

V IS FOR VODOO:  
THE RISE AND DECLINE OF AN ANOMALY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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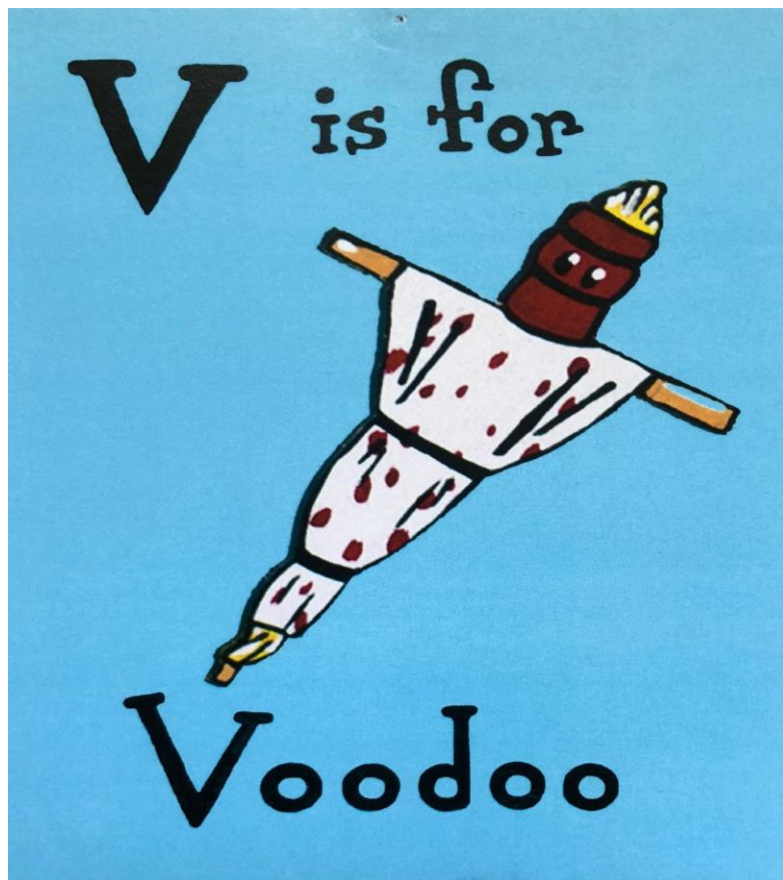
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*Artwork by Aaron Damon Porter*

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# ABSTRACT

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**Title:** V is for Voodoo: Exploring the Rise and Decline of an Anomaly in the American South

**Supervising Professors:** Dr. Shirley E. Thompson, Dr. Minkah Makalani

This thesis examines Voodoo's evolution in the context of New Orleans's political and social climate during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1935, African American folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston published a collection of Voodoo and Hoodoo oral folklore, which she personally collected from Black elders residing in The Mississippi River Valley. Her research was one of the first major attempts to explore Voodoo through the lens of cultural anthropology, and to distance the religion from the stereotypical, sensationalistic portrayals of Voodoo in the early 20th century. Being a historically black female-led faith, its persistence through the oppressive years of the antebellum South is remarkable. It is through this characteristic of the faith, black female-led, that this thesis examines the prosperity and subsequent decline of the American-born tradition. Part One deconstructs Voodoo's most successful years by examining the social and political conditions of 19th century New Orleans, that made the city conducive to the success of Voodoo, in addition to the aspects of the religious movement that aided in its survival. Part Two explores the Voodoo movement in the later years of the 19th century by analyzing the evolution of New Orleans politics and social dynamic in relation to the decline of the Voodoo movement, in addition to the aspects of the religious movement that promoted its decline.

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# FOREWORD

## **A Note on the Cover Art**

I took a brief trip to New Orleans in the Fall of 2017 as part of my research for this project. One night, I discovered this exceptional piece of artwork while stumbling around the French Quarter. This illustration was part of a larger set of Alphabet cards (available on etsy.com), with each letter corresponding to some unique aspect of the city. This one, in addition to “Y is for Where Y’at?,” were among my favorite cards in the stack. The decision to name my project “V is for Voodoo” came late in the writing process after taking another look at this card. On one hand, the prospect of normalizing Voodoo to the point of indoctrinating our youth is enthralling. I hope that one day, every American kindergartener knows that V is for Voodoo, in addition to Volcano, Vulture, and Vampire. On the other hand, the drawing in the middle of the card encapsulates my motivations for taking on this project.

I am unsure of when my interest in Voodoo began. My curiosity has evolved tremendously over time, ranging from superficial mental acquisitiveness to entering a rabbit hole of questions about this peculiar facet of New Orleans culture. Before taking on a similar project during my first year of university, my personal knowledge of Voodoo was drawn almost exclusively from public memory. But far too often, collective memory of events, peoples, and institutions stray far from reality. After researching Voodoo on my own, I realized that such was the case for New Orleans Voodoo; however, awareness of this discrepancy between the historical reality of Voodoo and the current collective narrative was insufficient. I wanted to know how, when, and why it happened.

My connection to the city is bound by blood. Though my interactions with New Orleans have become less frequent, the Crescent City still holds a significant place in my heart. In my youth, I recall swinging on my grandmother's porch and catching lightning bugs in front of her house on Prieur street. The memory of her quaint home, unjustly taken by the ferocious waters of Katrina, reminds me that there are aspects of this city that future generations may never have the pleasure of knowing.

# INTRODUCTION

*"New Orleans is unlike any city in America. Its cultural diversity is woven into the food, the music, the architecture - even the local superstitions. It's a sensory experience on all levels, and there's a story lurking around every corner."*<sup>1</sup>

-Rupta Sepetys

## I. INTRODUCTION: CONSTRUCTIONS OF VODOO IN LITERATURE

In New Orleans, Louisiana, a music festival, a tour, and a convenience store call themselves Voodoo.<sup>2</sup> This peculiar part of New Orleans's history is an alluring taboo, incorrectly defined by images such as dolls, spells, and black magic. However, despite its prevalence in the Crescent City, American pop culture, and beyond, Voodoo's past is largely unknown.

Voodoo as an anthropological pursuit is a relatively new phenomenon. Harlem-born writer Zora Neale Hurston carried out one of the first major attempts to explore Voodoo from an anthropological perspective. In the early 20th century, she travelled to the United States South to converse with elderly Blacks about their memories of Voodoo and Hoodoo in Mississippi and Louisiana.<sup>3</sup> These accounts eventually appeared in her 1935 book, *Mules and Men*, which is advertised as a collection of black American folklore.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from an interview conducted by Stephan Lee that appeared in Entertainment Weekly on June 15, 2012. The interview was about with Rupta Sepetys's book *Out of the Easy*.

<sup>2</sup> For nearly two decades, New Orleans has held a yearly music festival, "Voodoo Fest," in City Park. Beyond its name, the festival has no affiliation with the Voodoo tradition in New Orleans.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix page 59 for expanded definition of Hoodoo.

<sup>4</sup> The description of *Mules and Men* available on Amazon.com introduces the ethnography as a staple of African American Folklore, a categorization that Hurston, herself endorsed. While the description does say that Hurston goes beyond the typical superstitious exoticism found across Voodoo literature, I contend that folklore, in its reception rather than its definition, is a form of sensationalism. For further reading see Ch. 4 of Jeffrey E. Anderson's *Hoodoo Voodoo and Conjure*.



A decade later, The Louisiana Writers Project hired Robert Tallant to research and provide a comprehensive overview of New Orleans Voodoo. In 1946, he published an ethnography, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, where he names Voodoo a “cult.” Despite the book’s racist undertones and the jarring problematics of his discussion of Voodoo, the ethnography remains one of the most prominent and most frequently-referenced books written on New Orleans Voodoo to date.<sup>5</sup>

Just two decades after that, The Louisiana Historical Association published an article by Blake Touchstone, “Voodoo in New Orleans,” in which he tried to delineate fact from fiction. Despite Touchstone’s valiant attempts at restoring Voodoo’s good name, he still names Voodoo a “‘cult’ that ‘appealed to superstitious Blacks, both slave and free.’”<sup>6</sup>

These constructions of Voodoo as a cult, superstition, and folklore are harmful. It is not the terms themselves which problematize Voodoo literature, but the inequity of usage when describing different belief systems. The exclusion of Voodoo from traditional religious scholarship is a form of “othering,” one that propagates negative perceptions of Voodoo and of its adherents.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in the late 20th century, anthropologists such as Claude Levi Strauss gave greater attention to the “othering” phenomenon that is prevalent in history and ethnography:

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<sup>5</sup> Blake Touchstone, later referenced, deems Tallant’s work a “gullible read.” Although this work provides good insight as to how New Orleans Voodoo came to be, the book is rather prejudice, avoiding any recognition of Voodoo as a religion. Carolyn Marrow Long, referenced later, also comments on Tallant’s work in her 2002 article entitled: “Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment and Religion.” saying “Tallant Voodoo in New Orleans, a racist and sensationalistic adaptation of interviews and other materials compiled by the Louisiana Writers Project, is still considered by many to be the preeminent source on New Orleans Voodoo” 74.

<sup>6</sup> Touchstone, Blake. “Voodoo in New Orleans.” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 13, no. 4 (1972): 371–86, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Fandrich, Ina J. *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth Century New Orleans*. Routledge, 2005, 26.

Both history and ethnography are concerned with societies other than the one in which we live.

Whether this otherness is due to remoteness in time... or to remoteness in space, or even to cultural heterogeneity, is of secondary importance compared to the basic similarity of perspective.<sup>8</sup>

For this reason, modern Voodoo literature, especially through the past decade, recognizes Voodoo as a religion.<sup>9</sup> In my view, the religious construction of Voodoo helps to promote serious discussions of Voodoo, and to give Voodoo a substantive seat in current religious scholarship.

### III. INTRODUCTION: *ORIGINS OF THE FAITH*

Mapping the origins of the Voodoo religion is an extremely difficult task. This is because the word has become a generalized, all-encompassing term used to describe a variety of African, African American, and Afro-Creole religions.<sup>10</sup> One may consider the relationship between New Orleans Voodoo and Haitian *Vodou* ancestral rather than successional. Voodoo is not a replacement of *Vodou*, nor a watered-down version of the Haitian tradition, but a unique manifestation of its predecessor. Others pinpoint Voodoo's emergence in New Orleans to the first arrival of African slaves in 1719, which suggests that Voodoo is a direct descendant of Yoruba *Vodu*. Ina Fandrich offers an evidence-based analysis against this latter theory of emergence, however.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural anthropology* (New York: Basic Books 1963) pp 16-17, as quoted by Ina Fandrich in *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau*.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, Jeffrey E. *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook*. Westport, UNITED STATES: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2008, 107.

<sup>10</sup>Fandrich, Ina J. "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo." *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (2007): 775-79, 779.

<sup>11</sup> Read: Fandrich, Ina J. "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo." Fandrich examines the prevalence of Deities in Yoruba Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo. She found that Louisiana Voodoo did not adopt many of the Deities relevant in African Vodou, or even Haitian Vodou.

And of the scholars who do choose to recognize Voodoo as a religion, and who seek to write about it in an appropriate manner, there is further disagreement over the productivity of defining Voodoo in terms of its ancestors. Brenda Osbey refutes the idea that Voodoo is highly syncretic, or that it holds strong ties with religions historically practiced by the Yoruba peoples.<sup>12</sup> Instead, she endorses the construction of Voodoo as a unique, independent development in New Orleans, arguing that this view is the most beneficial for positively reframing Voodoo narratives.

