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## **The State and the Spirits: Voodoo and Religious Repression in Jim Crow New Orleans**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The State and the Spirits:  
Voodoo and Religious Repression in Jim Crow New Orleans

by

Kendra Cole

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

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## **Abstract**

Voodoo transitioned from a religion that caused its practitioners to be criminalized and apprehended by the state to a lure used to entice visitors to the Crescent City. This thesis attempts to show how the public perception of Voodoo shifted in the late nineteenth-century from a hidden threat to a public novelty. I explain this shift through analyzing New Orleans guidebooks, newspapers, and court cases at the turn of the twentieth-century. This thesis fills the gap in the scholarship pertaining to the twentieth-century. I achieve this by drawing upon more extensive literature on the oppression of African-derived religions in other decades, such as the 1850s in New Orleans, and other locations, such as Latin America and the Caribbean. Because of its association with African Americans, Voodoo was deemed a purely black superstition and a form of primitivism. Yet, it was feared for being the exact opposite—a powerful tool used by workers to invert prevailing social hierarchies of southern Jim Crow segregation.

Keywords: New Orleans, Voodoo, Jim Crow, Repression, Religion, Louisiana



## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to those repressed due to their religion, especially the resilient women of color whose stories take fold in the following pages.



## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not exist without the time, patience, and pop culture references of my advisor, Dr. Matthew Casey. The impetus for this project came through discussions with him, and his constant motivation and continual support drove me to its completion. For that, I thank him immensely and hope his cup is always filled with Café Bustelo.

My parents, Ursula and Wes Cole, listened to fragmented thoughts and theoretical hypothesis throughout the years, and I thank them both for their constant encouragement and inspiration. Without their continuous dedication to my education, in both the academic sense and 1980s music trivia, I would not be the person I am today.

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## Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Religion, Rights, and Crescent City Tourism.....	5
Chapter 2: Spiritual Communities and Public Opinion.....	18
Chapter 3: State Power Versus Spirit Power.....	31
Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography.....	45

## **List of Illustrations**

Illustration 1. Vèvè from 1893 Louisiana Criminal Courts.....	31
Illustration 2. Erzulie Vèvè.....	32

## Introduction

Southern history has long played the role of myth reinforcing racism.<sup>1</sup>

For thirty-three years, residents of the Crescent City whispered rumors about the curse of the Superdome. Built near the disturbed spirits of the Girod Street Cemetery, New Orleans' beloved football team, the Saints, inherited the jinx and botched every attempt to win a playoff game since 1967. After over thirty years of bitter defeats, the Saints hired Voodoo priestess, Ava Kay Jones, in 2000, to eradicate the curse. With a boa constrictor around her neck, Jones called upon the spirits and prayed in front of a packed stadium. That night the Saints won the playoffs and defeated the Rams after spiritual intervention from a Voodoo worker.<sup>2</sup> A century earlier, this public commemoration of Voodoo would have been not only inconceivable but nearly impossible. This shift in public perception is evident at the turn of the twentieth-century during heightened racial tensions and questions of citizenship in which Voodoo transformed from a mysterious threat to a public novelty. This thesis will trace the shift of Voodoo from repression to commodification.

Voodoo is a central part of the mystique that entices visitors to the Crescent City. This African-descended religion, which continues to serve the spiritual needs of practitioners in New Orleans, Miami, Haiti, Cuba, and elsewhere, is brushed off as devil worship, nonsensical superstition, or simply a hoax by many outsiders. However, as my research shows, this paradox--the simultaneous celebration and denigration of Voodoo--is nothing new.

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<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Scott, "The legend of the Superdome curse," *The Times-Picayune*, October 29, 2017.

