. The placage system in New Orleans was another form of a white male/black female relationship that connected free women of

¹¹⁵ Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 137.
¹¹⁶ Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 141.
¹¹⁷ In an interview with John O’Brien, Reed discusses the ways in which “high yellows exploit blackness” in situations where African American culture has reached the white mainstream “while still using their skin privileges” to reap the benefits from whites over darker-skinned blacks whom are not accepted by the white establishment. See Dick and Singh, 20.
color to white men both socially and often biologically. In his critique of African American feminists, Papa LaBas sees them continuing this historical situation as a conspiracy between white men and black women to keep black men down. In a heated exchange, Papa LaBas tells Minnie, the novel’s feminist heir to Angela Davis that a sexual relationship between a black woman and a white man was normal practice under cover in the North and South when the sun goes down. It’s almost like a secret society...They’ve been enjoying each other, from the ninth-precinct cop whose car can be seen parked for two hours in front of the negro hooker’s home to the President’s cook who had more power than the First Lady. But now the old lovers have entered into a conspiracy to put the negro male into the kitchen and to death, and you can call me a male pig all you want, but I will do my utmost to stop you.118

Black Power activists such as Eldridge Cleaver espoused similar sentiments concerning the historical triangular relationship between white men, black women, and black men.119 As a light-skinned free woman of color in New Orleans whose power comes in part from her connections with white male elites, Marie Laveau exemplifies this conspiracy theory when she does her best to destroy Dr. John.

In the spirit of synchronic time, Reed connects an antagonistic relationship between Marie Laveau and Dr. John to the politics of African American feminists in the early 1970s as a way to comment on the faults of such politics. Ed Yellings’ youngest daughter, Minnie joins the “ideology of the moment,” Moochism. Moochers are selfish people who take but do not give and blame everyone else but themselves. It is not long before Minnie becomes the leader of the Moochers.

As she rises to the head of the Moochers, Minnie’s feminist politics increase, fueled by stories told to her by Nanny Lisa. A black woman from New Orleans, Nanny

118 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 129.
Lisa is a spy for the Louisiana Red Corporation. She keeps Minnie suspicious of her father and his Gumbo Workers by telling her “‘Louisiana Red’ stories” of Marie Laveau’s rivalry with “Doc John, a mean uppity diabolical smarty pants.” Minnie thoroughly enjoys the way these stories ended: “Marie, would always best Doc John; prevail over the no-account ruffian.”

Minnie, like Antigone, to whom she is repeatedly compared throughout the novel “desire[s] to destroy the existing patriarchy.” She is a ruthless caricature of black feminists who by the late 1960s, with the rise of the Black Power movement, were faced with the assertion on the part of many African American men of the necessity of the restoration of black masculinity. The best way for that to occur was for African American women to remain in the domestic realm and play a secondary role in the movement. In the novel, this transformation is represented through the return of Minnie’s brother, Street, from exile in Africa to take over as leader of the Moochers. When Minnie goes to see Street to accept his replacement of her as the Moochers’ leader, Street tells his sister and her gang, “the Dahomeyan Softball Team, a bunch of butches who split a man’s head open with a baseball bat” to “make themselves useful. Mimeographing my speeches, licking stamps, fixing drinks, giving massages, cooking our dinner, giving up some drawers.” He then physically asserts his masculinity when he wrestles Minnie’s head bodyguard, Reichsfuhrer, into submission by having sex with her.

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120 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 15.
121 Bryan, 144.
123 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 81, 89. Street’s suggestions for what Minnie and her bodyguards could do for the Black Power movement echo Toni Cade Bambara’s claim that “[I]t would seem that every organization you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men
While the easy succumbing of the butch bodyguard to Street’s sexual advances supports his right as a male to dominate women, it also suggests that women bring this upon themselves. This “she was asking for it” justification of rape relates to the source of Marie Laveau’s power as a woman implied in the messenger’s story: her sexual allure. In this, Reed agrees with Tallant, but puts it much more crudely; instead of “magnetism,” it is “cunt power.” Again, it is Papa LaBas who voices a concern with black feminism in his discussion with Minnie. He says:

Women use our children as hostages against us. We walk the streets in need of women and make fools of ourselves over women; fight each other, put Louisiana Red on each other, shoot and maim each other. The original blood-sucking vampire was a woman. You flirt with us, tease us, provoke us, showing your delicious limbs to our askance glances; then you furtively pretend you don’t want it... Your cunt is the most powerful weapon of any creature on this earth, and you know it, and you know how to use it. I can’t understand why you want to be liberated. Hell. You already free— you already liberated. Liberated and powerful. We’re the ones who are slaves; two-thirds of the men on skid row were driven there by their mothers, wives, daughters, their mistresses and their sisters...124

In other words, African American women control African American men through sex. This passage sounds surprisingly similar to white racist ideology that blames “hypersexual” black women for miscegenation. Reed uses the rivalry between Marie Laveau and Dr. John to connect antebellum inter- and intra-race relations with the racial negotiations taking place during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Reed’s version of this story exposes Marie Laveau as a petty show woman unworthy of her reputation as the Voodoo Queen because her power came more from her seduction of wealthy white men than her African-derived spiritual knowledge. Reed challenges some black feminists’
claims that all relationships between black women and white men were rape. He proposes that black women should allow black men “to build something” rather than siding with their “rapists” to keep black men “on the corner sipping Ripple.” This is the mistake Laveau made when she refused to allow Dr. John a place in New Orleans Voodoo.

McGee claims that Reed “aligns himself with a more conservative African-American tradition...[which] identifies the patriarchal family as the means of cultural restoration for the peoples of the African diaspora.” Dr. John becomes a symbol of black patriarchy in Reed’s essay, “Shrovetide in Old New Orleans” when he writes, “[Dr. John] is said to have had an international harem of fifteen wives, in a Christian country, where only white men are allowed that many.” Thus, Dr. John must be restored to his rightful position as “the founder of the American Business” because he not only asserted his masculinity in a slave society, but he practiced authentic Voodoo, the cultural expression inherited by Reed as his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic.

In her novel, Voodoo Dreams, Jewell Parker Rhodes presents a defense of African American feminism through her construction of the relationship between Marie Laveau and Dr. John. Continuing the literary conventions that came out of the Black Arts and feminist movements, Jewell Parker Rhodes attempts to write an historical novel that describes “what it might have been like to have been Marie Laveau in the nineteenth century.” Be that as it may, Rhodes seemingly uses the shortage of historical evidence

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126 Reed, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, 125.
127 McGee, 50.
about Marie Laveau’s life as an indication that it is acceptable to ascribe to her whatever story she wants in *Voodoo Dreams*. In doing so, Rhodes creates a feminist text ready to be aired on the Lifetime channel complete with evil, abusive men, women who must find their inner strength, and multiple, gratuitous and perverse sex scenes. In the novel, Marie Laveau is consumed by a love/hate relationship with Dr. John whom she must overcome in order to fully realize her power as a woman. Ultimately, Marie is the more powerful of the two Voodoo leaders because, according to Rhodes, the serpent *Iwa*, Damballah, only possesses women.

In *Voodoo Dreams* the power struggle between Marie Laveau and Dr. John is not over who deserves to be the preeminent Voodoo leader in New Orleans due to his or her relationship with the spiritual world. This is a non-issue because Dr. John has no real spiritual power in the novel; everything he has gained is through the spiritual power of the women in his life, especially Marie. Instead, the power struggle is set in the context of a sexually abusive relationship where the man overpowers the woman physically and psychologically. Marie must find her inner strength as a woman to free herself of John’s control.

In opposition to Reed’s rendering of Laveau as only a secondary figure to Dr. John’s “authentic” Voodoo practices, Rhodes’ Marie Laveau has a direct, biological connection to African spirituality, particularly with Damballah, the serpent spirit in the Fon and Haitian Vodou religions. In the novel, Marie Laveau is the fourth woman in a matrilineal line of Voodoo priestesses beginning with Membe, an enslaved African

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130 It must be remembered that the ten years that Rhodes spent writing *Voodoo Dreams* predated the scholarship on Laveau by Fandrich, Long, and Ward. Fandrich’s dissertation was completed a year after *Voodoo Dreams* was published.
woman. Membe’s daughter, known as Grandmere in the book, is named Marie as is each woman after her. While in Africa, Damballah visited Membe giving her the following instructions: “I want you to mother my lost children...Go to the seacoast. Be taken as a slave. When you get to the New World, teach my children to remember their faith. Tell them the tales of themselves and their creation.”  

For her service, Damballah promises that one half of Membe’s soul will return to African while the other half will “live forever in a line of daughters.” Marie Laveau, as the third daughter in Membe’s line, is the direct descendant of Damballah’s spiritual powers charged with the assignment to continue West African religious traditions in the New World. In other words, Marie’s authenticity cannot be denied. In opposition to Reed, Rhodes establishes African American women as the bearers and protectors of African culture in the diaspora. Rhodes also makes Marie’s mixed racial heritage a positive aspect of her character. Grandmere tells Marie that being of mixed blood was the women’s “history and power.” Unlike in Reed’s representation of Laveau, Marie’s racial mixture strengthens her power rather than renders her a fraud.

Raised by Grandmere in Bayou Teche, Marie has no memories of her mother, and her questions remain unanswered. Grandmere teaches Marie natural medicines, but she does not speak of Voodoo. The mysteries that surround Marie’s heritage are further complicated when, at age ten, she begins to have visions which she is sure have something to do with her mother. Thus, Marie’s personal and spiritual journey begins as a

132 Rhodes, 331.
133 Rhodes, 17.
quest to find out how: “Pursuing the mystery of Maman, she hoped she’d uncover herself.”