While Osbey's point does have its merits, this thesis assumes the syncretic view of the faith. Given this assumption, however, I am careful to limit the extent of my discussion of Haitian *Vodou*, or West African *Vodu*.

## II. INTRODUCTION: *NOTABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VOODOO RELIGION*

*"Voodoo is a way to explain the unexplainable, to move the immovable, and to find power and agency in a dangerous world."*<sup>13</sup>

-Martha Ward

Voodoo is the product of a process called syncretism, which is defined as the amalgamation of cultures, religions or schools of thought.<sup>14</sup> New Orleans Voodoo emerged proceeding a mass migration of nearly 10,000 Haitians in 1809.<sup>15</sup> The newcomers

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<sup>12</sup> Osbey, Brenda Marie. "Why We Can't Talk to You about Voodoo." *The Southern Literary Journal* 43, no. 2 (2011): 1-11, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ward, Martha. *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*. University Press of Mississippi, 2004, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Merriam-Webster online, Syncretism: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, Jeffrey E. *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook*. Westport, UNITED STATES: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2008, 42.

combined their *Vodou* with the practices and beliefs of the Catholic church to form New Orleans Voodoo.<sup>16</sup>

New Orleans Voodoo focuses on the interactions between earthly beings and the divine. Voodoo's primary focus is the transformation and improvement of the connection between humans and the divine deities.<sup>17</sup> Like Catholic Christianity, Voodooists believe in one supreme ruler and many *loa*, a syncretized term for saints, who were once human and now watch over the living.<sup>18</sup> Followers of Voodoo look to the *loa* for guidance and protection, and in turn, provide attention and services to the deities.

### III. INTRODUCTION: *NOTABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VOODOO MOVEMENT*

Beyond the core beliefs and practices of the faith, New Orleans Voodoo presented a counterculture movement against the prevailing, white patriarchal institutions of the antebellum South.<sup>19</sup> Considering white male Southerners' extreme hostility toward women during the 19th century, and general white oppression of Blacks, it is remarkable that a black female-led religion found its way into Southern society.

This characteristic of Voodoo, black female-driven, is the basis on which I construct a framework for discussion. However, as Ina Fandrich points out, the "blackness" and "femininity" of the faith are not to be taken as parallels. Treating these two identities as analogous or comparable facets of the faith is inapt for discussing Voodoo through the

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix for notes on spelling and expanded definitions of Voodoo, Vodou, and Vodou.

<sup>17</sup> Pinn, Anthony. *The African American Religious Experience in America*. Santa Barbara, UNITED STATES: ABC-CLIO, 2005, 229.

<sup>18</sup> Ross, Jeffrey Ian. *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present*. Armonk, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor and Francis, 2015, 789.

<sup>19</sup> Voodoo's core beliefs do not require blackness from its adherents, nor does it call for exclusively Black leaders. The femininity of Voodoo, however, straddled the line between the Voodoo's core beliefs and its power as an institution.

lenses of race and gender.<sup>20</sup> Like Ina Fandrich, I have chosen to adopt Deborah King's model of "multiple jeopardy" for the purpose of this thesis, which describes the multidimensional oppression of black women in America: for it is not that the oppression of black women mirrors that of white women nor that of black men, but is a multi-angular form of oppression that operates simultaneously on the basis of race, sex, and class.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. INTRODUCTION: *CRAFTING AN APPROACH AND ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK*

The method used to conduct this analysis is an examination of Voodoo's evolution in the context of New Orleans's history. In Part One, I aim to deconstruct the religion's most successful years by answering two key questions: (1) how did the social and political climate of New Orleans in the 19th Century relate to the success of a black female-led faith in the antebellum South? (2) What aspects of the religion and the religious movement allowed Voodoo to exist publicly in New Orleans through the 19th century? Part Two focuses on the decline of the faith from the public eye into secrecy, specifically seeking to answer: (1) how did the social and political climate New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries relate to the decline of a black female-led faith in the post-civil war South? (2) Which aspects of the religion and the religious movement contributed Voodoo's public decline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

I reject the idea that there exists such a thing as "Voodoo History." Voodoo is a forgotten thread woven into the fabric of New Orleans's political and social past. For this reason, I examine Voodoo placed in a larger context, namely, the history of the city in which


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<sup>20</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> King, Deborah K. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42-72, 45.

it took hold. There is a grave disconnect between the historical reality of Voodoo and current, commonly held perceptions of the faith. While the focus of this project is not on the modern stigma surrounding Voodoo, creating a better understanding of how this disconnect occurred is certainly an underlying motivation for writing this thesis. To fulfill this goal, I look backward.

## PART ONE



### Black, Female-led Religion

*"If it was so glorious and honorable to be black,  
why was it the yellow skinned people among us  
who have so much prestige?"<sup>22</sup>*

-Zora Neale Hurston

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<sup>22</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*. 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984, 26.

# Timeline of New Orleans History: Part One

**1718** New Orleans settled by colonists; Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville begins the construction of the city of New Orleans.

**1719** First slave ships arrive to New Orleans

**1726** Ursuline nuns from the Convent of Roen establish a convent in New Orleans

**1738** Passage of *Code Noir*

**1763** The Spanish officially gain control of Louisiana from the Bourbon King of France

**1794** Haitian Revolution begins

**1800** New Orleans seized by the French once more

**1801** Birth of the Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau

**1803** The United States acquires Louisiana through The Louisiana Purchase

**1804** Haitian Revolution ends

**1805** Slave Uprising in New Orleans

**1806** Louisiana Territorial Administration enacts Black Code

**1808** Importation of slaves officially abolished in the United States

**1809** 10,000 Haitians migrate into the city

**1811** Charles Deslondes leads a Slave Insurrection in Louisiana

**1812** America recognizes Louisiana as a state

**1815** The war of 1812 ends with the Battle of New Orleans

**1827** Birth of Marie Eloise Euchariste Glapion (Marie II)

**1831** Nat Turner's rebellion

**1850** Beginning of Voodoo arrests



## **PART ONE: OVERVIEW**

In Part One, I take a thematic approach to deconstruct how a black female-led religion found a prominent place in the antebellum South. Part One is broken down into three sections divided thematically rather than chronologically. Through the themes of exoticism, feminism, and fear, I will attempt to answer the questions posed.

There are prominent figures both tangentially and directly related to the Voodoo movement, whose identities and contributions exemplify interconnectedness of these themes. Many details regarding the lives of 19th century Voodoo leaders like Marie Laveau, who I will introduce in Part One, vary between sources. But whether the small details of these figures' lives are rooted in fact or fiction, the persistence of these stories surrounding them is remarkable, given the severity of anti-blackness in the antebellum South.

## **EXOTICISM**

I have previously characterized the Voodoo movement as black female-driven, but I must clarify that this characterization is retrospective. On the surface, Voodoo appears to be a great example of black female leadership against the racist history of the United States. But in reality, it is likely that some of the Voodoo leaders of the 19th century were not labeled as "black" during their time. The illustrious "one drop rule," which persists as a means of determining blackness in the United States, was in many cases not applicable for determining racial categories in 19th century New Orleans.<sup>23</sup> Keeping this fact in mind is key to understanding the racial aspects of Voodoo in the 19th century.

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<sup>23</sup> Spickard, Paul. *Race in Mind: Critical Essays* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 15-32.

Following the initial colonization of New Orleans by the French in 1718 and, shortly after, the first importation of African slaves, New Orleans established a three-tiered social system which mirrored that of western Europe. Persons belonging to the intermediary class were classified as *gens de couleur libres* (free people of color) under the city's legal code, *Code Noir*. This system, which was enacted by the French and later maintained by the Spanish, would impact the city's politics and social climate for the next several hundred years.<sup>24</sup>

While a large proportion of people belonging to this intermediary class had both black and European ancestry, Blacks were not necessarily slaves.<sup>25</sup> In addition to formally recognizing free persons of color as an intermediary class, *Code Noir* outlined the ways in which slaves could buy their freedom and, subsequently, gain entrance into the intermediary social caste. Additionally, *Code Noir* outlined the provisions for slave-slave master relations: (1) slave masters could not be 'cruel' to their slaves, or they ran the risk of confiscation of their property, and (2) slave masters could not force their slaves to work on Sundays.<sup>26</sup>

Creole women of color were the leaders of the religion; and their exoticism, which was endorsed by persons belonging to all social classes, is related to their influence in the Voodoo movement. The status of Creoles of color in 19th century New Orleans, relative to most Blacks at the time, was a product of the city's social and political conditions, which granted these individuals agency and the ability to make radical achievements, such as

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<sup>24</sup> Sumpter, Amy R. "Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans." *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 1 (July 10, 2008): 19-37, 2; Hanger, Kimberly. S. "Personas de Varias Clases Y Colores: Free People of Color in Spanish New Orleans", PhD diss, University of Florida, 1991,7.

<sup>25</sup> Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color,"4.

growing and institutionalizing a “savage” religion in plain sight. Nonetheless, the Deborah King “multiple Jeopardy” model is still applicable, with slight modifications. Where King asserts that the “black woman” is an inseparable identity, where both her gender and race act simultaneously against her, the “Creole woman of color” should not be considered based on gender alone or race alone.

# I. EXOTICISM: RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF 19TH CENTURY NEW ORLEANS

In the 19th century, New Orleans experienced a massive shift in its demographics.

Table 1. Total Population by Year, Race, Sex, and Status										
Year	Total Pop.	Total Whites	White ♀	White ♂	Total Free Color	Free Color ♀	Free Color ♂	Total Slaves	Slave ♀	Slave ♂
1791	5037	2386	912	1474	862	538	324	1789	918	871
1805	8222	3551	1650	1901	1566	942	624	3105	1767	1338
1820	41351	19244	7569	11675	7188	4326	2862	14946	7615	7331
1830	49826	21281	8681	12600	11906	7042	4864	16639	9651	6988
1840	102193	59519	24616	34903	19226	10788	8438	23448	13653	9795
1850	119460	91431	38553	52878	9961	6006	3955	18068	10672	7396
1860	174491	149063	71330	77733	10939	6356	4583	14484	8477	6007

Source: Hangar, K.S. (1997), *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*; and Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Historical Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790–1960.