Twentieth-century literature about New Orleans Voodoo is limited. My thesis attempts to fill the gap in the scholarship by drawing upon more extensive literature on the oppression of African-derived religions in other decades, such as the 1850s in New Orleans, and other locations, such as Latin America. In her overview of New Orleans Voodoo, Ina Fandrich demonstrates how times of social and political strife for people of color coincided with social upheaval throughout their fight for citizenship in the 1850s.<sup>3</sup> For Latin America, Kate Ramsey explains that in 1940s Haiti, Vodou was celebrated in folklore nationally, while local variants were the object of legal prosecution, showing the need to avoid generalizing the entire religion.<sup>4</sup> In regards to Cuba, Reinaldo Román builds on the repression of African-descended religions by explaining how practitioners' race influences whether they were renowned or deemed criminals and examining the impact that public opinion had on racial stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> By integrating the scholarship from other Caribbean and Latin American areas, I cross-reference cases to those within the 1890s and early 1900s of New Orleans Voodoo to help identify various aspects of religious repression of African-diasporic traditions.

My project analyzes the moment in which the perception of Voodoo transferred from being a risk to white supremacy to being a valuable commodity. I show this shift within New Orleans guidebooks, various New Orleans newspapers, and two court cases from the era. The guidebooks addressed tourists visiting the Crescent City who are unfamiliar with the practice, while the newspapers were for residents already accustomed

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<sup>3</sup> Ina Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods," In *Fragments of Bone* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Reinaldo Román, *Governing Spirits: Religion, Miracles, and Spectacles in Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1898-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

to Voodoo. Although these sources attempt to piece together the origins and traditions of workers, they fail to reconstruct ritual practices and ceremonies. In my first chapter, I demonstrate Voodoo's absence in the travel guides prior to 1896 and sudden appearance after the Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which created the "separate but equal" ruling. This shows that Voodoo was viewed as a threat and hidden from outsiders prior to the decision as it empowered those that white society wished to repress. However, after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Voodoo was then used by outsiders as validation for the oppression of African Americans due to the primitivism of their superstitious beliefs and employed as a tool for outsiders to further revoke their citizenship through Jim Crow policies. My second chapter incorporates the origins of the religion, its role as a service, and the diversity of Voodoo workers. Through its recognition as a service, it is rendered a legitimate entity through the law. Then, in the third chapter, the court cases show the inadvertent authentication and vilification of Voodoo workers. While religious freedom granted the open practice of Voodoo, workers were arrested under different terms and criminalized for their practices. The duality of Voodoo, as being both a black superstition and powerful religion is a recurring motif throughout this thesis.

The modern spelling, Voodoo, is currently up for debate within contemporary scholarship but is my choice of spelling throughout this work. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, the religion was predominantly spelled as Voudou, and sometimes Voodoo, Vodou, or even Hoodoo. Regardless of spelling, the terms were used interchangeably by outsiders to refer to the belief-system of the nineteenth-century. Hoodoo, or Houdou at the time, was also synonymous with Voodoo practices but now more closely refers to the material or healing practices of African Americans apart from

the spiritual element.<sup>6</sup> Modern attempts by Haitian scholars are being made to recategorize the spelling as Vodou; however, most New Orleans scholars use Voodoo as the spelling throughout their work.<sup>7</sup> Despite the flaws in each term to fully encompass the traditions and rituals of Voodoo workers, I will reproduce the spelling employed by New Orleans scholars, unless I am quoting directly from a source that spells it differently.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook* (London: Greenwood Press, 2008), 131-132.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Ramsey, "From 'Voodooism' to 'Vodou': Changing a US Library of Congress Subject Heading" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 18(2) 2012, 14-25.



## Chapter 1: Religion, Rights, and Crescent City Tourism

African culture thrived within the confines of Congo Square in New Orleans prior to the Civil War and Reconstruction. Bamboula dances, originating in Africa, were a Sunday ritual; weathered hands pounded on homemade drums. Even the name, Congo, hinted at the origin of the people that inhabited the square on certain nights. This description is not to romanticize the struggles of daily life for African slaves on their one night of relative freedom, but it is to show that within certain geographical spaces and times, African culture was on proud display well into the American era of the Crescent City.