Instead, Marie finds John Bayou (one of Dr. John’s many aliases). Before Marie was born, John terrorized Grandmere and Marie’s mother, using them for their spiritual powers to gain power himself. Because of John, Marie’s mother was lynched by white men after she held a Voodoo ceremony on the steps of the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. John comes to Bayou Teche when Marie is ten years old and sexually molests her. This event sets in motion her tortured, yet ultimately triumphant journey to self-discovery through her relationship with John.

As soon as she begins to menstruate, Grandmere brings Marie to live in New Orleans in order to find her a husband. Grandmere wastes no time in choosing Jacques Paris, a free black sailor, for her granddaughter. Marie accepts Jacques’ proposal a few days later but does not truly love him. Through a vision, Marie realizes that she will leave Jacques on their wedding night for the “dark man who’d caressed her in the bayou...Even as a child she’d known that after a touch from him she’d be ready to yield everything, even her soul. Jacques was sweet; the man in the bayou was desire.” Leaving Jacques in the marital bed, Marie goes to live with John Bayou.

An enslaved African Prince, John killed his master and found freedom in the bustling port town of New Orleans where he seeks prestige, financial success and power through Voodoo. To him “...Voodoo was a business. Profit. Manipulation. Power.” He did not see Voodoo as a religion, only as a way to reclaim the life denied him by slavery.

As a black man in a slave society, John has lost his sense of masculinity. To compensate

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134 Rhodes, 80.
135 Rhodes, 75.
136 Rhodes, 127.
for this loss of control, he must control the women in his life. He tells Marie, “Nothing is fair...I shouldn’t be here. The world isn’t just. I should be ruling a kingdom, not living in a country where my skin color makes me less than a man. Help me reclaim my rights. Myself.”\textsuperscript{137} John’s plea echoes sentiments espoused by some African American men who feel black women’s subjugation is for the good of the race. In an interview, Rhodes admits that her “sense of John is very much that he is a victim...While he’s evil, while he’s abusive, while he’s in some ways very much an insecure man, that’s the flip side of having so much to give and so little scope in which to give it.”\textsuperscript{138} But it is exactly through the evil and abusive John that Rhodes makes a defense against Reed’s critique of black feminists. John’s violence against Marie, her mother before her and Marie’s baby daughter is indicative of an over-compensation for lost masculinity. While she sympathizes with John as a victim of white racism, Rhodes suggests that black women have the right to defend themselves against such an excessive assertion of male dominance no matter the color of the man’s skin. Where Reed uses Dr. John as a symbol of black patriarchy existing within a slave society who is denied the recognition he deserved because of a woman, Rhodes presents John Bayou as an example of what happens when a female spiritual leader is stifled by a black man emasculated through slavery.

But John does not only need Marie as a stepping stool to assert his masculinity. Because, in the novel, Damballah will only possess women, without Marie’s connection to Damballah- her power as a Voodoo priestess- John would have nothing. John’s misogyny blinds him to the spirituality of Voodoo. He tells Marie, “I sometimes think

\textsuperscript{137} Rhodes, 150.
\textsuperscript{138} Rhodes and Ramsey, 599.
women are Damballah’s whores. It explains why He uses their bodies for prophecy, visions. But the power is male. Always male...It well explains why Damballah chose you. Just as you’ve been my whore, so you’ve been Damballah’s. I control you just as He does.” Far from the “more authentic” Dr. John in _The Last Days of Louisiana Red_, John Bayou has no real understanding of the workings of the _Iwa_ and their relationships with their devotees. His only interest in Voodoo is gain, and because, in the novel, women are a necessity to access Voodoo, John must work with them. In turn, he projects his hatred of his condition onto these women.

In order to control Marie, John withholds information from her about her mother and about Voodoo. She must discover the real importance of her spiritual power on her own. John physically abuses Marie and uses sex as both the promise of love and as rape to keep Marie under his power. After a ceremony in which Damballah possesses Marie, John fears that she will realize that she does not need him. In order to remind her who has control, John violently has sex with her, essentially raping her anally while suffocating her. As perverse as it may seem, Marie cannot help her feelings for John. “John was amazingly attractive: angular, lean, ruthless. Lusting for John, Marie learned to hate herself. Her logic was circular: John was evil-she must be evil too. If she were truly good, she’d stop wanting a man so evil.”

This statement, a classic description of the psychology of the abused, indicates the level to which Marie has sunk. To put it crudely, the “power of the cunt” has been replaced with the power of the “cock.” It is not John who does crazy things to stay in Marie’s bed; rather, it is Marie who sacrifices her self-esteem and a good part of her life.

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139 Rhodes, 322.
140 Rhodes, 201.
needing John’s acceptance, support and love because John’s “sex had stirred her like a drug.” The evil, abusive John, as the symbol of black masculinity, is the enemy in Rhodes’ stereotyped portrayal of feminism.

What is particularly striking about Rhodes’ version of this relationship is the overt sexual element. In fact, her imagined relationship between Dr. John and Marie Laveau borders on the sadomasochistic. Rhodes’ insistence on making sex and Marie’s sexuality play such a major role in her novel echoes Robert Tallant’s attraction to the exotic and sensual that Voodoo and Marie Laveau represent to him. Ironically, where sexuality becomes the essence of her power in Tallant’s mind, Rhodes makes Marie’s sexuality the main source of John’s control over her. Even her beauty, which does so much for her, according to Tallant, makes her vulnerable to men. Months after leaving him on their wedding night, Marie sees Jacques Paris at Grandmere’s house. “Marie was carelessly beautiful. Jacques wanted to raise his hand and strike her.” All of the ways Tallant suggests Laveau gained power—secrets learned as a hairdresser, her natural business acumen—become John’s ideas in Voodoo Dreams. Instead of a woman who has multiple levels of power, Jewell Parker Rhodes’ Marie Laveau is a weak, impressionable girl who must find her inner strength to become a woman and fully realize her power to receive possessions from Damballah.

Each chapter in Voodoo Dreams opens with a journal entry from Louis DeLavier’s journal. Louis, a white Northerner who sees and falls in love with Marie the

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141 Rhodes, 130.
142 This is only hinted at in The Last Days of Louisiana Red when the messenger describes Dr. John’s confrontation with Laveau over the gris-gris she placed in his yard: “Marie sat there, her heart palpitating and her lashes fluttering. Doc John was a big old negro man with coal-black skin and Nigerian scarification on his face. He was always dressed like a prince. Marie did not know whether to love the man or mutilate him. You know how passion works.” According to Reed, she clearly picked the latter, implying that any black feminist would.
143 Rhodes, 277.
first day she arrives in New Orleans, befriends her and publishes articles in newspapers about Voodoo. In some ways, Tallant makes a cameo appearance through Louis’ character. In an interview, Rhodes says, “I...wanted this notion of a white male to stand in for all of the other people, all the other white males who had written about Marie Laveau.” Rhodes attempts to answer texts like Tallant’s with her inclusion of Louis. In a way, she agrees with Tallant- Marie’s power did come from being a woman, but it was not her sexuality or “magnetism,” but her inner strength. (Although, arguably this inner strength is never revealed.) On her deathbed, Louis, echoing Tallant’s ambivalence about the true meaning of Voodoo, asks Marie whether or not it is evil. Marie replies and the following conversation ensues:

When I was younger and didn’t know any better, I would’ve answered yes. But Voodoo reflects what is. Maman was evil... so it presented her as she truly was. Voodoo had never demanded Maman’s death. But it was Voodoo, steeped in ancestor worship that gave Maman back to me in all her ugliness, with all her spite.

What of John, Marie? He was Voodoo.

A religion can’t account for its charlatans. I was a charlatan.

Always?

I grow tired, Louis. I doubt if I’ll survive the night.

Were you always a charlatan?

No. At times, I had the greatest gift. I was a woman with power.145

Marie refers to herself as a charlatan because she became the Voodoo Queen through John’s propaganda rather than her own spiritual calling and knowledge. Even on her deathbed Marie feels that her blending of Catholic saints with the lwa was blasphemy. Describing herself in almost Reed-esque terms, Marie tells Louis, “I was worse than a

144 Rhodes and Ramsey, 596.
145 Rhodes, 152-153.
charlatan. I wasted my gift. I led others to believe in a religion based on lies, on theatrics.”146 Thus, even Marie’s spiritual power is undercut because of her victimization by John.

It is through overcoming John’s abuse and misogyny that Marie realizes her power as a woman. Ultimately, the only way to completely rid herself from John’s soul-damaging control is to kill him. The decision to finally end John’s life comes when she watches John having an erection while stroking their infant daughter’s vagina. She kills him using the python he bought as another way to earn money and win followers. With John’s death, “a vortex” around which her life became centered, Marie symbolically topples black patriarchy.147

However, lest the reader forget, Rhodes includes a parallel storyline that makes clear that nineteenth-century New Orleans was “a world where white and male meant power.”148 The incestuous relationship between the white Creole twins, Brigette and Antoine DeLavier, emblematically portrays the ultimate power of white patriarchal rule. Brigette is married to her cousin, Louis DeLavier, the same newspaper reporter who falls in love with Marie. Impregnated by her brother, Brigette initially asks John for help, who, in turn, asks Marie.