**Figure 1:** Racial Demographics in 19<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans

The Spaniards’ lax attitudes toward miscegenation contributed to the massive growth free persons of color by 82% between 1791 and 1805.<sup>27</sup> After 1809, the influx of French-speaking Haitian immigrants, who maintained their status as free persons of color

<sup>27</sup> Sumpter, “Segregation of the Free People of Color,” 21.

in Haiti, nearly doubled New Orleans's population and was a catalyst in the development of a black-creole identity.<sup>28</sup>

## II. EXOTICISM: *SLAVES, FREE PERSONS OF COLOR AND POSITIONALITY*

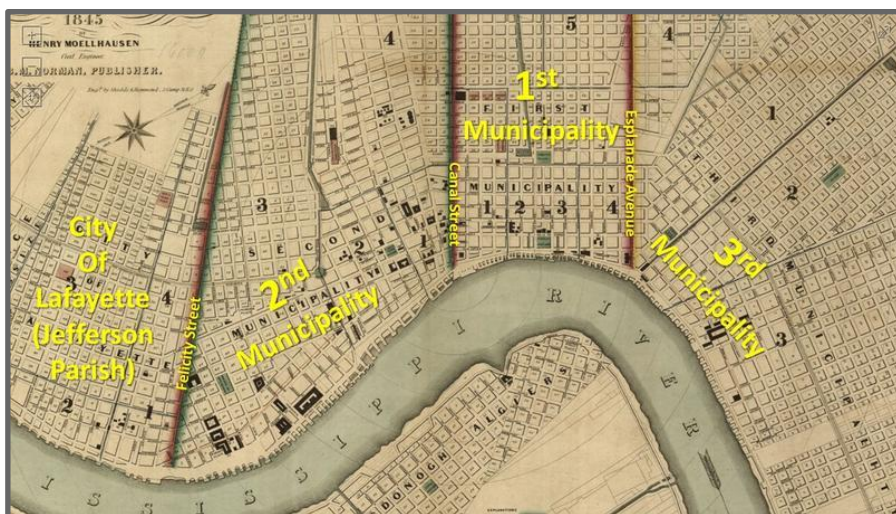
Part of the exoticization of the creole class was encouraged by their position, both physically and within society. Geographically, free people of color were clustered, as they tended to reside in specific *Faubourgs* (sub-divisions) in the city. In the mid-19th century, Anglo Americans who had migrated to the city after the influx of Haitian immigrants, were grew increasingly hostile to white Creoles, and Creoles of color.<sup>29</sup> Because of this, the American Government split the city into three *municipalities* in 1836, that were drawn according to racial lines: The French Quarter (and part of Faubourgs Treme), The American Sector, and Faubourgs Treme and Marigny.<sup>30</sup> While these municipalities were eventually abolished by the mid-19th century, the clustering of free persons of color unified a black-creole identity.

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<sup>28</sup> Lachance, Paul F. "The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Domingue Refugees to New Orleans: Reception, Integration and Impact." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 29, no. 2 (1988): 109–41, See Appendix page 8 for expanded definition of *Creole*.

<sup>29</sup> Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 24. Many of these immigrants came from other areas of the United states and from Europe particularly Ireland and Germany.

<sup>30</sup> Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 24.



**Figure 2:** New Orleans Municipalities in the 1830s<sup>31</sup>

In the antebellum South, New Orleans was among the region's most important cities due to its port access. This robust trading economy called for skilled laborers, and many free persons of color were educated in various trades and could fulfill these roles.<sup>32</sup>

Hairdressing was a popular profession for a free women of color in the mid-19th century.<sup>33</sup> Marie Laveau's network in the city is said to have been extensive, and was made possible primarily through her work as a hairdresser to black women and to the city's most elite white women.<sup>34</sup> Marie was born between the years 1797 and 1801 to her mother Marguerite, a free woman of African and Choctaw descent, and her father Charles Leveau, a wealthy plantation owner. The two are listed as her parents on Marie's marriage certificate, but the details of her parents' races and financial means are debated. Some say that Charles

<sup>31</sup> New Orleans Municipalities in the 1830s, Image Courtesy of Library of Congress, Richard Campnella. <http://wwno.org/post/cityscapes-culture-wars-geography-new-orleans-1830s>.

<sup>32</sup> Mencke, John G. *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1979, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Gehman, Mary, and Lloyd Dennis. *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction*. Donaldsonville, LA: DVille Press LLC, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Starbuckwylde. YouTube. March 26, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaJP8w-jW2k&t=231s>. Originally filmed and published by History.com.

Laveau was a free person of color rather than a white plantation owner.<sup>35</sup> Others pin him as a Frenchman of great means, who would raise his daughter on his own plantation.

Although Marie was a legitimate adherent and priestess of the Voodoo faith, this did not stop her from capitalizing on her skills and her social standing to build her network. As a hairdresser, Marie had access to the homes of New Orleans's most elite. Many of her female clients took an interest in her "side practice," and she built her business by selling charms and potions to white women and free women of color in the city. Additionally, she allegedly established a network of black house servants and slaves, to whom she would sell charms and potions in exchange for information about their white masters.<sup>36</sup> Another operation of the network of house servants, was the dissemination of information about Voodoo meeting times. According to Lyle Saxon, servants embedded messages in songs sung in creole languages.<sup>37</sup> The information that she collected was a crucial part in executing her customers' requests. It is rumored that in one instance, she was responsible for one man's acquittal in a murder trial. While many interpreted this event as undeniable proof of the power of Queen Marie, it is likely that she utilized her network to make a deal with the judge.

As previously mentioned, all *gens de couleur libres* were not necessarily Creoles of color. One major figure of the Voodoo movement, Dr. John Montanee, was of Senegalese descent and a free person of color in the early 19th century. Dr. John was an important, early figure in New Orleans history, whose life is shrouded in fiction and exaggerated

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<sup>35</sup> Fandrich, Ina J. *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth Century New Orleans*. Routledge, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Niven, Steven J.. "Laveaux, Marie." *African American National Biography*, edited by Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., edited by and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. . *Oxford African American Studies Center*

<sup>37</sup> Saxon, Lyle, and E. H. Suydam. *Fabulous New Orleans*. Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2004, In, Tallant, Voodoo in New Orleans, 64.

accounts. There is one fact about him that seems to be a staple across Voodoo literature: his unmistakable appearance.

In 1859, the *Daily Picayune* published an article on Dr. John describing the Voodoo Doctor as “an African negro of the purest black, who is by trade a doctor, by reputation a performer of miracles.”<sup>38</sup> Robert Tallant also provided a description Dr. John in his ethnography:

A huge black man, a free man of color, himself an owner of slaves, he claimed to be a Senegalese prince and the masses of grotesque scars that marked his fierce face were believed to support this claim.<sup>39</sup>

Although Tallant’s book was published in the mid-20th century, the language he uses reflects 19th century perceptions of free people of color. On the next page he goes on to say the following:

He soon became someone at whom people stared in the streets, for he owned a carriage and pair as fine as any possessed by any white gentleman and a blooded saddle horse, on which he rode through the streets, attired in a garnish and elaborate Spanish Costume. Later he forsook all this for austere black and a frilly white shirt front and affected a beard.<sup>40</sup>

Tallant time travels in this excerpt, writing from the perspective of 19th century New Orleanians gazing at the Voodoo “King.” From this account, Dr. John appears to be somewhat of a spectacle. Like the details of Laveau’s life and practices, many details surrounding Dr. John’s life are hazy. Still, however, it is remarkable that the mere *idea* of a black man with such high social standing in the 19th century persisted in the minds of black and white New Orleanians alike.

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<sup>38</sup> “Africa Triumphant,” *Daily Picayune*, August 18, 1859, p. 2, c. 5., In Long, A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess, 253; Long, Carolyn Morrow. *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. University Press of Florida. Kindle Edition, 137.

<sup>39</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 33.

## II. EXOTICISM: ROMANTICIZATION OF FEMALE CREOLES OF COLOR IN ART

New Orleanians' infatuation with Creole beauty throughout the 19th century is apparent in the city's artwork. In 1837, Charles Jean Baptiste Colson painted "Creole Woman," which hangs gallantly in the halls of The Louisiana State Museum. Colson was a French painter who received his training at École des Beaux Arts school in Paris, and he came to the city in response to a growing demand for portraiture in The Crescent City.



**Figure 3:** "Creole Woman"<sup>41</sup>

This Portrait reflects a romantic conception of feminine beauty popular in Louisiana during the mid-nineteenth century. The strikingly animated young woman seems lost in reverie, carelessly holding a folded fan as if in anticipation of an outing to the opera or ball. Colson was the first wave of artists trained at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris who came to New Orleans during the winter to meet Louisianians' insatiable demand for portraiture. In contrast to the crisper neoclassical style practiced by French Colleagues such as Jean-Joseph Vaudechamp or Adolphe Rinick, Colson's softer and more

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<sup>41</sup> "Creole Woman" 1837, Charles-Jean Baptiste Colson (French, fl. 1810-1851) Oil on Canvas. Picture captured in the Louisiana State History Museum.



emotive style of portraiture gained popularity in France during the reign of King Louis-Philippe (1830-1848)<sup>42</sup>

The above description hangs adjacent to the painting in the Louisiana State History Museum. Though the exoticism of the woman portrayed in this painting is communicated without words, the language of its accompanying description further reveals the historical conceptualizations of creole beauty in New Orleans. Most likely, the painting does not portray any woman in particular, but rather an amalgamation of fantastical ideas about the appearances of creole women of color. Not only does the romantic portrait of the unnamed woman reflect a common perception of creole women's appearance, but it alludes to deeply rooted ideas of their mysteriousness and exotic nature.

This famous portrait of Marie Laveau also reflects exoticism. Apparently, the portrait executed by Frank Schneider is a replica of the original painting, which was completed in by George Catlin in 1837. The location of the real painting is unknown, but the replica currently hangs in the Louisiana State History Museum.

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<sup>42</sup> Louisiana State History Museum, description for *Creole Woman 1837*, Charles-Jean Baptiste Colson.



**Figure 4:** "Portrait identified as Marie Laveau"

According to legend, George Catlin Famous for his portrayal of American Indians, saw Marie Laveau in 1835 and asked to paint her portrait. She refused, so he painted her likeness from memory. Over the years, many scholars and local historians have debated whether Catlin painted the original portrait and if it represents Marie Laveau (1801-1881), the famous "voodoo queen," or instead an unidentified Choctaw woman. Gaspar Cusachs loaned the Caitlin painting to the Louisiana State Museum in 1911. He reclaimed it in the early 1920s and sold it to collector Simon J. Schwartz. The painting's whereabouts are unknown today. The painting shown here is a copy executed by museum employee Frank Schneider, and it remains among the museum's most popular artworks.<sup>43</sup>

Apparently, Caitlin asked to paint the Voodoo Queen after meeting Laveau, but she refused to sit for a portrait. As a result, he created his masterpiece from memory. In this instance, the painting is of one woman in particular; however, because Laveau did not actually sit for the creation of her portrait, it is likely that some features of Laveau would have come from his own amalgamated, idealized version of the creole woman of color.

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<sup>43</sup> Louisiana State History Museum, Description for painting of Marie Laveau, "Portrait identified as Marie Laveau," Frank Schneider, after George Catlin attributed, ca. 1915.

### III. EXOTICISM: *SEXUALIZATION, FETISHIZATION, AND PLACAGE*

The appeal of the creole women of color, and mixed-race women in general, was a complex reality inside and outside antebellum New Orleans. In 1815, Jefferson created mathematical equations to numerically assess one of his slave's blackness and to predict how these values would manifest in future generations.<sup>44</sup> Emily Clark maps out the "racial algebra" that Thomas Jefferson concocted in hopes to quantify the "blackness" of his slave, Sally Hemings, whom with he held a sexually exploitative relationship with for more than 30 years. It is likely that the former President's valiant attempts to quantify mixed-race ancestry was an attempt to come to terms with his own dissonance.<sup>45</sup>

Inside New Orleans, the implications of white men's complex attraction to mixed-race women did not play out in the same manner. While some travel accounts from visitors to the city in the mid-19th century do straddle the line between admiration and fetishization, white men's reverence for creole women of color typically worked in their favor.<sup>46</sup> The appearance of creole women of color who were tied to the Voodoo movement seems to be a staple of Voodoo literature. This excerpt from Martha Ward's *Voodoo Queen* is taken from Hurston's personal account of a conversation with one of Laveau's longest students about her appearance:

Marie Laveau's color--people said-- was red, yellow, brown, black, golden, rosy brick, peach, banana, apricot, light, bright, fair, and high. Her color, the so- called social fact around which cultural life in New Orleans depended on who was looking at her. Although no one agreed on tones and tints, everyone agreed that Marie Laveau, like her creole sisters of color was exceptionally beautiful.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Clark, Emily. *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, Emily. *The Strange History of the American Quadroon*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, 9.