Congo Square is a place of significance for black heritage but also for the greater narrative of New Orleans. Throughout the times of African bondage, slaves were permitted to gather North of the French Quarter for one night of independence in the physical boundaries of Congo Square. Even after the abolition of slavery in the United States, Congo Square maintained relevancy for the community as a space to commemorate past histories and present challenges. In the same confines in which slaves assembled for decades, a memorial for the community was held for President Abraham Lincoln after his assassination. On April 15, 1865, the African American newspaper, *The Black Republican*, reported a large assembly at Congo Square which was held “to express the feelings of abhorrence...at the great crime that has deprived these United States of its honored and beloved President.”<sup>1</sup> In Congo Square, a quasi-sacred space, African Americans gathered to celebrate the man who pushed to abolish the chains that bound

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<sup>1</sup> “Mass Meeting in Congo Square,” *The Black Republican*, April 15, 1865, New Orleans: City Archives.

them. However, the Square was much more than simply a meeting place; it was a site that shaped politics, religions, and the community that surrounded its borders.

Congo Square is an example of how African spirituality was present in certain areas of the city but not on display for tourists. This chapter analyzes Voodoo within New Orleans guidebooks, both pre- and post-*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Through Voodoo's absence in the travel guides prior to 1896 and sudden appearance after the Supreme Court decision, I argue that Voodoo was viewed as a threat prior to the decision as it empowered those that white society wished to repress. However, after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Voodoo was viewed as validation for the oppression of African Americans due to the primitivism of their superstitious beliefs and was used as a tool for outsiders to further revoke their rights for citizenship.

## **FROM HIDDEN THREAT TO PUBLIC NOVELTY**

Mardi Gras balls, jazz street musicians, and a plethora of the supernatural—the city of New Orleans, founded in 1718, is known throughout the world for its unique culture and perpetual revelry. Shifting in time from French control to Spanish back to French and finally to American rule, New Orleans is unlike any other place in the United States with its strong Catholic, as well as, Caribbean influences. Since the first slaves were brought from the Senegambian region of West Africa in the early eighteenth-century, African-diasporic religions have played an integral, if not always evident, part in the city's social dynamics and history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 29-55.

New Orleans' Voodoo blends Native American practices, Catholicism, and West African religions, creating a fusion of beliefs. Various African spirits are syncretized with Catholic saints and seen as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realm.<sup>3</sup> Charms, or *gris-gris*, are objects produced by workers to alter reality in some way, such as gaining luck, health, or revenge. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, people visited the city for various reasons but also to see the religion in practice. From the quasi-religious gatherings of African Americans in Congo Square to consultations with Voodoo Queens, the religion has thrived in the Crescent City for several centuries.

Although Voodoo was practiced throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries in New Orleans as evidenced by the numerous newspaper articles and police arrests, it was not mentioned in the city's guidebooks prior to 1897. The religion was not a secret for the city's inhabitants; most citizens knew of its existence through newspaper articles, local Voodoo workers, and word of mouth. From July 25, 1851, *The Times-Picayune* ran an article entitled, "The Voudous Again," which discussed a private Voodoo gathering in which seven women of color were arrested "while engaged in the rites of 'Voudou.'"<sup>4</sup> As the title implies, the topic of Voodoo was a regular occurrence throughout the nineteenth-century to inhabitants of the city; however, publishers, especially *The Times-Picayune*, seem to withhold information about the practice of Voodoo to outsiders.

Voodoo is completely absent from travel guides before 1896, yet other supernatural and superstitious beliefs are fully present through the inclusion of haunted

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Long, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 96; Leslie Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> "The Voudous Again," *The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 25, 1851.

homes and animal forecasters. In the 1896 edition of *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, an entire section is dedicated to a "Haunted House," which was inhabited by Madame Delphine Lalaurie who tortured her slaves until the public became aware of her actions in 1834.<sup>5</sup> The guide includes Lalaurie's home because of the atrocities committed against slaves; its inclusion is a form of enticement since it implies the house contains the ghosts of her past victims. The guide also includes local legends with a section entitled, "The Picayune Frog."<sup>6</sup> Like the groundhog on Groundhog's Day, the Picayune Frog served as a weather oracle for locals instead of relying on methodical forecasts. A drawing of the Picayune Frog even serves as the front cover for many of *The Picayune's* guides. Guidebooks made little effort to erase histories of slavery's cruelty or non-Christian beliefs, yet it was Voodoo itself that was obscured from outsiders.