A few days later, Marie goes to Brigette’s house as an apprentice to Ziti, a hairdresser. Looking over Brigette’s nude body as she sprawls on the bed wearing an undone robe, Marie realizes that Brigette is pregnant and wants an abortion. Immediately she recognizes Brigette as “a white version of her.” Not only are the two women expectant mothers, but their children are the products of unhealthy, adulterous

146 Rhodes, 258.
147 Rhodes, 413.
148 Rhodes, 237.
relationships. This connection between the two horribly abused women makes “Marie [want] to lay her head on the golden-headed crotch and weep.”¹⁴⁹ Instead Marie lies down on the bed beside Brigette as the white woman talks about her relationship with her twin brother. Marie’s desire for intimacy with Brigette when she feels “the brush of bare abdomen and breasts against her back” betrays her sympathy for Brigette’s plight. Before leaving the room, Marie “kiss[es] Brigette’s exposed neck, her pale lips.”¹⁵⁰ This intimate scene between Marie and Brigette unites them as two women against the evils of men across the racial divide.

Yet, this shared struggle against patriarchy is only momentary. Marie refuses to perform the requested abortion because “[n]o religion should tolerate a child’s death.” The sympathy she has for Brigette as a victim of male abuse, seemingly the motivation for her “lesbian” desires, does not outweigh Marie’s moral conviction that abortion is a sin. Compared to Brigette, who practices incest and wants an abortion, Marie is the morally superior woman, despite her own acts of adultery. Symbolically, Marie’s disgust at Brigette’s incestuous relationship and desire for an abortion suggests the impossibility of any joint struggle of black and white women against patriarchy because of the ultimate perverse nature of the white world- a world of incest and slavery. However, it is absurd to believe that Marie, who as of yet has made no decisions on her own and has only shown distrust of Catholicism, chooses to suddenly make a thoroughly Catholic, moral-based claim against abortion. Not only is this a ridiculous choice for Marie’s automaton-like character to make, it is not a very “feminist” thing to do. Brigette later dies while giving birth to her brother’s child. Death is her only defense against the evils of patriarchy.

¹⁴⁹ Rhodes, 234, 233.
¹⁵⁰ Rhodes, 234, 235.
Marie, on the other hand, actively resists the abuse of Antoine. The same night she leaves Brigette with a kiss and then listens to Louis confess his love to her in the study, Antoine follows Marie down the dark streets. Attacking her, he drags her into an alley and begins to rape her, but Louis stops him. Antoine then turns his fury on his cousin whom he nearly beats to death. No longer able to watch Louis suffocate as Antoine strangles him, Marie picks up a large rock and deals a mortal blow to Antoine’s head.

With the murder of Antoine, rumors of Marie’s power as a Voodoo Queen spread, especially after the judge releases her from jail when John threatens to hex him. Thus, through the death of two men, white and black symbols of the evils of patriarchy, Marie finds her power— as a Voodoo priestess and as a self-confident woman. A visit from Membe’s spirit after Marie murders John reassures her that “Life be a celebration. No need to be more than a woman. Being a woman just fine. Being Marie be...just fine.”

Yet, in the end, Marie dies a lonely old woman who never finds love. Louis Delavier take cares of her, but Marie does not love him. Even her daughter does not care for her because she cannot understand why Marie killed her father. Rhodes admits in an interview that “there are ways in which I have [Marie] pay the price of being who she is, a strong, wondrous one by the end of the book, but yet not having love...there’s no man that she loves in a healthy way.” Rhodes claims she did this in order to emphasize that the Marie’s strength “is really in the woman, as opposed to the strength that comes in the romantic love connection.” This is certainly one way to view Marie’s lack of love in the end; however, another reading could be that Marie’s loneliness is punishment for her

151 Rhodes, 427.
152 Rhodes and Ramsey, 598.
153 Rhodes and Ramsey, 598.
killing John and Antoine. In this reading, the destruction of patriarchy leaves women lonely and without “healthy” relationships with men. Marie is a victim throughout the book, and, arguably, she remains so even in the end despite her newfound inner strength. Perhaps it is not “just fine” being a woman.

John’s character and Marie’s successful surmounting of his control over her could be read as Rhodes’ response to Reed’s critique of black feminism and his own version of the relationship between Marie Laveau and Dr. John. But, Rhodes’ heavy reliance on stereotypical characterizations and situations, her melodramatic storyline with its see-through imagery of the destruction of black and white patriarchy and her own use of the sexually insatiable black female discourse only plays into the hands of Reed’s satirical critique. Marie Laveau is victimized throughout Voodoo Dreams. And it is this portrayal of her that so contradicts the legends and historical knowledge of the Voodoo Queen. Rhodes wants to create a character that represents “the twin themes of female and African American empowerment,” but in this, Voodoo Dreams fails miserably.\textsuperscript{154}

In the author’s note to Voodoo Dreams, Rhodes, the self-described “African American and feminist,” explains that “[m]ost of this story sprung from imagination, from my vision of Laveau as a woman with power, and from my sense that Voodoo has been and continues to be a spiritual well that is far richer than American media and popular stereotypes allow.”\textsuperscript{155} Yet, the novel does not portray either of these two things. Rhodes’ novel is inaccurate in the portrayal of Marie Laveau as a woman who is dominated by John Bayou and whose only power is a “Lifetime feminism” self-worth. In other words, whatever semblance of power Rhodes gives Laveau through a recognition of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{154} Review of Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau, by Jewell Parker Rhodes Publisher’s Weekly 240, no. 39 (1993): 44.
  \item \textsuperscript{155} Rhodes, 435, 436.
\end{itemize}
her feminine self and her matrilineally-descended spirituality, her power is based on
gender and not actions she performs beyond murder. Not only does Marie believe herself
a charlatan and refer to her ceremonies as “a farce” throughout the book, her only
charitable actions come in the last few pages when she “take[s] to aiding Father
Christophe nurse the fever victims and prisoners” to assuage her guilt for the deaths of
Grandmère and Jacques. Furthermore, Rhodes undermines her feminist claims because
she perpetuates the myth of the black Jezebel whose insatiable sexuality invites and
rationalizes abuse by men. In this, her representation of Laveau inverts Tallant’s
portrayal. Whether Laveau’s sexuality gives her power or makes her vulnerable, it is
what defines her for these two authors.

The sexual excess in *Voodoo Dreams* not only does not support Rhodes’ claim to
create a powerful Laveau but also belies any care or understanding of Voodoo. In an
interview Rhodes explains that the novel may come across as didactic because “there is a
whole historical context that is needed in trying to deconstruct stereotypes of
voodoo...There were a lot of things that needed to be said, a lot of information that
needed to be given, which then you try to do in the most dramatic way possible.” This
drama, however, does very little to deconstruct the stereotypes of Voodoo. Take the
following description of one of Marie’s ceremonies, for example:

John was wringing chickens’ necks, slicing out their hearts and spraying
blood. Women swooned and men cheered. Ribaud grinned as he
carressed his drums, building his own rhythms, encouraging a breathless
insanity.  
John filled the cup with blood. People in the crowd surged forward,
fighting among themselves to drink it.
Nattie was dancing, twirling her skirt above her head, exposing

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156 Rhodes, 415.
157 Hill Collins, 77.
158 Kevin E. Quashie, “Mining Magic, Mining Dreams: A Conversation with Jewell Parker Rhodes,”
bowlegs and a wide pelvis. Her motions were erratic and seductive, her breathing slow. Nattie was pretending Ezili possessed her. She stroked John’s cock. He batted her away.

Consider Tallant’s rendition of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description from *Voodoo in New Orleans*:

Papa presented Mama with the bowl of warm blood from the sacrificed kid. She drank and handed it to each of the people as they whirled past. Her own lips drank the last drop.

The dance grew faster now. They spun and gyrated and leaped high into the air. They fell to their hands and knees, imitating the postures of animals, some chewing at the grass, shaking their posteriors violently. They bit and clawed at each other. Their scanty garments were ripped away. The clouds broke and the moon came out and glowed upon naked black flesh. In pairs they fell upon the hot earth, still panting and gyrating. Some fell unconscious and were dragged away, into the deep darkness of the trees that edged the clearing.

Rhodes further perpetuates the stereotypes of Voodoo when she has John turn Jacques into a zombie. Reminiscent of a lynching, in this horrifying scene one of the female dancers stabs Jacques’ hand, pulls down his pants, and plays with his penis amid shouts of “zombie, zombie” from a huge crowd. Rhodes then confuses the reader when a page later Damballah possesses Marie, and she refers to the *lwa* as “li grand zombi” for the first time in the novel. Rhodes offers no explanation of the difference between the “living dead” (zombie) and the name of praise for Damballah (zombi). During the American occupation of Haiti beginning in 1915, rumors of zombification circulated throughout the United States and became popularized by books, particularly William Seabrook’s *The Magic Isle*. Hollywood latched onto the idea of the living dead shortly after, and “the horror film was born in the United States, exploiting the theme of

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159 Rhodes, 357.
161 Rhodes, 365.
zombification, a practice that forever after spelled Haitian ‘Voodoo’.\textsuperscript{162} Rhodes’ use of the stereotypical Voodoo mainstay, the zombie, contradicts any desire to teach the reader about Voodoo. In the historical context of popular perceptions of Voodoo as sexual debauchery and black magic, Rhodes’ graphic sex scenes and descriptions of Voodoo ceremonies only serves to make Voodoo perverse.