Yet, the beauty of Creole women of color should not undermine their intellect and deliberate efforts to achieve upward mobility. Their beauty was a gateway to some of the privileges enjoyed by the white class, but the dedication and determination of these women was the method through which they maintained these privileges.

Due to 19th century anti-miscegenation laws, marriages between Creoles of color and whites were forbidden. But to circumnavigate these laws, *placage* parties or “quadroon balls” were a popular facet of New Orleans culture beginning in the late 18th century. The popularity of *placage* could have also been a result of the city’s demographics in the 19th century. White men outnumbered white women in the city, and women of African descent outnumbered males of African descent.

Creole women of color attended these parties with the intention of meeting their potential “husbands,” and white men attended these parties hoping to find a mixed-race mistress. *Placage* is often inaccurately portrayed as concubinage, where women lived their lives as slaves serving their white masters.<sup>48</sup> *Placage* did not entirely mirror concubinage, but this is not to say this portrayal is completely misguided.<sup>49</sup> In many cases these arrangements were strategic for Creole women of colors, as it helped them attain financial security and independence.<sup>50</sup>

It is likely that some of the narratives painting the Creole woman color as a powerful and influential figure stems from the nature of some of the *placage*-based households. While some partnerships did indeed mirror a common law marriage, others were an

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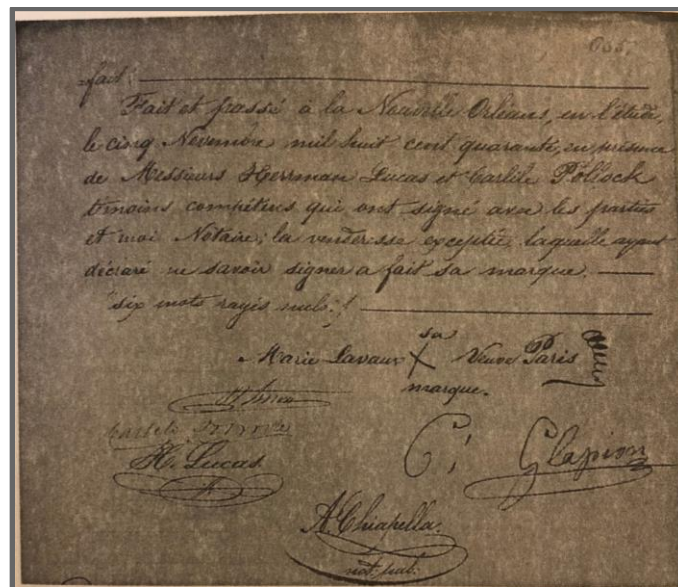
<sup>48</sup> Aslakson, Kenneth. “The ‘Quadroon-Plaça’ Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon.” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2012): 709–34.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon*, 3. Aslakson, “The ‘Quadroon-Plaça’ Myth of Antebellum New Orleans,” 12.

<sup>50</sup> Aslakson, “The ‘Quadroon-Plaça’ Myth of Antebellum New Orleans,” 13.

“arrangement” where white males set up their *placees* in a house and supported them financially but had minimal involvement in the household itself; therefore, the women assumed the role of “head of the house.”<sup>51</sup>

It is reported that The Voodoo Queen entered a relationship of this nature after the disappearance of her first husband, Jacques Paris. After her first marriage to Jacques Paris, Marie entered a second *placage* relationship with Christophe Glapion in 1826.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 5:** “Signatures of Marie Laveau and Charles Glapion”<sup>53</sup>

While there is debate over Glapion’s race, it is likely that he was a white due to the nature of their relationship.<sup>54</sup> Unlike some of the short lived *placage* arrangements, their 30-year relationship lasted until the time of his death in 1855, which indicates that in some instances, *placage* resembled common law marriages.

<sup>51</sup> I must note that, in some cases, males would eventually abandon their *placees* once they found a white bride. This fact leads people to assume Placage was a form of concubinage, when in reality, this was not the case in most situations.

<sup>52</sup> Marie Laveau’s first marriage was to Jaque Paris, an Octoroon who migrated to New Orleans during the 1809 Haitian immigration. Quickly after their marriage in 1819, Paris passed away. but some sources suggest he did not perish but disappeared Certificate Whether this rumor is factual or not, she was known for much of her life as Widow Paris.

<sup>53</sup> Pictured in Ina Fandrich, *The Voodoo Queen*.

<sup>54</sup> Recall that anti miscegenation laws would have prevented Laveau and Charles from marrying.

## **FEMINISM**

In this section, I discuss how the feminist appeal of Voodoo contributed to its momentum throughout the 19th century. First, I argue that the beliefs and practices of the Voodoo faith are feminine in nature. Secondly, I postulate that the Voodoo movement was an opportunity for women's empowerment, thus drawing women across racial lines.

### **I. FEMINISM: *INTRINSIC FEMINISM IN THE VOODOO RELIGION***

In one article, Brenda Osbey contends that members of the Voodoo faith do not actually use the terms queen, priest, and priestess:

I can tell you that there are no queens, priests, or priestesses in Voodoo. Anyone who claims to be one is lying. And that terminology-- queen, priest, priestess--- was never part of our terminology... the religion here in New Orleans is entirely within the sphere of Women, whom we call mothers. Clearly men cannot work in this capacity.<sup>55</sup>

While I opt to use the term "Queen," this does not imply that the title has a male equivalent. Even if this term only belongs to the popularized, commercialized version of New Orleans as Osbey suggests, a female Voodoo practitioner is called a "queen," while a male is called a "doctor." Clearly, these titles do not hold the same weight. Despite using the masculinized "king" to describe male Voodoo leaders, Robert Tallant still alludes to the discrepancies between the sexes in his ethnography:

Voodooism seems to have been a matriarchy almost from its first days in Louisiana. The King was always a minor figure. Papa didn't count. Mama was the entire show. The only men of importance were the witch doctors. The King was probably changed from year to year and was actually the current lover of the queen.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Osbey, "Why we Can't talk to you about Voodoo," 4.

<sup>56</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 21.

The role of motherhood is a central aspect of the Voodoo faith. In Voodoo, pregnancy is not simply the way through which life takes form, but a kind of bodily possession;<sup>57</sup> and biologically, only the female sex is capable of becoming pregnant.<sup>58</sup> In New Orleans Voodoo, bodily possession is the way through which the *loa* reach humans, and it is viewed as a miraculous act that New Orleans Voodooists anticipate in their rituals. In support of the syncretic view of Voodoo, one could even say that positive bodily possession occurs in the Christian Bible, when the Holy Spirit impregnates the Virgin Mother Mary. The Virgin mother is especially revered in Roman Catholicism, which, if we accept the syncretic view of Voodoo, would explain why the role of motherhood is so critical in the faith.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, 48.

<sup>58</sup> I use the word female, rather than woman, to distinguish people born genetically as a female. Woman is a gendered term. And while most biologically born females do identify as women, the “woman” is primarily a societal construction.

<sup>59</sup> While considering the syncretism of Voodoo and Catholicism, it is important to recognize that there are obvious discrepancies between the two faiths. One major difference is the male-dominated tradition of the Catholic Church.

## II. FEMINISM: *THE VODOO QUEEN, CREOLE WOMEN OF COLOR, AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*

From 1719 until the late 19th century, New Orleans's churches were integrated,<sup>60</sup> and women of African descent accounted for the majority of the congregation at St. Louis Cathedral.<sup>61</sup> Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen, was a devout Catholic and maintained a friendly relationship with Pere Antoine, a Priest of St. Louis Cathedral in the 19th century. The History Channel published a video documenting the life and legacy of Marie Laveau. In this video, they claim that her ties to the Catholic Church were so strong, that Antoine allowed her to practice Voodoo rituals on the altar of the city's largest Cathedral—so long as she filled the seats at Sunday's Mass.<sup>62</sup>

Through the lens of feminism, her work as a nurse is fascinating. Firstly, in working as a healer alongside the leaders of the Cathedral, Marie transformed into a mother figure who brought ease and comfort to the sick. In the latter half of the 19th century, New Orleans's death toll began to rise due to a massive outbreak of yellow fever and cholera. Marie Laveau worked as a nurse toward the end of her life, healing people afflicted with these ailments. Her work as a nurse was instrumental in the positive reframing of her legacy. Her kind acts helped her earn the distinction of "one of the most wonderful women who ever lived," as quoted in her obituary in *The New York Times*:<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Anderson, R. Bentley, 1959. *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interracialism, 1947-1956*. 1st ed. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 200, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Long, A *New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Starbuckwylde. YouTube. March 26, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaJP8w-jW2k&t=231s>. Originally filmed and published by History.com.

<sup>63</sup> See figure 6, pp. 32



Marie Laveau, one of the most wonderful women who ever lived, passed peacefully away. Her daughter, Mme. Philomel Legendre, the only survivor of all Capt. Glapion's children, who possesses many of the characteristics of her mother, and Mme. Legendre's two pretty daughters, ministered to the old lady's last wants. She died without a struggle, with a smile lighting up her shriveled features. She was interred in her family tomb, by the side of Capt. Glapion, in the old St. Louis Cemetery, and with her is buried the most thrilling portion of the unwritten records of Louisiana. Although Marie Laveau's history has been very much sought after, it has never been published. Cable has endeavored to portray her in the character of Palmyre, in his novel of the "Grandissimes." The secrets of her life, however, could only be obtained from the old lady herself, but she would never tell the smallest part of what she knew, and now her lips are closed forever, and, as she could neither read nor write, not a scrap is left to chronicle the events of her exciting life.

**Figure 6:** Excerpt from Marie Laveau's Obituary in the New York Times (1881)<sup>64</sup>

Creole women of color were active in many different realms, but one common thread through the worlds in which they operated was The Catholic Church. Henriette Deville, a free woman of color and an alleged 'distant relative' of Laveau, was an activist and a devout Catholic as well. She was the founding force behind a group, The Sisters of the Holy nuns, through which she fought for the rights of the poor and women of color. Many of her efforts focused on improving women's literacy and baptizing mixed-race children in the Catholic church. Interestingly, Henriette was born out of a *placage* arrangement, yet she refused *placage* for herself and actively fought against it. While I have previously painted *placage* in a positive light, not all women agree that *placage* was at all a feminist institution.

<sup>64</sup> "THE DEAD VOUDOU QUEEN; MARIE LAVEAU'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF NEW-ORLEANS." Published in The New York Times, June 23 1881, accessed from The New York Times online archival record.

But like the feminist movement of today, feminism in 19th century New Orleans was not a monolith.