This was part of a larger process of downplaying the black presence in the Crescent City. Other pre-1896 guidebooks also refrain from including a large portion of the city's population—African Americans. According to the United States' Census from 1890, people of color made up 26.6 percent of the population, but they were largely left out of the city's tour books.<sup>7</sup> When African Americans are mentioned, it is only the sexualized women of color that receive any attention. Published in 1892, *A Little Guide to New Orleans* constantly praises the diverse, European-descended population from their French and Spanish roots but avoids giving attention to people of color.<sup>8</sup> The guide does, however, briefly describe the numerous quadroon women (a person of one-quarter

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<sup>5</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans: *The Picayune*, 1896), 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics On Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities And Other Urban Places In The United States."

<sup>8</sup> *A Little Guide to New Orleans: What to See and How to See It*, (1892).

African descent), but not men, that walked around town selling goods.<sup>9</sup> The guide only briefly describes the small section of the black population that are deemed desirable because they were often thought of as containing noble European blood that “tamed” their “savage” African ancestry.<sup>10</sup> The people that make up the backbone of the city are erased from outsiders’ view. The guidebooks did not oppose supernatural tales and did mention nonwhite people, yet Voodoo remained a forbidden topic.

Although Voodoo is not included within the guidebooks for tourist consumption, it was well-known to city residents. New Orleans’ citizens read about Voodoo history, gatherings, and arrests in various newspapers throughout the decades. Some of the first court cases addressing Voodoo appeared in 1773, in which several slaves were convicted for using *gris-gris*, or charms, to kill their master.<sup>11</sup> The religion is spotted in newspapers from then onward, followed by a wave of Voodoo arrests in the 1850s and continued repression into the twentieth-century.<sup>12</sup> In the *New Orleans Weekly Delta* on July 8, 1850, an arrest of seventeen women, including Voodoo priestess Betsey Toledano, was made because slaves were attending a ritual with free women of color and white women. This is merely one case of many which shows that Voodoo, including its interracial workers, was well-known to New Orleans’ residents. Therefore, this begs the question: if the religion was already notorious with citizens, why was it hidden to outsiders?

It is likely that guidebooks chose to underemphasize Voodoo because it was viewed as a threat to those outside the faith because it imparted power to those of lower

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Fandrich, “Defiant African Sisterhoods,” 188; Long, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess*, 93-94.

<sup>12</sup> Fandrich, “Defiant African Sisterhoods,” 187-207.

political and social statues and threatened the goal of segregation. Voodoo gave its believers the ability to invert social hierarchies, allowing minorities, especially people of color and women, to have a greater standing in society. Women of color were typically at the top of Voodoo hierarchies, such as the infamous Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau. White's inability to contain the religion and its followers is found in similar African-derived religions throughout the Caribbean as well. As Ned Sublette states in *The World That Made New Orleans*, "There was a system of social organization going full tilt within the black world of Saint-Domingue, existing beyond the whites' abilities to control their slaves' thoughts and actions."<sup>13</sup> Sublette is referencing Haitian Vodou in the book by Moreau de St. Méry, but the parallels are the same. Whites, for centuries, sought to control every part of black people's lives with varying degrees of success, including their spiritual practices and beliefs. Whites, both in Haiti and New Orleans, feared the social authority and self-empowerment that Voodoo imparted upon its workers. Through this belief-system, many people, especially people of color, were able to draw forms of power even though they had little politically.

Voodoo gave black people spiritual power that even the city's white residents revered. According to the guides published post-*Plessy*, the white audience that found the religion fascinating were "lured" due to some supernatural means.<sup>14</sup> This implies that whites watched these gatherings against their superior judgement, influenced somehow through sorcery or witchcraft. The guide clearly separates those that practice Voodoo, predominately blacks in their eyes, from those that do not, the city's white inhabitants,

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<sup>13</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 185.

<sup>14</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (1903), 43.

drawing stark racial lines. The guide states that white onlookers were enticed to watch the Congo Square gatherings to see the “awful worship of the serpent.”<sup>15</sup> The roles are never reversed in the travel guides: black onlookers are not depicted seeing the practice as irrational, nor do white workers participate in rituals, although these cases existed.<sup>16</sup> By empowering African Americans and threatening the goals of segregation with integrated religious rituals, Voodoo went against the political reality that the city’s ruling classes were still trying to cement.