Rhodes is irresponsible as a writer in the ways she uses Marie Laveau to tell a twentieth-century “feminist” tale. In essence, Marie Laveau provides a context, an historical backdrop for Rhodes to tell her own story. In an interview, Rhodes admits just that:

When I was very young, my mother left the family home and was gone for many years... So I was very much alone during my growing up years... There were ways in which I was always alienated in very profound ways that are connected, I think, to this sense of, Why did my mother go, and where did she go? So, when I started to write \textit{Voodoo Dreams}, I did not realize that there were many ways in which the novel spoke to my own history. I remember... when it dawned on me that I was writing about my own relationship to my grandmother and mother. It’s interesting that for many years, nearly a decade, I fooled myself into thinking that I was just writing about Marie Laveau. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks that I was writing about a daughter trying to find her mother.\textsuperscript{163}

Rhodes worked on the novel for at least a decade, taking a complete break from writing for almost three years during that time. She told an interviewer that upon returning to the second draft, “I was writing to save my own life.” Therefore, finally finishing the novel had a major impact on her self-esteem as a writer and a woman. She says, “There are ways in which completing what I wanted to do enabled me to say, ‘Yes, I love myself,’ in profound ways that I had never been able to say before... When I wrote, ‘Being a woman


\textsuperscript{163} Rhodes and Ramsey, 598.
be just fine,’ I was in tears because I hadn’t known that being a woman was just fine. I
didn’t know that being a woman was glorious, you know. I didn’t know that you could
move from painful experiences to a sense of triumph and wonder...”

These personal issues suffuse *Voodoo Dreams*, perhaps explaining the
discrepancy between the historical and legendary Voodoo Queen and Rhodes’ abject
victim. The excess of personal drama is part of the problem with the book. This novel is
not about Marie Laveau but about Rhodes herself. And this is a questionable use of an
historical figure and an historical context. Rhodes justifies her use of history in an
interview:

> But my argument here is that [*Voodoo Dreams*] is part of the
folklore tradition...I’d say its a cousin to Zora Neale Hurston’s
work in that there is an African American folklore experience
that is embodied in voodoo...So, while *Voodoo Dreams* is an
historical novel, it should be underscored that it is a novel, an
imaginative lie that tells a great deal of truth about what it might
have been like to have been Marie Laveau in the nineteenth century,
and this might be more authentic in some ways than so-called histories.”

Yet, her portrayal of Laveau is so far from the historical record and even the “mythical”
record that surrounds Laveau’s name. Rhodes’ Laveau has no social power, and arguably,
no psychological power. The decision to represent Marie Laveau in this way shows
Rhodes’ absolute disregard for history. In addition, it is ludicrous to claim that *Voodoo
Dreams* resembles Hurston’s work in any way.

However, Reed could easily be accused of the same thing. In fact, Reed’s work is
notorious for challenging the Eurocentric metanarrative of American history that ignores
African American contributions to the building of the nation and its culture. In *Mumbo
Jumbo* he intersperses his fiction with nonfiction in such a way as to make it difficult to

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164 Rhodes and Ramsey, 603.
165 Rhodes and Ramsey, 594.
tell the difference between the two. Reed’s satirical works are marked by his attention to historical detail and penchant for unearthing obscure information to make connections between time periods. As an example of synchronicity, defined as “the past is contemporary,” *Mumbo Jumbo* is a detective story set in the 1920s Harlem; at the same time, the novel is a comment on the 1970s Black Arts movement. The two are linked through Egyptology. Reed calls this “necromancy.” He explains in an interview that “[p]eople go back into the past and get a metaphor from the past to explain the present or the future...Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in tombs to receive visions of the future...The black writer lies in the guts of old America, making readings about the future. That’s what I wanted to do in *Mumbo Jumbo.*”

Reed would agree with Rhodes’ assessment of history as “very much fictional.” In fact, Reed uses Robert Tallant’s fictional account, *The Voodoo Queen*, as his source of information on Laveau in his essay, “Shrovetide in Old New Orleans” and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* in order to better support his description of the Marie Laveau/Dr. John rivalry. In another interview, Reed explains what he meant by the kids in his novel, *Yellow Back Radio Brokedown*, needing their “own fictions”: “When I say ‘own fictions,’ I mean that one can speak more accurately of the psychological history of a people if one knows the legends, the folklore, the old stories which have been handed down for generations, the oral tales, all of which tells you where you came from...A few hundred years of American history have been given the wrong interpretations so now

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166 Dick and Singh, 139.
167 Dick and Singh, 16.
168 Rhodes and Ramsey, 594.
what we have to do is provide another side, another viewpoint. And that’s what I try to do in my novels.\footnote{169 Dick and Singh, 186-187.}

Clearly, Reed uses Marie Laveau to satirize black feminism, but he also recognizes the “legends, folklore, the old stories, the oral tales” about Marie Laveau. In contrast to Rhodes, he does not deny Laveau’s power even while placing her in a subordinate position to Dr. John. Reed aims to present an alternative historical narrative to the dominant white narrative of American history. The most important component to this alternative narrative is the creativity and strength of people of African descent, and the significant mark they have made on American history and culture. Both Dr. John and Marie Laveau are important figures in Reed’s enterprise.

Marie Laveau becomes the site over which issues of gender and race are played out between African American men and women writers. Ishmael Reed portrays Marie Laveau, the light-skinned free woman of color, as a co-opted figure in his paranoia of black women teaming up with white men to keep black men down. His elevation of the full-blooded African Dr. John over the mixed race Marie is a response to New Orleans Creoles of color similar to the dominant narrative of African American history that relegates wealthy, free, sometimes slave-owning black people to the margins. Reed, however, never denies Laveau’s power nor does he make her a victim. Because she is an African American woman, one may be inclined to consider Rhodes’ rendering of Marie Laveau naturally more authentic than Tallant’s or Prose’s portrayals. In his review of \textit{Voodoo Dreams}, Houston Baker says, “And it is not surprising to those of us who grew up with conjure and conjuring women as part of our youth that only a brilliant present-day black woman’s imagination has been able to flesh out the presence of Marie
I wonder if Baker and I read the same book! Rhodes ignores most of the history known about Laveau in order to tell about her own discovery of power as a woman. Rhodes makes Marie Laveau a symbol of African American feminism; yet, Rhodes’ view of black feminism is predicated on complete and utter victimization. Jewell Parker Rhodes exploits Marie Laveau for her own purposes and in many ways perverts these purposes by not giving Marie Laveau the multiple levels of power that she had.

The political and cultural movements of the late sixties and early seventies brought major racial and gender issues to the nation’s attention. The Black Power and Black Arts movements sought empowerment for African Americans. Economic and political power formed two goals of the Black Power movement, but psychological empowerment through a celebration of “blackness” and African American culture served as a vitally important third objective, exhibited in the Black Arts movement. While these movements included African American women and, indeed, benefited them in numerous ways, the subject of the Black Power movement was ultimately black men. The Women’s Liberation movement sought empowerment for women. Black women participated in the movement and benefited from it in some ways, yet, again the movement often ignored issues specific to African American women because its main focus was on white women. Black feminists qualified the discourse of these three movements by highlighting the ways in which race and gender are inextricably linked and positioning themselves as legitimate subjects.

Throughout the late sixties and early seventies questions of “power” infused politics and literature. Marie Laveau proved to be a figure in which such issues of power

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could be discussed. As the Voodoo Queen, Laveau embodies black folk culture. As a strong woman who managed to rise to a position of power in a Southern slave society she represents women’s capability and their fight against oppression. Francine Prose draws these two things together in her fantastical portrayal of Marie Laveau by relating her to Zora Neale Hurston. Ishmael Reed uses Marie Laveau to criticize black feminists even when he recognizes the importance of Laveau to his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic. Writing twenty years later, Jewell Parker Rhodes aspires to join the ranks of African American female writers like Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison with Voodoo Dreams. Yet she creates a pathetic, powerless, Marie Laveau in her “feminist” text set against a sensational and often perverted Voodoo backdrop.
CHAPTER IV
MAMZELLE MARIE WITH HER TIGNON OF SEVEN POINTS:
REPRESENTATIONS OF VOODOO AND MARIE LAVEAU IN BARBARA
HAMBLY’S DETECTIVE SERIES

The past decade has seen a new era of scholarship on Marie Laveau marked by
the work of professional female scholars from various disciplines who have taken the
Voodoo Queen, as both historical figure and legend, seriously. In light of the literary
interest in Laveau discussed throughout this thesis, it would be reasonable to assume that
the new scholarship would shape recent literary works that portray Marie Laveau. The
texts discussed in this section, a detective series by Barbara Hambly, supports this
assumption. If the new scholarship is not an explicit influence on Hambly’s series, it
certainly is one in spirit as Hamby applies a scholarly seriousness to these mysteries set
in 1830s New Orleans. While Hambly perpetuates the legends of Laveau in her own way,
she is dedicated to presenting a convincing and balanced view of Marie Laveau with
multivalent power and a somewhat sympathetic portrayal of Voodoo. Hambly clearly
uses Tallant as a source, but unlike Tallant, she incorporates the contradictions that he
could not reconcile into one woman. Hambly creates a realistic character that truly
embodies the extraordinary aspects of the Voodoo Queen and the ordinary aspects of a free woman of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans.¹

The series' sleuth is Benjamin January (Janvier), a free man of color, who exemplifies what Gina and Andrew Macdonald refer to as a “cross-cultural detective” in their essay, “Ethnic Detectives in Popular Fiction: New Directions for An American Genre.” The authors explain: “These non-mainstream detectives explore cultural differences—in perception, in way of life, in visions of the world—and act as links between cultures, interpreting each to each, mainstream to minority and minority to mainstream.”² Hambly’s choice of detectives and settings could be seen simply as one of the exotic to appeal to the popular perception of New Orleans as a land of the strange and mysterious. This is, unfortunately, how many reviewers have seen it. The Sunday Oregonian describes the first novel of the series, A Free Man of Color (1997) as “[a] vivid depiction of an exotic bygone time.”³ But Hambly’s well-researched and richly detailed descriptions of the multicultural port city of New Orleans and its many inhabitants filtered through the thoughts of Benjamin January can also be seen as complicating the romanticized perception of antebellum New Orleans and its free colored population. Not only does January bridge multiple cultures within the texts, he provides a link between the audience and the world of nineteenth-century New Orleans. The reviewer at the Times Picayune writes, “Trained as a historian, Hambly has rooted

¹ Carolyn Morrow Long discusses how Laveau was both “extraordinary” and “ordinary” for her time. See Long, Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 45.