## II. FEMINISM: *ACTS OF DEFIANCE*

An unlikely symbol of feminism in the 19th century Voodoo movement was in women's fashion. In antebellum New Orleans, young, unmarried free women of color were required to wear the *tignon* in public. This mandate came in 1786 as part of the "Proclamation for Good Government," when Spanish governor Estevan Miro forbade free women of color from showing their hair or wearing ornaments of value.<sup>65</sup> The *tignon* is a piece of cloth worn around the head to conceal the hair. It resembles the turban, which was worn by slave women to protect the hair and, for some, to avoid the sexual pursuits of white slave owners.<sup>66</sup>

Creole women of color were first subjected to the *tignon* in effort to suppress what was perceived as a "tempting" feature of creole women of color. While these suppressive measures may fall under the category of exoticism, creole women's response to this mandate was a brilliant act of defiance. Rather than fight for the right to put their curls, kinks, and waves on display, creole women of color *embraced* their *tignons*, often embellishing them with jewels and pins. The *tignon* quickly became a symbol of status and beauty, and creole women of color proudly displayed their head coverings in the streets.<sup>67</sup>

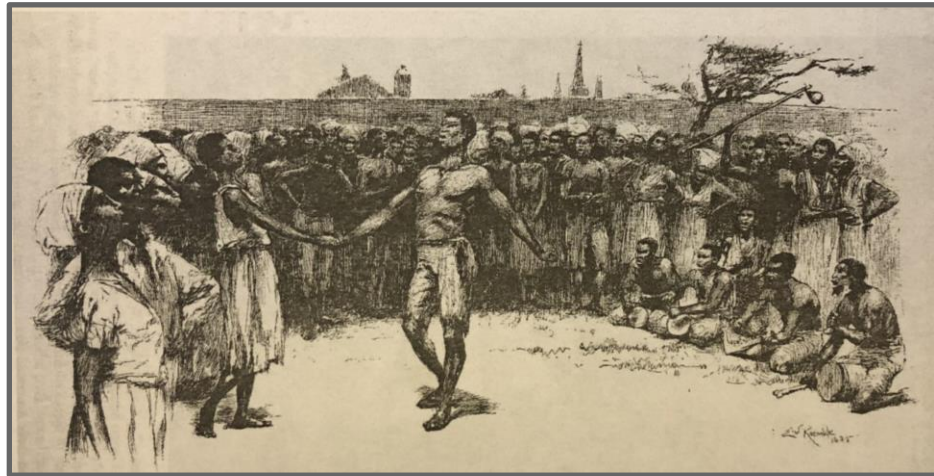
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<sup>65</sup> Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Blanco F, Jose, Patricia Kay Hunt-Hurst, Heather Vaughan Lee, Mary Doering, Mary Doering, Heather Lee, Mary Doering, and Mary Doering. *Clothing and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe*. Santa Barbara, United States: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015; Trevigne, Barbara. "Tignon Headdress in New Orleans." *African American Studies Center*, edited by Ed. Oxford African American Studies Center.

<sup>67</sup> Trevigne, Barbara. "Tignon Headdress in New Orleans."

In the 1835 painting of Laveau by George Catlin, she is pictured wearing a the headwrap. Following in suit of her fellow Creole women of color, Marie's participation in this silent protest reinforced her individual power, the power of female Voodoo leaders, and the power of the Creole class alike. Additionally, many drawings of Voodoo gatherings from the 19th century picture female attendees wearing the *tignon*:



**Figure 7: "The Bamboula"**<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 8: "A Congo Woman"**<sup>69</sup>

**Figure 9: "A Voodoo"**<sup>70</sup>

**Figure 10: "Voodoo Woman."**<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> "The Bamboula" in Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, Appendix. Drawing by E. W. Kemble in George Washington Cable, *Century Magazine*, "The dance of in Congo Square" and "Creole Slave Songs," February 1886, April 1886.

## FEAR

In general, white fear stemmed from the prospect of Voodoo's legitimacy. In this section, I briefly discuss how white fear unintentionally contributed to the success of Voodoo in the 19th century.

### I. FEAR: *LEGITIMACY AND NARRATIVES OF WHITE FEMALE PARTICIPATION*

In the early 19th century, complaints from white New Orleanians about disruptive gatherings around the city led to a crackdown on Voodooists activity. Beginning in 1817, Voodoo gatherings were restricted to the area informally known as Congo Square. Unintentionally, this restriction popularized the weekly gatherings; every Sunday, the Square was reportedly filled with hundreds of slaves, free people of color, and interestingly, white women as well.<sup>72</sup>

Women seem, too, to have made up at least eighty percent of the cultists, and it was always the female of the white race who entered the sect. When white men were present, it was usually because they sought handsome yellow girls, rather than for reason of any belief in the Zombi.<sup>73</sup>

From this excerpt we see early sentiments of white-female fragility. Unlike their male counterparts, they were simply naive attendees who were under the spell of the

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<sup>69</sup> "A Congo Woman" in Fanrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, Appendix. Drawing by E. W. Kemble in George Washington Cable, *Century Magazine*, "The dance of in Congo Square" and "Creole Slave Songs," February 1886, April 1886.

<sup>70</sup> Martinez, Raymond J. *Mysterious Marie Laveau, Voodoo Queen: And Folk Tales Along the Mississippi*. New Orleans: Hope Publications, 1956. Originally in "A Voodoo" Drawing by E. W. Kemble in George Washington Cable, *Century Magazine*, "The dance of in Congo Square" and "Creole Slave Songs," February 1886, April 1886.

<sup>71</sup> "A Voodoo Woman." Illustration by "A. K." for Charles Dudley Warner's "New Orleans," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1887, p. 199. (Author's collection.) In Long, *Voudou Priestess*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Donaldson, Gary A. "A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862." *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 2 (1984): 63-72, 64.

<sup>73</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 21.

“handsome yellow girls.” Claims such as this, taken from Robert Tallant’s ethnography, create a narrative of white female participation as compulsory rather than voluntary.

In 1850, a group of women were arrested while gathered at a Voodoo dance, led by Voodoo Priestess Betsey Toledano, on the grounds of indecency. After the arrest, the women stood their ground, insisting that the arrests were unlawful. In turn, authorities then fell back on another law that forbade the gathering of white women and slaves.

Later that year, several nude women were arrested during another gathering. At the proceeding trial, the accused white women said that they had all been under the influence of the Voodoo Queen.<sup>74</sup> Whites believed that if their women’s innocence could succumb to the power of the Voodoo Queen, then her magic was legitimate.

## II. FEAR: *LEGITIMACY AND THE SUCCESS OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION*

In the early 19th century, white fear of being overtaken stemmed from the prospect of Voodoo’s legitimacy. The impracticality of slaves overtaking their masters convinced white New Orleanians that this magic, which they had initially perceived to be foolishness concocted by their naive slaves, was a powerful force. Carolyn Marrow Long details the Americans’ response to the Haitian Revolution:

American fear and abhorrence of Voodoo increased with reports of the successful slave revolt in the French colony of Saint- Domingue (1791-1804), which ended with the creation of the black republic of Haiti. Legend has it that the rebels fought with such courage and ferocity because they believed their Vodou deities made them invulnerable.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 25.

<sup>75</sup> Long, Carolyn Marrow. "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment, and Religion." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6, no. 1 (2002): 86-101, 88.

Whites genuinely feared that Voodoo would be the cause of their downfall, inadvertently giving the faith an essence of power. Black slaves and Haitian migrants were also aware of this “infamous” slave insurrection. The Voodoo movement offered them an opportunity to unify in the face of white oppression, an opportunity that was not available to most slaves in the antebellum South.

The restriction of Voodoo gatherings to Congo Square was one of the first legal actions taken against the movement.<sup>76</sup> But while white officials took action to suppress Voodoo gatherings as early as the beginning of the 19th century, the relative inaction Whites took to completely suppress the movement for the first half of the century is fascinating nonetheless:

Whites likely maintained a degree of fear of Voodoo’s mysteries and hesitated to challenge its leaders or practitioners directly—even as they publicly dismissed its rites as childish superstitions of primitive inferiors.<sup>77</sup>

In his article, *Midnight Scenes and Orgies at Congo Square*, Gordon details the onslaught of suppressive measures in the latter half of the 19th century. She contends that even in the most oppressive stages of Voodoo in the public sphere, there was still an element of white fear. However, as Americans increasingly perceived these gatherings as a threat, they took measures to rid of the faith once and for all. The public decry of the faith eventually masked the prospect of legitimacy. I will further discuss this shift in Part Two.

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<sup>76</sup> Gary A. Donaldson, “A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800–1862,” *Journal of Negro History* 69.2 (1984), 67.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, Michelle Y. “‘Midnight Scenes and Orgies’: Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy.” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2012): 767–86, 772.

## **PART ONE: CONCLUSION**


The conditions of 19th century New Orleans created an environment where exoticism, feminism, and even white fear were advantageous for the Voodoo faith. Generations of racial mixing promoted the growth of New Orleans's intermediary class; and due of a mass migration of Haitians beginning in 1809, the number of *gens de couleur libres* increased dramatically, helping to establish the black-creole identity.<sup>78</sup> Creole women of color were particularly looked upon with favorability. Many of the peculiar women who reigned as queens of the Voodoo faith in the 19th century were Creoles of color, and part of a larger class of peoples distinguished by a codified tri-tier social hierarchy that was drawn according to racial lines. Because of their position in New Orleans society, they were allowed a high degree of freedom, relative to enslaved Blacks, and expanded opportunities for upward social mobility.

Feminism is ingrained in the Voodoo faith. The Biblical story of the Virgin Mother Mary being overtaken by the holy spirit is interpreted as a form of possession in Voodoo. The core beliefs of the faith, in addition to the number of females who assumed leadership roles in the movement played into its its feminist appeal. Ultimately, the matriarchal nature of Voodoo and the acts of defiance exhibited by creole women of color gave white women an opportunity to defy the normative, patriarchal system as well. White women were active participants in Voodoo ceremonies and dances, however, narratives of white female participation did not match those of women of color. The two elements which I have previously discussed fed into a collective fear of the faith. The perceived legitimacy of the faith induced feelings of fear, and this fearful curiosity kept the religion alive.

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<sup>78</sup> See Appendix page 58 for expanded definition of Creole

## PART TWO



### Black Female-led Religion

*"The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman.  
The most unprotected person in America is the black woman.  
The most neglected person in America, is the black woman."*<sup>79</sup>

-Malcom X (el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz)

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<sup>79</sup> This quote is from a speech by Malcolm X on May 5, 1962 at the funeral service of Ronald Stokes in Los Angeles.



## **A TIMELINE OF RELEVANT DATES**

- 1850** Beginning of Voodoo Arrests
- 1855** Louisiana Legislature restricts freedom of assembly for *gens de colour libres*
- 1857** Supreme Court Case Dred Scott v. Sanford; Louisiana prohibits the emancipation and manumission of slaves
- 1859** Marie Laveau called into court for disrupting the peace
- 1861** United States Civil War begins
- 1862** Congo Square closed for gathering
- 1865** Civil War ends, 13<sup>th</sup> amendment enacted; Reconstruction begins
- 1868** Louisiana enacts “black and tan” constitution
- 1870** Ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment; black men are given the right to vote
- 1871** Marie Laveau II conducts St. John’s eve ceremony
- 1877** Reconstruction ends, Jim Crow Era begins
- 1881** Marie Laveau I dies
- 1892** Homer Plessy boards the Whites only section of a train
- 1897** Supreme court case Plessy v. Ferguson causes the bifurcation of racial categories and reinforces Jim Crow segregationist policies
- 1903** Marie Laveau’s cottage on St. Anne’s Street torn down
- 1928** Zora Neale Hurston goes to New Orleans

## **PART TWO: OVERVIEW**

In this chapter, I discuss how Americanization, racism, and fear contributed to the decline of Voodoo in the late 19th and early 20th century. This massive shift in public memory of Voodoo was largely tied to the Americanization and the institutionalization of racism in New Orleans. Additionally, I discuss how the implications of white fear were stronger in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As in Part One, I explore these themes: Americanization, racism, and fear, as separate entities. Still, I recognize that these themes are highly interwoven, working as a system to suppress the black, female-led faith.

## **AMERICANIZATION**

Throughout the 19th century, New Orleans's government officials increasingly made changes that would help the city mirror the American landscape. Many of these changes came in the form of legal efforts to deconstruct New Orleanians' unique conception of racial categories. The creole women of color, who had historically dominated the faith, were viewed differently in the eyes of white men toward the end of the 19th century.

Americanization also encouraged Blacks and Creoles of color to adapt to these changes, and to make active attempts to assimilate into *new* New Orleans. Consequentially, the external and internal pressures of the Voodoo community to assimilate contributed to the demise of the faith.

## II. AMERICANIZATION: *INTERNAL ASSIMILATION AND ABANDONING THE FAITH*

The suppression of the Voodoo religion was both an internal and external effort. Following the Civil War, and the enactment of the 13th Amendment, the United States government encouraged Blacks to integrate into society. Leaders of the black community played a role in convincing their people to abandon their faith:

Educators and ministers in the black community taught their constituents to be ashamed of their Voodoo beliefs, and those who aspired to the middle class vehemently denied any association with the practice. By the turn of the twentieth century, all of the powerful and charismatic priests and priestesses were dead, and no new leaders arose to replace them. Voodoo as an organized religion, had been thoroughly suppressed by the legal system, public opinion, and Christianity.<sup>80</sup>

In this passage from Carolyn Marrow Long's *A Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, she suggests that Blacks were complicit in dismantling their faith. Many Blacks in New Orleans felt that to obtain a respectable status in society, they would have to abandon any practices that echoed slave culture and could thus be used as grounds for proving black inferiority.<sup>81</sup> Voodoo was just that. Thus, Blacks began to perceive Voodoo, which had previously promoted unification of Blacks and Creoles, as a hindrance to the prospect of assimilation into white society.

In the same passage, Long also brings up another important development in the late 19th century Voodoo community. Much of the focus thus far has been on the longest reigning Voodoo Queen, but Marie Laveau did not hold this title or position up until her death. In 1827, Marie Laveau gave birth to a daughter of the same name, who was nearly identical to her and took over her mother's practice. While Marie II was also a legitimate Priestess, she was far less charismatic than her mother, and far more concerned with

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<sup>80</sup> Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo," 92.

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, *Hoodoo Voodoo and Conjure*, 90.

making a profit. In addition to Marie II, “Mama Eliza” was reportedly the Queen who oversaw the Voodoo gathering on the night of St. John’s Eve in 1873.<sup>82</sup>

## I. AMERICANIZATION: *THE BIFURCATION OF RACIAL CATEGORIES*

Although the Americanization of New Orleans was a steady effort throughout the 19th century the 20th centuries, many attempts to Americanize the city came as a response to the short-lived success of black and black-Creole New Orleanians during the Reconstruction era. The years following the civil war presented a brief period of prosperity for Blacks in the south. Blacks and Creoles of color were increasingly playing roles in society, holding positions in local government, and becoming more educated. Still, the final years of this century would prove to be a negative turning point in New Orleans history and in public perceptions of Voodoo.

One of the most apparent efforts to Americanize New Orleans was the implementation of new racial laws. The city’s notable tri tier system gave way to a newer bi-classification system, which separated Blacks from Whites.<sup>83</sup> Of course, in order to make this new system work, the law called for a new definition of who is and who is not black.

Efforts to adopt more traditionally American constructions of race can be seen as early as 1803, when the French relinquished their control over the city.<sup>84</sup> The 1857 supreme court decision, *Dred Scott v Sandford*, signaled the beginning of a decline in

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<sup>82</sup> Voudou Worship,” New York Times, July 3, 1873.

<sup>83</sup> Spain, Daphne. “Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans: Two Centuries of Paradox.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 441 (1979), 90.

<sup>84</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, 100.

freedom, social standing, and mobility for Blacks and free people of color alike.<sup>85</sup> The decision stated that Blacks and slaves had no constitutional rights, because they were not technically citizens due to their ancestry. This case further divided the North and the South and was one of the most important events leading up to the civil war.

Although this court case did not concern Louisiana or New Orleans specifically, it did encourage New Orleans government officials to abandon their unique laws and abide by federal court decisions.<sup>86</sup> In the same year, New Orleans officially prohibited the emancipation and manumission of slaves, so they could no longer buy their freedom into the middle class. New Orleans was, after all, a part of the South regardless of its long history of colonialism and European influence.<sup>87</sup> Solidarity became crucial leading up to the civil war, and *Dred Scott v Sandford* was only the beginning of a long set of changes for New Orleans's coveted free people of color.

A later case did directly concern New Orleans. In 1892, a Creole man of color boarded a train car reserved for Whites only. Four years later, Homer Adolph Plessy would become the plaintiff in the landmark 1896 Supreme Court case, *Plessy v Ferguson*. Plessy was a New Orleans native; and as a white-passing octoroon, he was ideal to carry out what was actually a meticulously calculated plan.<sup>88</sup>

Plessy was an active member of the Citizens Committee, a local group organized by Creoles of color who fought for the rights of Blacks and Creoles alike. By the late 19th

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<sup>85</sup> Logsdon, J., and Bell, The Americanization of Black New Orleans. In A. Hirsch and J. Logsdon, eds. *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

<sup>86</sup> Hirsch, Arnold R. and Joseph Logsdon. Eds. *Creole New Orleans; Race and Americanization*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

<sup>87</sup> Tuttle, Kate. "Plessy v. Ferguson." *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, Second Edition*, edited by Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah, ., edited by and Henry Louis Gates Jr.. . Oxford African American Studies Center.

<sup>88</sup> Kelley, Blair L. M. *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*. Chapel Hill, UNITED STATES: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010, 56.

century, most trains had designated sections for Whites only, and the penalty for non-white persons sitting in these sections was jail time. The committee decided to test these constraints by having one of their members sit in the Whites only section on the train. Initially, the group attempted to perform the demonstration with a different member of the committee but ran into trouble because the train crossed state lines. The event that spurred the monumental court decision was a second attempt at the same plan.<sup>89</sup>

Homer Plessy was a free person of color residing in New Orleans, and he was distinguished as such despite being only 1/8th black. It was only after he informed the workers on the train car of his ancestry that they knew he was black under the new bi-classification system.<sup>90</sup> When discussing *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this fact is often overlooked. It was by no accident that Plessy sat in the Whites only section of that train car, nor was it a spontaneous act of resistance. Much like the bus demonstration by Rosa Parks that took place nearly 60 years later, this was a carefully calculated plan that aimed to spark controversial debate over the racial injustices taking place post-civil war. The official opinion of the Supreme court was that Plessy was a black man because of his distant black ancestry; therefore, he broke the law. It also established the concept of "separate but equal," upholding the constitutionality of segregated neighborhoods, schools, and public facilities.

*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) is an important turning point in the history of the United States. But the importance of this case does not reside in the decision alone that ruled

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<sup>89</sup> Lewis, Kerima M. "Plessy v. Ferguson and Segregation." *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Ed. Paul Finkelman. Oxford African American Studies Center.

<sup>90</sup> Tuttle, "Plessy v. Ferguson."

“separate but equal” as constitutional, but the judicial notice that said “black” is a person with has evidence of black ancestry.<sup>91</sup>

This simple notice greatly contributed to the bifurcation of the former tri-tier system that had been unique to the city since its founding. Indirectly, this decision was a detrimental to the already wavering momentum of the Voodoo movement:

By the later nineteenth-century New Orleans had entered the infamous era of Jim Crow segregation, and city administrators had become absolutely intolerant of Voudou. Increasing harassment by the authorities and disapproval on the part of the Christian churches forced Voudou, as an organized religion, to go into hiding.<sup>92</sup>

One of the ways in which Voodooists hid their faith was through the establishment of the Spiritual Churches. These churches were built nationally as a response to the growing white hostility against any outwardly traditionally African faith. Martha Ward detailed a visit to one of these churches and says that while many of the rituals in the Church service showed obvious similarities with the Voodoo faith, the leaders of the Church denied that their faith had any affiliation with Voodoo.<sup>93</sup>

## **RACISM**

This section expands on the consequences of Americanization for the Voodoo faith, when the legal changes enacted through the later years of the 19th century translated to society. In the early 20th century, these legal decisions provided a framework for the institutionalization of racism.

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<sup>91</sup> Davis, F. James. *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, 8. See Wallenstein, Peter. "Miscegenation Laws." *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Ed. Paul Finkelman. Oxford African American Studies Center.

<sup>92</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 128.

<sup>93</sup> Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, 176.

Efforts to stop Voodoo gatherings had been made as early as the beginning of the 19th century, but in the century's later years, the city was more strategic in suppressing the faith by enacting a series of ordinances. Long highlights some of these ordinances, which did not directly specify Voodoo, but were nonetheless deliberate attempts to stop the Voodoo movement:

An 1879 city ordinance forbade loitering, disorderly conduct, and "exposing the body" in public places, while another, passed in 1881, required permission for any sort of meetings, including religious gatherings and the formation of processions in the public squares of the city. In 1887 a state law forbade practicing medicine for pay without a license, which subjected traditional healers to prosecution.<sup>94</sup>

The specificity of these ordinances was only the beginning of meticulous, extremely calculated attempts to oppress Blacks, and anything associated with blackness, under the American legal system. And as if the legal oppression of the traditionally black faith was not enough, New Orleans adopted and institutionalized the American psyche of black inferiority to eradicate any positive memories of the faith for the last time.

#### I. RACISM: *SOLIDIFYING BLACK INFERIORITY THROUGH LAW, SCIENCE, AND SPIRITUALITY*

The question of "who is black?" resurfaced in the 20th century; but unlike the nonsensical racial algebra of Thomas Jefferson 100 years prior, the ramifications of this question were far greater. As questions of phenotypic inheritance turned into questions of genetic inheritance, scientists worked to determine the inheritability of certain traits. As genetics gained legitimacy in science, people began to speculate which traits could and could not be passed down such as intelligence, temperament, and morality. The Eugenics

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<sup>94</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 128.



Movement, often associated with the Nazi Regime of World War II, made in impact in the United States as well. Increasingly, persons of mixed race were seen as impure, and eugenics pushed that through selective mating, society could effectively rid of these “impurities.”<sup>95</sup> Thus, segregation was seen as a necessary measure for preserving the purity of the white race.

The impurity narrative of the Voodoo faith was constructed through various means. Firstly, the prevalence of mixed race women at Voodoo gatherings, who were generally viewed as impure and immoral post reconstruction,<sup>96</sup> pointed to the inherent impurity of the faith. Secondly, as Michelle Gordon points out, post reconstruction reports detailing Voodoo gatherings capitalized on the sexual deviance and grotesqueness of the dances at Congo Square. While black-led and liberal newspapers attempted to convince the public that these reports were exaggerated, their cries were muffled by the intensification of white-supremacist ideology. And the Catholic Church, which had for years maintained a positive relationship with the Voodoo community, was now at ends with the sinful, sexually deviant faith.

## II. RACISM: *BLACK INFERIORITY, BLACK FEMALE INFERIORITY, AND THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF VODOO*

By the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the fear surrounding the Voodoo faith, which is further discussed in the next section, subsided and gave way to white-

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<sup>95</sup>Moran, Rachel F. *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race & Romance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; Barnes, L. Diane. "Eugenics Movement." *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Ed. Paul Finkelman. *Oxford African American Studies Center*.