³ Barbara Hambly, A Free Man of Color, (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), front page. Throughout these citations, I am using the paperback edition. Each hardback edition was published a year before the paperback. The dates given in the text reflect the first, hardback publication.
Graveyard Dust [the third book in the series] firmly in the reality of the times- and then created a cast of characters that makes it soar." Similar praise could be made for Hambly’s representation of Marie Laveau.

Able to traverse the worlds of slaves, free people of color, and whites (with the help of friends), Benjamin January comes into contact with numerous members of the community including Marie Laveau. Voodoo plays a role in several of the novels, not because it is strange and exotic, but because it was a real and important force in the milieu that Hambly describes. January’s sister, Olympe, also known as Olympia Snakebones, is a Voodoo priestess who studied under Marie Saloppé and Marie Laveau. Although both January and his sister were enslaved as children, their mother was bought and freed by a wealthy white man. She became his long-term lover, and January and Olympe were freed. January was educated in New Orleans and eventually moved to France. The series begins with his return to New Orleans after sixteen years in Paris working as a surgeon. He is a devout Catholic who distrusts Voodoo, but not so much that he cannot understand it. Thus, throughout the series, January must take Voodoo seriously in order to solve the crimes, often utilizing the aid of Marie Laveau. He also must come to terms with his conflicting feelings of Voodoo and its apparent opposition to his Catholic faith. Hambly uses January, Olympe and Marie Laveau as a way to show varied perceptions of Voodoo.

Embodied in her descriptions of Marie Laveau are many of the legends that surround the Voodoo Queen. In Fever Season (1998), Laveau works at the hospital with Ben taking care of the yellow fever patients. She also visits prisoners in jail bringing them gumbo and words of encouragement. In the same novel, another view of Laveau is

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illustrated through a conversation between Ben and a crippled man of color who earns his living as a water vendor. The man says, “The whore-bitch poisoner who blackmails half the town? Mustn’t say anything against her. You’ll wake up one morning to find a cross of salt on your back step and no one in the town willing to talk to you, for fear of her. If your friend ran foul of that heathen bawd she’d better cover her tracks; Laveau’s hand is everywhere.” At the end of Fever Season, January echoes the rumors of Laveau’s wicked persona when he thinks of her as a “poisoner, witch, and worshiper of the Damballah serpent.” However, as January comes into more contact with Laveau throughout the series, his perception of her changes.

The reader initially meets Marie Laveau in the first book of the series, A Free Man of Color, dancing in Congo Square. Ben has gone there to find his sister who he has not seen in many years. Ben watches “Mamzelle Marie” leading the dances upon several stacked crates. She is described as “tall and would have topped many in the crowd even had she not been standing on the makeshift dais- handsome rather than beautiful, with strong cheekbones and very dark eyes.” Describing Laveau as handsome highlights a physical attractiveness that does not stem solely from sensuality or sexual appeal. It also plays on gender conventions in which men are described as “handsome” and women as “beautiful.” Following these conventions, calling Laveau “handsome” connotes an inner strength that “beautiful” often denies.

Throughout the novels, Laveau, “[a]lone among the women of color...had worked her tignon into seven points, like a halo of bright-colored flame points around her strong-boned Indian face. By this she was known, the crown of the city’s reigning Voodoo

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6 Hambly, Fever Season, 383.
7 Hambly, A Free Man of Color, 171.
Queen.” With its similarity to Catholic iconography of Mary, particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe, this description emphasizes the spiritual as well as the regal nature that accompanies such a title as Voodoo Queen. In *Graveyard Dust* (1999), Laveau is described as “a woman who had only to sit in a room to be the focus of attention. Like a fire she seemed to radiate both heat and light.” Marie Laveau is not only physically attractive but also has a striking personality. She is the type of person that appeals to both men and women - the “heat” of physical attraction and the “light” of a shining personality. Laveau possesses the qualities that naturally command respect, important qualities to have as the reigning Voodoo Queen of New Orleans.

These attributes certainly make up one aspect of Marie Laveau’s Power (Hambly’s capitalization). At a Congo Square dance, Ben observes how “[p]eople came up to her in the firelight, reached out their hands to meet her, seeking contact with her Power to absorb a little of the dark brilliance that seemed to shine from somewhere just beneath her skin.” This power is part of her being, “the electric flame of her presence.” It is not, however, related to her sexuality. In fact, there is no mention of Laveau’s sensual nature or sexual relationships in the novels. Unlike Tallant and Rhodes, Hambly successfully creates a Marie Laveau who is not defined by her sexuality.

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8 Hambly, *Graveyard Dust*, 22. In 1786, the Spanish colonial governor of New Orleans, Estaban Miró decreed that free women of color must tie a scarf around their head because he believed these women’s dress too often rivaled that of their “social betters”- white women. Known as a tignon, the headtie was meant to symbolically link these free women of color to slavery since enslaved black women most often wore headties, a custom brought from West Africa. Yet, free women of color in New Orleans pushed the law to the limits by wearing extravagantly tied and decorated tignons. See Virginia Meacham Gould, “‘A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord’: Slave and Free Women of Color in Spanish Ports of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola,” in The Devil’s Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South, eds. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 237-238. Robert Tallant quotes Gerald July, a WPA informant, who describes Laveau’s tignon: “...sometimes she wore a kerchief tied wit’ seven knots and the points stickin’ straight up. It was what they used to call a tignon.” See Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, (New York: Macmillan, 1946; Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2003), 61.


Nor is she defined by her relationship with Dr. John. In fact, there is no mention of any such relationship. Unlike the other novels discussed earlier, Dr. John is only briefly mentioned in *A Free Man of Color* as one of several other Voodoo priests and priestesses in New Orleans. January asks Olympe who made a death *gris-gris* that was placed under the pillow of a murdered girl’s mother. Olympe tells him the charm was made by John Bayou. Interestingly, Olympe advises her brother not to go see the maker of the *gris-gris* because “[h]e mean, Dr. John.”

Beyond this description, opposite the one espoused by Reed, nothing more is mentioned of Dr. John.

In addition to a power derived from her personality, Laveau claims power in an external sense. Marie has a “network of spies and informers, a gossamer cobweb of words and conversations and bits of intelligence that covered the town like a mist, funneling information back to her house on Rue St. Ann.” Laveau does not just rule “by secrets and knowledge and fear” but also “friendship and mutual aid.” Her power comes from city-wide connections with all levels of society. Through both intimidation and kindness, Laveau gains power.

Clearly, Laveau has spiritual power through Voodoo as a believer and priestess. This is a power shared by other Voodoo leaders such as Olympe and Dr. Yellowjack, who sets Olympe up to take the fall for the murder in *Graveyard Dust*. Mamzelle Marie explains to January the difference between Olympe and Dr. Yellowjack: “Your sister could have gone Dr. Yellowjack’s way, all cleverness and skill and Power, with no more heart to him than a shrike.” As leaders within the Voodoo community, these people

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13 Hambly, *Fever Season*, 79.
15 Hambly, *Graveyard Dust*, 322.
have the choice to use their power for ill or for good. Evidently having chosen the former, Dr. Yellowjack is the criminal mind behind the mystery in *Graveyard Dust*. Not only does he run a brothel of slave girls (something the historic Marie Laveau allegedly did) and smuggle in stolen goods, he blackmails a white Creole man, causes Olympe to be accused of murder, and kidnaps her son, Gabriel.

Marie Laveau, as the Voodoo Queen, certainly has the same spiritual power as well as the same choices concerning her use of that power. Throughout the series, it is only through rumor that Laveau uses her spiritual power for evil; as January comes to realize, her actions do not support these accusations. Throughout *Fever Season* January believes Marie Laveau provided Emily Redfern the poison that killed her husband while Redfern’s slave, Cora Chouteau, stands accused of the murder. At the end of the novel, January confronts Laveau, insisting that she convince Redfern to not only drop the charges but to manumit Cora and her husband, Gervase. Laveau reveals that she did not sell the poison to Redfern and stalks off. January later sees Emily Redfern, and her business partner, Reverend Dunk, “standing now in a corner of the courtyard talking very quietly, very earnestly, with Mamzelle Marie. Mamzelle Marie shook her head and said something with an air of patient repetition. Dunk retorted, eyes blazing, and Emily Redfern pulled hard on his sleeve and told him to hush. Dunk looked as astonished as if a pet cat had given him an order. But he hushed.”¹⁶ Three books later, the reader finds Cora and Gervase no longer enslaved, but the owners of a small café.