<sup>96</sup> Dagbovie, Sika Elaine. "Mixed-Race Women." *Black Women in America, Second Edition*, edited by Ed. Darlene Clark Hine. *Oxford African American Studies Center*.

supremacist ideologies. During this time, Whites increasingly believed that these inferior groups' lack of intelligence made them unable to effectively practice any kind of legitimate faith. Many Whites held the idea that Voodoo was but a self-prescribed medicine for desperation, lack of education, and an exploitive operation led by creole women of color.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the United States' relatively advanced developments in technology, 19th century New Orleans had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country.<sup>98</sup> With the end of the 19th century came the idea that the large female population of Voodooists was an emotional response to child loss. Such a claim implies that Voodoo only appealed to the most vulnerable and oppressed members of society. Of course, claims such as these were tumultuous; they suggested that its adherents simply "don't know any better."

## **FEAR**

In this final section of Part Two, I briefly discuss how the rhetoric, roots, and ramifications of white fear related to Voodoo's decline. Following the civil war, the fear of legitimacy lessened, and gave way to more harmful narratives, painting Voodoo gatherings as potential breeding grounds for insurrections and as a general threat to white supremacist ideology. In this section, the timeline overlaps with that of Part One. Fear was a persistent thread throughout the stages of 19th century Voodoo, but the responses to white fear varied overtime.

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<sup>97</sup> Anderson, *Hoodoo Voodoo and Conjure*, 92.

<sup>98</sup> Ward, Martha. "Voodoo." *Black Women in America, Second Edition*, edited by Ed. Darlene Clark Hine. *Oxford African American Studies Center*.

## I. FEAR: *THE PROSPECTIVE LOSS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE*

Voodoo in Haiti was and still is a very important practice. The unification of slaves drove what is considered the most successful slave revolt known to date. The revolt was reportedly initiated by a religious gathering amongst the slaves:

Sometime in the late 1830s or early 1840s the activities at Congo Square ended, undoubtedly outlawed as a result of a general reaction throughout the South to an intensification of Northern abolitionist activities in the 1830s, and to the Nat Turner slave insurrection in Virginia. These two occurrences (the first fostering the second in the minds of many Southerners) struck fear throughout the South, and one result was the elimination of all slave gatherings, meetings, or organized assemblies.<sup>99</sup>

These revolts proved that slaves were capable of mobilizing and disrupting social order. As the century progressed, Whites increasingly saw Voodoo gatherings as opportunities for Blacks to stage a revolt of their own. Nat Turner's rebellion was particularly pertinent in New Orleans, as the members of this uprising were both free and enslaved Blacks in the antebellum South.

## II. FEAR: *FLIPPING THE NARRATIVE OF VOODOO GATHERINGS*

Newspapers played a substantial role in changing the narrative of Voodoo gatherings. Reports from Public narratives of Voodoo in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave embellished accounts of rituals involving sacrifices and blood. Increasingly, white newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Daily Picayune* described Voodoo Gatherings as "grotesque" and "obscene" and even "wild and hellish."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Donaldson, Gary A. "A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862." *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 2 (1984): 63-72, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Gordon, "Midnight Orgies," 769.

Leading up to the civil war, narratives of Voodoo gatherings at Congo Square changed dramatically. New Orleans's local newspaper, *The Daily Picayune*, continued to follow these gatherings, and arrests made at these gatherings, late into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While earlier reports focused on white women in proximity to female Voodooists of color, later reports increasingly focused on white women's proximity to black men.<sup>101</sup> The rape narrative, that is, the black male as a "beastly" and "immoral" figure seeking to prey upon fragile white women, appeared with greater frequency in the post-Civil War South, and was used as a justification for most lynching's that occurred over the century. White reporters exploited the Voodoo religion to help disseminate these narratives,<sup>102</sup> simultaneously tainting Voodoo's reputation in the process.

As explained in part one, female participants highly outnumbered male participants. Yet, the presence of a few black males was reason enough to perceive Voodoo gatherings as a threat to white females:

...the sudden entrance of a hoydenish flaxen-haired girl, who whirled around the room in the arms of a Negro blacker than the ace of spades. . . . Set adrift on the rapids of depravity in real earnest, she had reached the center of the vortex. . . . While the maddening whirl continued, our reporter watched the wretched creature, as one after another of the ebony suitors sought her hand. . . . Mute with amazement [the reporter] turned away.<sup>103</sup>

This report details a Voodoo gathering on the night of St. John's Eve in 1872. The language needs little explanation; there is a clear, and purposefully crafted dichotomy between the two parties described in this account.

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<sup>101</sup> Gordon, "Midnight Orgies," 778.

<sup>102</sup> Gordon, "Midnight Orgies," 777.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 13.

Whites used Voodoo as a tool to disseminate narratives of black sexual immorality, but this narrative of black sexual immorality was also a tool itself. In 1870, the United States ratified the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which granted black men the right to vote.<sup>104</sup> For the years that followed, newspaper reports describing Voodoo gatherings became more aggressive in stressing the danger of these events. Some radical newspapers explicitly stated in the reports that these gatherings were proof as to why black men are unfit to vote.<sup>105</sup> But in the fashion of most racial oppression, many narratives were far less direct in their approach. One extreme report comes from book written by Henry Castellanos in 1895, where he observes:

Blacks and whites... circling round promiscuously writhing in muscular contractions, panting, raving and frothing at the mouth. But the most degrading and infamous feature of this scene was the presence of a very large number of ladies, moving in the highest walks of society, rich and hitherto supposed respectable, that were caught in the drag net. Two of them... so unexpectedly brought to shame were permitted to escape, while the husband of a third, unable to survive the disgrace of his wife, deliberately took his life on the following day.<sup>106</sup>

This passage reveals a nuanced approach. Not only has he removed the blame from the “elite” white female participants by implying that they were trapped and, only by the grace of the Voodoo Queen, “allowed” to escape, but he poses the disgraced white women as a threat to white manhood. In this case, this event indirectly murdered a white man, and white males’ numbers were already being threatened by the increase in registered black male voters. Just a year after this account, and after the decision of *Plessy v Ferguson*,

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<sup>104</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> amendment provided black men the right to vote, but the Voting Rights Act of 1965 addressed legal barriers for Black Voters.

<sup>105</sup> Gordon, “Midnight Orgies,” 778.

<sup>106</sup> Castellanos, Henry C. *New Orleans as it was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*. New Orleans: L. Graham & Son, Ltd., Printers, 1895, 100.

Democrats made tremendous efforts to better their numbers in the electorate. In just seven years, black voter registration plummeted from 130,344 in 1897 to 1,342 black voters in 1904.<sup>107</sup> Unsurprisingly, as Gordon points out, public Voodoo narratives of this kind virtually disappeared from white newspapers as the numbers declined.

## **PART 2: CONCLUSION**

Persons of mixed race were not distinguished as such by the law in post-Civil War New Orleans. At the turn of the 20th century, Creoles of color were no longer formally granted a substantial amount of freedom, and the boundaries tri-tier hierarchy slowly dissolved. The supreme court rulings of *Dred Scott v Sandford* (1857), and later, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), were catalysts in the institutionalization of racism. After these landmark cases, and a series of mandates in the reconstruction era, New Orleanian Creoles of color were forced to assimilate into racial categories constructed by Whites. The process of assimilation happened internally within the black and black-creole communities and because of external pressures by Whites. As part of assimilation, many Blacks turned away from Voodoo and denied any association with the faith.

The notion that biology and race are married concepts contributed to racist laws enacted during the Jim Crow era as well.<sup>108</sup> The institutionalization of racism in New Orleans came with advancements in science, which worked to solidify black inferiority by linking personality traits to DNA. White fear of black insurrection inspired substantial backlash against the Voodoo faith. Additionally, local newspapers concocted narratives of

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<sup>107</sup> Gordon, "Midnight Orgies," 782.

<sup>108</sup> Roediger 1991; Ford, Jr., L.K. 1999. Making the "white man's country" white: Race, slavery, and state building in the Jacksonian South. *Journal of the Early Republic*. 713-737.

black men preying on white female Voodooists and used these narratives to disseminate the larger emerging “rape narrative” of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The implications of white fear in the late 19th and early 20th centuries dramatically changed public perceptions of the Voodoo faith. Voodoo was exploited to further the agenda of white males in the face of prospective power loss. The public gatherings at Congo Square provided “easy evidence” of the perils of desegregation, and the sexual impurity of Blacks.

# CONCLUSION

*"Race remains the best reason for secrets  
and conspiracy in the Crescent City"*<sup>109</sup>  
-Martha Ward

## I. CONCLUSION: *VOODOO IN THE 21ST CENTURY AND POP CULTURE DEPICTIONS*

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, New Orleans's tourism industry has grown tremendously. In 2015, roughly 10 million people visited the city and collectively spent upwards of \$7 billion.<sup>110</sup> So it is no wonder that New Orleans's government has made countless efforts to preserve and restore relics of the city that reflect its unique colonial past. Tourists flock to the French Quarter in awe of the un-American American city, eager to purchase an "authentic Voodoo Doll," and other cheaply made, falsely-advertised paraphernalia.

Recently, Voodoo has reemerged as a topic of interest in pop culture and in scholarly discourse. The ever-evolving public perceptions of Voodoo, from superstitious "negro foolishness," to a legitimate form of sorcery, to a spectacle for white travelers, to a breeding ground for black insurrection, to an indicator of black immorality, to a commercialized enterprise, to a staple of black-American religious tradition, continue to evolve in the 21st century.

In 2013, the (loosely) historically-based hit television series, *American Horror Story*, set its third season in the Crescent City. The storyline of *American Horror Story: Coven*

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<sup>109</sup> Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, XII.

<sup>110</sup> Larino, Jennifer, "New Orleans Hosted a Record 10.45 Million Tourists in 2016," *Times Picayune*, March 23, 2017. [https://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2017/03/new\\_orleans\\_record\\_tourist\\_cou.html](https://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2017/03/new_orleans_record_tourist_cou.html)



follows a group of witches that are descendants of those accused in Salem.<sup>111</sup> While the show's third season incorporated factual elements and figures of New Orleans history, it fell victim to the stereotypical, dark-ridden portrayal of Voodoo. In the Voodoo of the Crescent City, Papa Legba is a *loa* who facilitates communication between humans and the gods. He has been likened to Saint Peter from a syncretic point of view; however, *American Horror Story: Coven* put a creative spin on Papa Legba's character by making him a satanic, cocaine-addicted baby snatcher.



**Figure 11:** Lance Reddick as Papa Legba<sup>112</sup>

Writers and filmmakers continually employ these stereotypes to appease their audience's affinity for the grim, dark, and twisted, consequentially reinforcing a false conception of New Orleans Voodoo. *American Horror Story: Coven*, is an extreme example of Hollywood's predilection to hyperbolic and inaccurate portrayals of Voodoo. Voodoo has

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<sup>111</sup> The Salem Witch Trials, was a series of prosecutions and the cause of mass hysteria beginning in the Spring of 1692. 7 girls accused over 100 members of their town of performing witchcraft, and as a result, over 20 people were hanged. *American Horror Story: Coven*, uses the events to provide a backstory for their storyline. For further reading on the Salem Witch Trials, see Goss, K. David. *The Salem Witch Trials: A Reference Guide*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2008.

<sup>112</sup> Stillshot of Lance Reddick as Papa Legba in *American Horror Story: Coven*, Season 3, 2013. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/541065342723211921/?lp=true>

suffered an unfortunate fate, becoming the antithesis of Christianity, and very far removed from the Judeo-Christian tradition familiar to the United States.

Another recent depiction of New Orleans Voodoo was in Disney's 2009 animated film: *Princess and the Frog*. The movie takes place in the early 20th century, and centers around a young woman, Tiana, who dreams of opening her own restaurant one day. In the film, a handsome, (racially ambiguous) young prince from the made-up country of Maldonia arrives to the city in hopes of becoming wealthy. Naveen naively makes a deal with the "Shadow Man," voiced by actor Keith David, falling for Dr. Facilier's promise of making his wildest dreams come true. Upon shaking hands with the smooth-talking Voodoo witch doctor, prince Naveen is immediately transformed into a frog. In attempt to reverse the curse, Naveen asks that Tiana, whom he mistakes for a princess, kiss him. Inadvertently, Tiana becomes a frog as well.

The tarot card- toting owner of the Voodoo Emporium is both a con artist and a serious practitioner of the dark arts, boasting early in the film about his "friends on the other side."<sup>113</sup> Dr. Facilier is undoubtedly the movie's antagonist. Greed and an unwavering desire to assert his power over others drive his manipulative actions through the film.

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<sup>113</sup> Musker, John and Ron Clements, directors. *The Princess and the Frog*. Disney, 2009.



Figure 12: "Dr. Facilier"<sup>114</sup> Figure 13: "Mama Odie"<sup>115</sup>

Dr. Facilier appears to be dressed like Baron Samedi, a Haitian Loa of the Dead. His army of shadows, which he eventually deploys against the movie's protagonists, also indicate his affiliation with the Haitian Loa. Later in the film, we are introduced to Mama Odie, a blind, elderly Voodoo priestess who lives deep in the Bayou. As far as dress and mannerisms are concerned, Mama Odie looks like a real Voodoo Queen with her wrapped *tignon* and beloved pet snake. Before Mama Odie's first appearance in the film, she is made out to be a powerful and dark figure, whose black magic can reverse the curse from the Shadow Man. However, upon meeting Mama Odie, she is not in the least sinister, but a benevolent and grandmotherly figure.

Despite its failure in separating Voodoo from Hoodoo, and the incorporation of *loa* from different religious traditions into the film, it does take a few steps in the right direction. Firstly, Mama Odie's snake is friendly, as is the serpent in New Orleans Voodoo. The serpent is a symbol of New Orleans Voodoo in particular, and was used in late 19<sup>th</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Musker, John and Ron Clements, directors. *The Princess and the Frog*. Disney, 2009. Animated by Bruce W. Smith, James Lopez, Frans Vischer. Dean Wellins, Andreas Deja, image from [http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Dr.\\_Facilier](http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Dr._Facilier)

<sup>115</sup> Musker, John and Ron Clements, directors. *The Princess and the Frog*. Disney, 2009. Animated by Bruce W. Smith, James Lopez, Frans Vischer. Dean Wellins, Andreas Deja, image from [http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Mama\\_Odie](http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Mama_Odie)

century narratives of Voodoo to communicate the hellishness of the religion.<sup>116</sup> Secondly, the introduction of the Shadow Man before Mama Odie feeds into the audiences preconceived stereotypes of Voodoo, and then offers a positive plot twist by revealing Mama Odie's true nature.

## II. CONCLUSION: *WRAP UP AND SUMMARY*



Firstly, I must make note of my intention in naming Parts One and Two. While these titles look almost identical, the addition of a comma alters the meaning entirely. I chose this title, "Black, Female-led," to reflect the changing conceptions of race in New Orleans over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Initially I posed the question: how was a black female led faith able to flourish in the antebellum South? To best conceive how a movement of this nature could have survived during the 19th century, I had to relinquish my post-reconstructionist vision of race. Today, knowable evidence of black ancestry is what is used to define "black."<sup>117</sup> The "one drop rule" has persisted for the past several centuries, and has become an acceptable and often unquestioned facet of racial perceptions.<sup>118</sup> Voodoo is indeed a historically black religion, but the racially-mixed women who rose to its leadership were not "black" in antebellum New Orleans. Understanding the unique position

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<sup>116</sup> Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was*, 98.

<sup>117</sup> Davis, F. James. *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

<sup>118</sup> Barnes, "Eugenics Movement."

of the free people of color, and white perceptions of Creole women of color, was critical in reframing the question.

Secondly, I must make note of the persistence of fear. As a theme, fear is a curious choice because it is less of a process, or an ideology, or construct as it is an emotion. But at the root of hatred, animosity, and any targeted effort against person, group, or institution, is fear. I established that fear was a constant thread through the Voodoo movement's life and death in the public eye, but fear continues to evolve. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, beyond the commercialization and appropriation of Voodoo, is fear.

Ultimately, the reasons for Voodoo's successes and failures are extremely interwoven. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the blackness and femininity of the Voodoo movement, which I had originally perceived as its shortcomings, worked in its favor. New Orleans gave rise to a faith that reflected the city's various cultures and influences. The large middle class, and the associated privileges of this class, allowed for Creole women of color to become leaders of the faith. Moreover, the core beliefs of the faith are feminist in nature, which helped to attract women across racial lines. Following the civil war, the unique classification system of races that had been a staple of New Orleans society gave way to a more rigid, bi-classification system. This system had significant consequences for Creole women of color, as they were no longer revered for their racial ambiguity, but seen as impure and products of immoral unions.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Despite the bifurcation of race in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Creoles of color have historically received better treatment than those with darker skin. Preferential treatment of mixed race individuals was not limited to New Orleans in the 18th and 19th centuries, but these privileges were generally granted informally outside of New Orleans, such as slave owners not subjecting their lighter skinned slaves to the same harsh conditions as darker or "blacker" property. Increasing research and discourse on the topic of Colorism suggests that the implications of this preferential treatment are tied to modern-day discrepancies in wealth and social standing between racial subgroups within the black community. However, there is much less ambiguity regarding the effects of

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, New Orleans Voodoo was a Black faith led by Creole women of color; in the later half of the century, New Orleans Voodoo was a Black faith led by Black women. It is not the characteristics of the movement that changed over the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but New Orleanian society. It is as if what accounted for its success also contributed to its downfall.

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colorism in modern day New Orleans, for the privileges given to mixed race individuals were granted by law, thus having lasting implications for successive generations regarding social mobility and wealth. Locally, New Orleanais are aware of this discrepancy. For further reading see: Hunter, Margaret L. "'If You're Light You're Alright': Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color." *Gender and Society* 16, no. 2 (2002): 175–93, 177.

## APPENDIX, A: DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

**Bayou:** a name for marshy/wetland area in Louisiana

**Conjure:** refers to African American magical practices.<sup>120</sup> In 1899, Charles Chesnutt published *The Conjure Woman*, which is a collection of stories that discuss the racial and social issues of the South. In the stories, conjure is used to achieve some end goal.

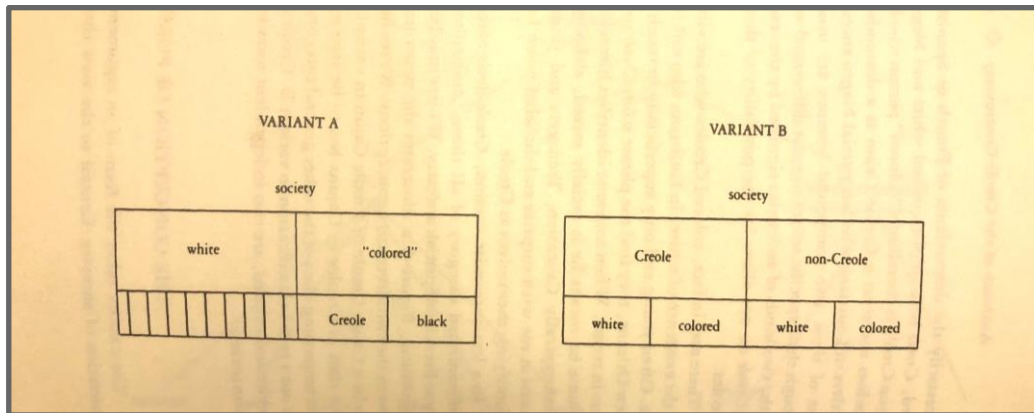
**Creole:** The meaning of the word *Creole* has changed overtime. In general, the term has come to mean a person, language, cultural custom that is rooted in various origins. By the time the Spanish seized the colony in 1763, the term “Creole” described the French speaking class of people, who showed (phenotypically) evidence of mixed ancestry.<sup>121</sup> Yet at the time of its founding in 1718, New Orleans Creoles were simply settlers in the colony who were born in France. They were transplants, and *Creole* was the term used to describe their status in the new world.

Today, the term is used in a variety of contexts. When using the term in reference to people, Virginia Rodriguez asserts that the definition of creole is largely dependent upon the race of the person defining it. She maps out these definitions with the following diagrams:

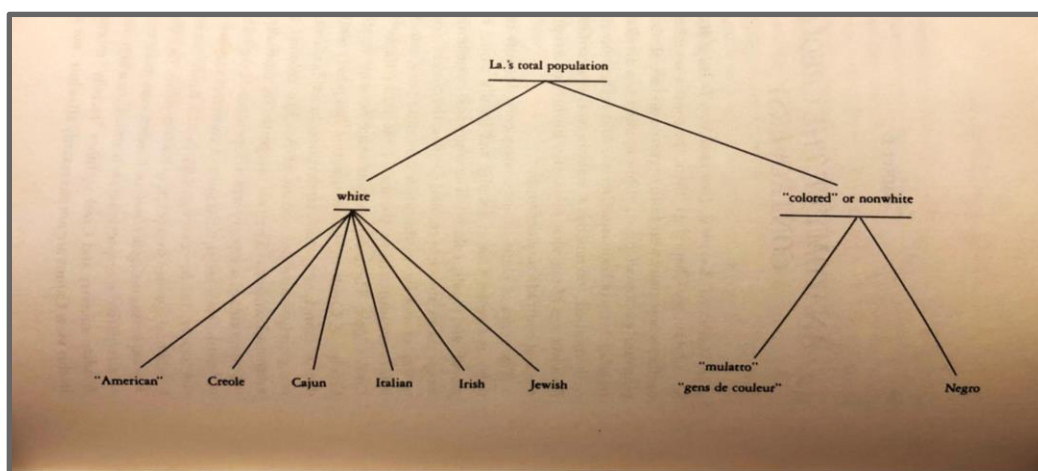
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<sup>120</sup> Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo and Conjure*, 42.

<sup>121</sup> Bennett, Eric and Keith Raether. "New Orleans, Louisiana." *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, Second Edition*, edited by Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah. edited by , Henry Louis Gates Jr.. *Oxford African American Studies Center*; Bennett, Eric. "Creoles." *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, Second Edition*, edited by Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Oxford African American Studies Center*



**Figure 14:** "Alternative Nonwhite Views of the Creole Social Category"<sup>122</sup>



**Figure 15:** "The Contemporary White Creole Conception of Louisiana's Social Categories"<sup>123</sup>

**Gris Gris:** charms used in Voodoo rituals. They are typically carried or worn around the neck. Apparently, the name is related to the French term *grese* or *grey*.

**Hoodoo:** Some say Hoodoo is just a more Americanized spelling of Voodoo, but the term is used in reference to paraphernalia, and the commercialized version of Voodoo.

<sup>122</sup> Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 150.

<sup>123</sup> Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 152.



Hoodoo is associated with the magical practices of some African-based religions, but shows a Roman-Catholic Influence.

**JuJu:** West African term for Hoodoo

**Vodou:** this spelling typically is used in reference to the Haitian tradition developed in the 18th and 19th centuries<sup>124</sup>

**Vodu/ Vodun:** these two spellings typically refer to African religions historically practiced by the Fon and Ewe speaking groups, who live in the former kingdom of Dahomey. <sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, Marie Laveaux, 257.

<sup>125</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, Marie Laveaux, 257.

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