It is through her actions that Marie Laveau’s power is best defined in Hambly’s books. As mentioned above, in *Fever Season* she volunteers at Charity Hospital taking care of the sick and dying during the yellow fever scourge. In addition, she convinces

¹⁶ Hambly, *Fever Season*, 386.
rich, white slave owners, who, at least theoretically, hold the position of power in the
social hierarchy, to free Cora and Gervase whom she did not even know. Throughout
_Graveyard Dust_, Mamzelle Marie helps January prove that his sister, Olympe, did not
murder Isaak Jumon. She makes sure the hired “witnesses” paid to testify against Olympe
lose their nerve to do so in court. When he needs to find Cut-Arm, the leader of a maroon
village, to solve the case, Laveau escorts January through the swamp to find him. Her
connections with Cut-Arm are necessary for January to gain access to the village. As they
spend the afternoon together following the winding waterways, he opens up to the
Voodoo Queen about his wife’s death in Paris the year before. January “understood then
how [Marie Laveau] came to know everything, to fit all things together in a giant mosaic
of intelligence. She listened, and she remembered, and she cared.”\(^{17}\) This compassion
reveals itself through her actions. When Dr. Yellowjack kidnaps Olympe’s son, Gabriel,
Marie accompanies January in search for his nephew at the risk of her own life.

Mamzelle Marie’s power is not a power over others; rather, she is empowered by
doing things for others. In the conclusion to her dissertation on Marie Laveau, Ina
Fandrich applies political scientist and anthropologist James Scott’s definition of
charisma to explain Laveau’s elevation to the status of Voodoo Queen. Scott sees
charismatic leaders not as people who manipulate others, but as someone who shares “the
hidden transcript” of a community and speaks “on behalf of others to power.”\(^{18}\)
Charisma, in this definition, is a reciprocal relationship between the leader and the
community. Fandrich sees Laveau as fulfilling this function in nineteenth-century New
Orleans. She writes, “Laveaux’s status as a heroine and a leader of New Orleans’

\(^{17}\) Hambly, _Graveyard Dust_, 321.
\(^{18}\) Quoted in Ina Fandrich, “The Mysterious Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux: A Study of Spiritual Power
and Female Leadership in Nineteenth Century New Orleans,” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1994), 331.
Voodoos 'depended centrally on having spoken on behalf of, in a quite literal sense,' all the disenfranchised and troubled people of the Crescent City who had turned to the Voodoo religion for help. As Scott put it, 'they did not appoint her to the post of spokesperson, but they defined the role.' Thus, charisma is the merging of an internal power derived from one’s personality and an external power received from one’s community.

Describing Marie at a dance in Graveyard Dust, Barbara Hambly writes:

And there she was. Head rolling as she danced, body sending off waves of electricity, like the madness in the summer air before the coming of a storm. Dominating [the dancers], drawing them, focusing upon herself the crazy leap of the music—Power. And January, watching her, knew it was true. Whatever Power was, Marie Laveau had something beyond her web of secrets, something beyond loyalties, love, or fear. Charisma the old Greeks had called it; the god, Plato had said. Whites would have termed it insolence. Power.

By using the Greek definition of charisma, “divine favor,” Hambly reminds us of the importance of Laveau’s spirituality in any definition of her power. It was a shared belief in this spirituality, a “cultural hidden transcript,” that informed the relationship between Marie Laveau and the Voodoo community which made her the accepted leader. The merging of spirituality and action can be found in the Yoruba and Haitain Vodou religions. Yoruba and Vodou are action-based rather than faith-based. Relationships between devotees and their òrisà or lwa are built through actions—altar construction, libations, helping others, etc., rather than just believing or “being saved.”

19 Fandrich, 331. Fandrich spells Laveau’s last name with an x (Laveaux) following the most common spelling of the surname of Laveau’s father. Throughout the sources on Laveau, her name is spelled in a variety of ways. Fandrich’s quotes of Scott are from his book Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
20 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 143.
21 Fandrich, 331.
For Fandrich and Hambly, a key aspect to Laveau’s spirituality is action—actions that in the context of a slave society can be seen as activism. Such action initiated by Marie is absent from Rhodes’ portrayal of Laveau. Instead, she finds herself in this leadership position without quite knowing how she got there. In fact, murder seems to be Marie’s only action in *Voodoo Dreams*. Hambly presents Marie Laveau as a free woman of color who possesses a multivalent power. This power derives from her personality and the community. It is formed through her spirituality and her actions precipitated by that spirituality. In her representation of Marie Laveau, Hambly maintains many of the legends surrounding the Voodoo Queen and the shadow of Tallant lingers in the background. Yet, in doing so, Hambly shows how Marie Laveau’s power can be defined in multiple, often contradictory ways depending on the interpreter.

Hambly’s detective series is a refreshing look at the multicultural world of antebellum New Orleans that works hard not to romanticize the people or the setting. Hambly pays close attention to her detail and is rewarded when the reader gains a tactile sense of what New Orleans looked like, smelled like, and felt like at this time. She also complicates the romantic perceptions of this environment, particularly the francophone free people of color community. As stated earlier, Hambly’s choice to include Voodoo in her stories reflects her purpose to realistically detail nineteenth-century New Orleans rather than to spice up her stories with the exotic. Hambly attempts to portray Voodoo in a sympathetic light while maintaining an historical perspective that accurately reflects the perceptions of Voodoo at that time. As we have seen, on the subject of New Orleans Voodoo, this is a very delicate balance to preserve.
Through her character Benjamin January, Hambly presents multiple perceptions of Voodoo as he struggles to reconcile his strict Catholic values with his acknowledgement of the power of Voodoo for its believers. January’s complex role within the environment of antebellum New Orleans makes him the most suitable vehicle for Hambly to explore different views of Voodoo. January is a “man between two worlds” on multiple levels. As a free man of color of mixed racial heritage, he exists between the black world of the slaves and the white world, socially and culturally. For example, January feels as moved by European composers as he does by the drumming of the slaves in Congo Square. He spent his childhood enslaved on a plantation outside of New Orleans, but came of age as a free man in the city. These years give him an insider view of the social structure of a slave society as well as provide him with contacts within the communities of New Orleans—enslaved and free people of color and white. The years January spent in Paris, however, bestow upon him an outsider status to these communities when he returns years later. As Maureen Reddy points out, being recently returned from Paris “allows January a comparative perspective that gives him some believable distance on the situation in New Orleans, which he never takes for granted in the way that someone entirely embedded in a single cultural milieu generally would.”

Through his racial mixture, experiences, education, and language, January holds a liminal status between insider and outsider. But it is this liminality that allows him to successfully move between these worlds.

From January’s point of view, Voodoo is in opposition to his Catholic faith, which teaches him that Voodoo is devil-worship and superstition. However, Voodoo

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23 Reddy, 184.
speaks to something within him, often reminding him of his childhood as a slave, making a whole-hearted acceptance of the priest’s view of Voodoo impossible for him. In addition to his rosary, January wears a gris-gris made by Olympe even though he is not always sure that this is acceptable.

Part of January’s mistrust of Voodoo stems from his relationship with his sister, Olympe. Disgusted with her mother’s relationship with a white man, Olympe left home to study Voodoo under Marie Saloppé. One night January goes to look for his sister. He finds Olympe at a Voodoo ceremony in the brickyard on Rue Dumaine. The scene creates contradictory emotional responses within him. Although “the music tugged at January’s heart,” making him want to dance, he is taken aback when a man near him becomes possessed by Papa Legba. January had witnessed possessions by the Iwa in the past, but “now it troubled him as it had not before he’d learned the ways of the Christian God.”

But what makes January recoil in horror was watching Olympe become possessed by Ogu. As she staggers through the crowd calling for rum to warm her balls (speaking as Ogu), the “half-naked King, his manhood lifting under the thin guise of his red handkerchiefs” takes Olympe into his arms. As Olympe grabs the King’s face to kiss him, January sees “her face now not the face of a god but of a woman blind with ecstasy.” Couples begin to disappear into the shadows while others “fell as simply as animals to the ground.”

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24 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 29, 30.
26 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 31, 32.
The scene in the brickyard goes against January’s moral code as a pious Catholic. It is not the sex to which he is opposed; rather, it is the “pagan” beliefs and practices of Voodoo. He flees the scene and attends Mass the next day where he confesses and burns a votive for Olympe’s soul, a ritual he continues every Sunday for the next twenty-three years. The disgust that January feels towards what he witnessed in the brickyard remains with him even when he returns to New Orleans and finds that he must take Voodoo seriously to solve the crimes. As an educated man and a strict Catholic, January cannot fully accept a belief in the power of the *lwa* or *gris-gris*, but something within him will not allow him to completely write Voodoo off as mere superstition. Thus, January feels torn between Voodoo and Catholicism because, as he understands it, his Catholic faith meant that “he could not be a child of God and a friend of the *loa* as well.”

The brickyard scene described by Hambly is derived from nineteenth-century accounts of New Orleans Voodoo. Her description is a composite of several sources including Buel’s *Metropolitan Life Unveiled* and the ubiquitous Moreau de Saint-Méry. Unfortunately, in her quest for grounding the details of her story in historical accounts, Hambly perpetuates the stereotypes of Voodoo as a sexual orgy, much like Tallant and numerous white writers before him. After her credible portrayal of Marie Laveau, this description of Voodoo is disappointing. With such a description, Hambly supports the perception that Voodoo is exotic, irrational, and an illegitimate religion held by many Americans, particularly Christians. This, in turn, implicates African Americans and denigrates black culture.

The problem with Hambly’s representation of the ceremony in the brickyard stems from the sources that she uses. Her description clearly reflects the nineteenth- (and

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many twentieth-) century accounts of Voodoo in New Orleans. There are not any contemporary nineteenth-century sources that dispute these claims. Only recent scholarship on Haitian Vodou discredits such accounts as white racist fantasies. Unfortunately, not much is known beyond these accounts of New Orleans Voodoo, although scholars are now beginning to read between the lines in order to gain some sense of what Voodoo in New Orleans might have looked like under the layers of white perceptions. Hambly realizes the danger in employing these accounts in her novels. In the Author’s Note to Graveyard Dust Hambly explains:

Most accounts of New Orleans voodoo add that sexual excesses followed hard upon the dancing. This may be a projection by whites who feared a more sexually liberated culture. But anyone who has gone to nightclubs and parties will be aware that the presence of the loa is not required to connect the one with the other, particularly if this is the only time most of these people (a) get to see each other and (b) are able to enjoy a few hours in which they can forget they’re someone else’ property and aren’t on call for some kind of work.28

Throughout her Benjamin January novels, Hambly wants to use the background of New Orleans, a slave society, to show the nuances of that life- for whites and blacks, enslaved and free and all mixtures in between. In her attempt to do so, she inevitably relies on nineteenth-century accounts of Voodoo ceremonies. Hambly, herself, is not making these judgments of Voodoo. The perception of New Orleans Voodoo revealed in the brickyard scene is a nineteenth-century perception told through the eyes of January, a strict Catholic. While this scene certainly hinders Hambly’s attempts to complicate a romantic version of antebellum New Orleans, her Author’s Note counters this damage to a degree. The presentation of Voodoo throughout Graveyard Dust also suggests that there are other ways to view the religion. Through January’s contact with Marie Laveau he changes his

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28 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 405-406.
ideas about Voodoo. In the end, January reconciles the seeming opposition between Voodoo and Catholicism.

On their jaunt into the swamp to look for a camp of maroon slaves, Marie tries to convince January that Voodoo and Catholicism are not opposing faiths, one wrong and one right, but that they are complementary to each other. She explains:

> If a man’s been beat, and his woman’s raped, by any man, white or black or purple, you think that man’s going to see God’s face the way the man who wronged him tells him it is? God finds all sorts of ways to speak to those that need Him, Ben. He’s a man with a sword, to those that need a rod and staff to comfort them, whether that man’s called Ogu or St. James. He’s the man with the keys in his hand, to those that’re in chains, and seeking a way through the door to Heaven.29

January begins to recognize the ways in which Voodoo incorporates Catholicism, not to pervert it, but to expand it in a manner that makes sense for enslaved individuals.

His full reconciliation of Voodoo and his own Catholic faith, however, comes at the climax of the novel. When Dr. Yellowjack kidnaps January’s nephew to force Olympe to falsely confess to the murder, he and Laveau follow the root doctor to his hideout in the swamp. January creeps into the cabin and is overcome by a poisonous smoke. In order to escape, Dr. Yellowjack hits Mamzelle Marie over the head. Groping his way through the mists of the swamps, a drugged and dazed January sees Papa Legba appear on the path ahead of him. Legba tells January which way to go in order to cut Dr. Yellowjack off at the bridge, and as he glances at the _Iwa_ again Papa Legba “looked more like the battered old statue of St. Peter at the back of St. Anthony’s Chapel. Heaven’s keys dangling from his belt. His face was black rather than white.”30 Thus January begins to see the layering of Catholicism and Voodoo rather than two irreconcilable beliefs. As

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29 Hambly, _Graveyard Dust_, 323.
30 Hambly, _Graveyard Dust_, 368-369.
Yellowjack drags Gabriel onto the bridge, he suddenly jumps into the swamp to avoid the “dark form” waiting at the end of the path. For only a brief second January sees the figure, “the outline of a top hat, the gleam of spectacles, the white glimmer of bones”- the accoutrements of the lwa Baron Cemetery. A few seconds later Marie Laveau appears out of the fog. At first January thinks what he saw was really her the whole time. Laveau, however, came around the other way and was never on the bridge.

After the lwa aid January in saving his nephew, he acquires a new perception of Voodoo. It is at this point that he is able to reconcile what he understood as the opposition of Voodoo and Catholicism to see how they are both complementary and necessary to believers. Counting on his rosary in St. Louis cathedral, January notices the offerings of food, money and cigars at the feet of the statue of St. Peter. He thinks, “In my father’s house there are many mansions. And in many of those rooms, armoires containing, perhaps, many different suits of clothes. Maybe even a top hat and spectacles, for the benefit of those who didn’t believe white men in long robes...Why wouldn’t God like the smell of rum and cigars as well as that of incense?” Hambly uses January as a way to discuss the different opinions of Voodoo and Marie Laveau. Ultimately, she shows that Voodoo is not a savage and illegitimate religion, but a real lifeline for its believers, as much as any other religion.

Barbara Hambly includes Marie Laveau and Voodoo in her novels as part of her commitment to providing a well-researched portrayal of antebellum New Orleans. Instead of the romanticized world of a “moonlight and magnolias” city with its sexualized free women of color, chivalrous slave owners, and Southern belles, Hambly

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31 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 372.
32 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 399.
provides a slave society marked by the cruelty and insanity such a system entails. Through her detective, Benjamin January, a francophone free man of color, this multicultural world is revealed. While her portrayal of Marie Laveau is not free from the tinge of Tallant and certainly perpetuates many of the legends which have grown up around Laveau's name, Hambly diligently constructs a Marie Laveau who is not flattened under the contradictions that those legends convey. Mamzelle Marie is not defined by her sexuality; instead she is defined through her spirituality and her actions. She is empowered through this spirituality and her choice of actions. This power exists on multiple levels and is not based on her gender.

In the Author's Note to Graveyard Dust, Hambly concludes an explanation of perceptions of Voodoo and how they have changed since the nineteenth century with her purpose in writing these novels: "My goal, as always, has been simply to entertain without doing violence to the truth of former times." Hambly's rendering of the Voodoo ceremony in brickyard based on nineteenth-century accounts perhaps belies this statement. Certainly, the negative perceptions of Voodoo as a sexual orgy emanate from this passage, making it difficult to see Hambly providing a sympathetic view of Voodoo. However, the Author's Note reveals Hambly's own struggling with the employment of these accounts. She uses these accounts because they make up the historic record on New Orleans Voodoo, but she does not do this blind to the fact that these accounts reflect the perceptions of their white authors more than the reality of Voodoo ceremonies. Through January's interaction with Marie Laveau and his own experience with the iwa, Hambly does provide a view of Voodoo that counters the negative perceptions of the religion.

33 Hambly, Graveyard Dust, 407.
Despite the brickyard scene, Hambly produces a well-researched and responsible portrayal of Marie Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo.
CONCLUSION

In her book, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, Nell Irvin Painter attempts to separate the mythical figure of Sojourner Truth as the “Strong Black Woman” who has been “alternately embraced and invoked by generations of white feminists, black nationalists, African-American women, scholars, students, and everyday people” from the complex historical person—an ex-slave from New York, preacher, abolitionist, and supporter of rights for African Americans and women after the Civil War.¹ In the end, Painter must concede that no matter how much historical evidence she produces to complicate the myth or expose its fabrications, people have a real need for the symbolic Sojourner Truth, a need powerful enough that the discrepancies between myth and person can be overlooked. Like Truth, Marie Laveau and her daughter were real women who lived in New Orleans during the nineteenth century, but their lives have been entangled in rumors, lies, stories, and legends to the point that they, too, have reached mythical status.

In her Master’s Thesis, *Conjuring Marie Laveau: The Syncretic Life of a Nineteenth Century Voodoo Priestess in America*, Rachelle Sussman applies Painter’s work on Sojourner Truth to Marie Laveau. “[H]op[ing] to bring a sense of humanness to this mythical and symbolic figure,” Sussman focuses on the historic Marie Laveau and attempts to explain how she gained her incredible amount of influence among whites and

blacks.\(^2\) Sussman argues that Laveau's "liminal" position as a free woman of color allowed her multiple identities and strategies for survival. She writes, "The strength of Laveau's personal power most vividly expressed itself through the ability to maintain the African ceremonial practices of Vaudou with the enslaved (and some whites) while simultaneously bringing Voodoo conjuring to the upperclass white community."\(^3\) In looking for the historic Marie Laveau, Sussman must encounter and negotiate the mythical Laveau. She thus describes the different perceptions of Laveau developed by the white, "Afro-Creole," and "African" communities in the nineteenth century.\(^4\)

I see this thesis as a counterpart to Sussman's study. I, too, am interested in sifting out the real Marie Laveau(x) from the mythical Laveau. Thus, in the first chapter, I have gone through the secondary sources on Laveau written during her and her daughters' lifetimes through the twentieth century to the most recently published scholarship. I have attempted to compare and contrast the evidence presented in these diverse works, cutting through overtly prejudiced accounts, in order to provide a glimpse of the historic Voodoo Queen(s) as well as to show the difficulties of that very task. Throughout, I have added my own hypotheses about Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo to the record, often agreeing with the recent scholarship by Fandrich, Long, and Ward, but not always buying their explanations. Because so many contradictions, half-truths, and falsehoods are attached to the name "Marie Laveau," this chapter's substantial body of information is necessary to provide the context for the twentieth-century novels discussed in the subsequent chapters.

For once you are familiar with these sources on Laveau, it does not take you long to

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\(^3\) Sussman, 12, 40.
\(^4\) Sussman, 40, 61.
detect which ones the novelists’ consulted to create their own representations of the Voodoo Queen.

Following Painter, Sussman points out, “The symbol of a person can be more appealing than the complicated historical person for various political or personal reasons.”5 While her thesis discusses the reasons certain groups in the nineteenth century perceived Marie Laveau, I look at how Laveau has been represented in the twentieth century through literature. Again, the background knowledge provided in the first chapter is important. While the authors I discuss clearly form their own characterizations of Laveau, they are each influenced by the earlier texts, whether they are supporting or writing against their antecedents. As the authors have chosen an historical figure to fictionalize, their representations of Laveau are limited to a degree by these sources.

Because he canonized the bevy of rumors, legends, truths, and untruths that make up the mythical Marie Laveau, in a way, Robert Tallant served as his own “source” for his novel, The Voodoo Queen. Tallant inherited a tradition of romantic “local color” stories and a fascination with “exotic” black culture from writers like Lafcadio Hearn, George Washington Cable, and Lyle Saxon. In his work on Laveau, Tallant comes across as utterly enthralled by this beautiful free woman of color. It seems probable that he considered The Voodoo Queen his masterpiece, an homage to the Laveau. But, Tallant could not reconcile the contradictions that riddled the biographies of the Laveau women-contradictions he was well aware of since he synthesized them ten years earlier in Voodoo in New Orleans. Instead, Tallant “creates” two Laveaux, complete opposites, and favored the mother over the daughter for her morality. While he recognizes the multiple layers of Laveau’s power- spiritual, economic, and knowledge of secrets-

5 Sussman, 5.
ultimately rests her power on her sexuality as a black woman. His Laveau may have been chaste, but she does not overturn the Jezebel stereotype. Tallant exemplifies the white co-optation of black figures that Reed addresses in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. This can be seen as a response to the Civil Rights movement that was developing at the time Tallant published his novel. He wanted to sell his books to his white audience through the “exotic” subject matter of Voodoo, but he also wanted to claim Marie Laveau as a white “black hero.” Presenting her, paradoxically, as chaste, yet sexualized, made her non-threatening and kept her in her place as a black woman but celebrated her as an important figure unique to New Orleans culture.

Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* and *The Voodoo Queen* serve as the foremost texts on which Prose, Reed, Rhodes, and Hambly base their own representations of Laveau. The third Laveau novel from the 1970s (not discussed), Margot Arnold’s *Marie*, perhaps, takes this to the extreme. Arnold fictionalizes the life of “Marie II,” following the stories of her in Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* to the letter. Yet, where Tallant saw a sexually promiscuous and utterly immoral daughter (the opposite of her mother), Arnold depicts Laveau, *fille* as a feminist who recognizes that white men hold the power in her society, assists other women because of the bond they share as women, and “happen[s] not to like the idea of anyone’s freedom being sold, particularly any woman’s freedom.”

In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (and the essay, “Shrovetide in Old New Orleans”) Ishmael Reed retells Tallant’s fictionalized account of Marie Laveau’s relationship with Doctor John to criticize African American feminism in the 1970s. Reed remains fairly true to Tallant’s *The Voodoo Queen*, but the differences between the two

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stories are key. Whereas Tallant depicts Doctor John as an African savage who practices polygamy, Reed privileges Doctor John’s “primitiveness” as his authentic tie to West African cultures. Doctor John’s polygamous relationships suggest for Reed that the Voodoo leader’s masculinity did not suffer from slavery or the racial oppression of antebellum New Orleans. In Reed’s evaluation, it is specifically Doctor John’s gender that authenticates him and elevates him in status over Laveau. Ishmael Reed respects Marie Laveau, but he also views her as another example of black women receiving all of the credit in white dominant culture instead of the “HooDoo men in the forest.” Through his version of the Laveau/Doctor John relationship, Reed comments on, what he feels, is unfair attention paid to black feminist writers by the white literary establishment to the disadvantage and defamation of African American men.

Critics have often charged Reed with misogyny, and The Last Days of Louisiana Red provides some of the best evidence for such accusations. The character, Papa LaBas, accuses black women of controlling men with “cunt power” while Street demands submission from Minnie’s bodyguard by forcibly having sex with her. Reed’s novel, however, is a satire of 1970s intraracial politics. He is keenly aware of the negotiations over power relations between black men and women going on at the time, and he makes these negotiations the focus of his book. Sexual relations are a part of the equation but not the sole part. An understanding of African American culture, represented by Hoodoo in the book, is another important theme that Reed establishes as a “weapon” in this battle of the sexes.

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Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Voodoo Dreams* is also interested in power relations between men and women both among African Americans and between blacks and whites. Yet, the pornographic sex scenes that infuse the novel detract from any serious discussion of gender relations. Rather than illustrating the cultural importance of Voodoo like Reed, Rhodes uses it as a lurid backdrop to her “feminist” tale. She explicitly wants to challenge Tallant’s authority to represent Marie Laveau, but ultimately perpetuates the same stereotypes of Voodoo as obscene and black women as licentious. Rhodes’ purpose in representing Marie Laveau as an abject victim is to highlight the abuse that black women have been historically subjected to by men of both races. But in her story Marie Laveau has no agency until she murders Antoine Delavier, and the power that she gains from this deed actually comes from two rumors: that she began an insurrection to free the enslaved blacks and that John would fix the judge. Suddenly, after the murder, Marie becomes the Voodoo Queen, but she never really comes to term with the role, nor does she do anything to deserve it. More importantly, she never truly believes in Voodoo. Thus, even her matrilineal-biologically inherited spiritual power is undermined. The only power Rhodes’ Laveau could possibly be said to eventually gain is self-empowerment through the recognition and acceptance of herself as a woman. This “Lifetime feminism” happy ending not only comes too late at the end of the novel to redeem Laveau’s character, it also has absolutely nothing to do with the historic Marie Laveau or even the mythical Laveau, for that matter. As Carolyn Morrow Long describes it, “*Voodoo Dreams*—oozing with sex and violence— is the most exploitative and the least historically accurate” novel on Marie Laveau.8

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In Francine Prose’s novel, *Marie Laveau*, the title character also discovers self-empowerment, not through murder, but in solitude. Prose, however, defines Laveau’s power on multiple levels, most importantly through Voodoo. It is because her power from Voodoo began to wane that Laveau, an otherwise strong and independent woman throughout the novel, needs to go to the cabin to find herself. Prose’s novel is a fantasy which presents Laveau’s Voodoo power as more supernatural than spiritual, yet it is free from sexualized references. Tallant provides one source for the book, but a much more important and overt source is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. Prose pays her respects to Hurston when she designates Hurston as the embodiment of Laveau’s spirit. Prose posits Marie Laveau’s legacy as a significant aspect of her power. Through Laveau, she links the celebration of black culture in the Black Arts movement and the psychological empowerment of “black consciousness” in the Black Power movement to the quest for empowerment for women in the feminist movement(s) and black feminist writers’ acknowledgment of their cultural and maternal forebears.

Barbara Hambly’s representation of the Voodoo Queen is certainly the most regal. Marie Laveau has a multivalent power based on her spirituality, her network of secret gatherers, and her personal charisma. Furthermore, she is an active participant in her community. Hambly’s Laveau is not defined by her sexuality, in fact, it never even surfaces in the books. However, in attempting to remain as true to her historical sources as possible, Hambly maintains the stereotypes of Voodoo ceremonies as sexual orgies. She recognizes the difficulties in using nineteenth-century sources that propagate racist views of Voodoo and attempts to alleviate the discrepancy between her use of these descriptions and her otherwise revisionist depiction of the religion. Hambly’s use of
nineteenth-century descriptions of Voodoo ceremonies illustrates her dedication to presenting a well-researched and historically accurate portrayal of antebellum New Orleans. Slavery, in all its cruelty and horror, thus forms the center of her detective novels. The social and economic system that defined the antebellum South and created the framework for relationships between men and women, white and black, and enslaved and free, is conspicuously absent from the other novels discussed in this thesis. Perhaps what Hambly does best is to place slavery at the heart of the milieu she describes, for what makes Marie Laveau’s power so extraordinary and fascinating is that she was a free woman of color in world of race-based slavery and patriarchal rule.

In her review of Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* for the Charleston, West Virginia *Gazette*, Mary King O’Donnell writes, “Some who speak of [Marie Laveau] (for the name is still a well-known one in New Orleans) believe her good; and some believe her evil. The latter belief is no doubt nearer the truth; but whatever she was it is impossible to dismiss her. She is woven into the folk life of New Orleans- and indirectly of the entire country.”9 The historic Marie Laveau and her daughter who went by the same name have over the years and through the gossip mill melded into one mythical woman. The legends concerning the Laveau women are contradictory, and, in spite of new scholarship, there is still much to learn. Within American popular culture, Laveau can be found in diverse media and she has been given multiple meanings by different constituencies. In New Orleans today, Laveau is a veritable industry of her own. While legitimate objections can be made to the persistence of the myths surrounding Laveau, often fueled by capitalist exploitation of her name and her religion, I, too, must concede

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as Painter did. Without the continued fascination with Laveau, the life of this extraordinary free woman of color may have been lost to us as so many others certainly have. In light of the terrible destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, the resilience of these myths give me hope for the city’s future.


“The Curious Charge of Swindling.” Daily Picayune, 3 July 1850.


Voudou.” New Orleans Times, 21 March 1869.

“Voudou Nonsense.” *New Orleans Times*, 26 June 1874.


VITA

Elizabeth Clark Neidenbach

Elizabeth Clark Neidenbach was born and raised in Gainesville, Georgia. She graduated from Gainesville High School in May 1999. Elizabeth received her BA from Tulane University in May 2003 with a double major in American Studies and African and African Diaspora Studies. From her time spent in New Orleans combined with the training she received from the wonderful faculty at Tulane, Elizabeth acquired her interest in the topic free people of color in antebellum New Orleans. This thesis is one aspect of her interest and was written with a tremendous love of the city of New Orleans and its people, past and present.

In the fall of 2003 Elizabeth entered the College of William and Mary to seek MA and PhD degrees in American Studies. She defended her Master’s Thesis on November 11, 2005. She will receive her MA in December 2005.