After Reconstruction, people were still uncertain about issues concerning black citizenship and Jim Crow segregation. Questions regarding these matters were still up for debate prior to the Supreme Court decision, but all of this changed after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, in which guidebooks began to include Voodoo throughout their writings. The impetus for *Plessy v. Ferguson* began in New Orleans, when local resident Homer Adolph Plessy attempted to ride in a whites-only reserved train car to Covington, Louisiana. The case was brought to the Louisiana Supreme Court and eventually to the United State Supreme Court.<sup>17</sup> After Reconstruction, many questions arose about citizenship statuses and rights of the newly freed African Americans throughout the nation, especially within Southern states. Through the decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, racial lines were distinctly drawn between those of African descent versus those of European descent, and the ruling cemented Jim Crow segregation in public policy. “Separate but equal” became the law of the land and the question of political rights for

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>16</sup> Kodi Roberts, *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans 1881-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 67-102.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Luxenberg, *Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America's Journey from Slavery to Segregation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

blacks was closed off for the next half century. After the *Plessy* ruling, the religion shifted from exuding power to those with little politically to a religion that was now contained through law and used to justify those actions. Racial lines were no longer a grey matter, but rather black or white.

Guidebooks published post-*Plessy v. Ferguson* include sections on Voodoo and Congo Square which romanticize the experience of New Orleans slaves and show the religion as nothing more than a trite superstition. If the travel guides mentioned Congo Square pre-1897, they never include the large gatherings of freed and enslaved African Americans that had been happening since the beginning of French rule in New Orleans. However, the third edition of *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, published in 1897, includes the large gatherings and the *bamboulas*, the form of dance the African Americans performed. Regarding the dances, the guide stated, "On Sunday afternoons the bamboula dancers were summed...by a sort of drum-roll... The male dancers fastened bits of tinkling metal or tin rattles about their ankles, like strings of copper grisgris worn by the natives of the Soudan."<sup>18</sup> The events are tainted with enigmatic overtones, emphasizing the African ancestry of the dancers. These details are not included to shed light on black traditions but to show the novelty of their practice to the most-likely white reader.

Voodoo is also shown as being a religion in decline in both members and power—a faded silhouette of its former glory under Marie Laveau's reign until her death in 1881. Because the religion is diminishing, the threat it poses of providing power to the powerless and inverting social orders becomes less prominent. *The Picayune* writers of

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<sup>18</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans: *The Picayune*, 1897), 32.



the 1897 edition state, “Voudous are neither so numerous nor so much respected now as formerly,” showing how the religion was viewed as degenerating and losing followers.<sup>19</sup> The guidebook also depicts Laveau living in her “queer, tumble-down, one-story structure” home, drawing attention to the impoverished, doleful nature of her home.<sup>20</sup> The guides wish to show that even the most powerful of the Voodoo priestesses lived without the average comforts and wealth of many New Orleans’ residents. The writers chose to emphasize the lowliness and inferiority of Voodoo workers through the description of Laveau’s former home and weakening of the religion. For the writers, the religion simply adds to the pathetic status of Voodoo workers and by default all blacks within the city.

Although the fifth edition of *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans* (1903) remains very similar to the third, there are a few additions that further emphasize the supposed deterioration and decline of the religion. The guide informs the reader of Congo Square and Marie Laveau once again, and it includes a section entitled “Voodoo Rites.”<sup>21</sup> This section seeks to give a broad overview of the religion but continues to reinforce false stereotypes and sensationalized rituals. Voodoo workers are spoken of in derogatory and critical tones by the writers who find great fault in the origins of the religion. The writers state, “Congo Square did not always present such an innocent scene of merry, careless pastime.” Post-*Plessy*, Congo Square offers a “merry, careless pastime,” yet before, the threat of Voodoo practitioners loomed over innocent outsiders. Voodoo is also displayed as being a primitive, non-Christian form of worship. The guide states:

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>21</sup> *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans: *The Picayune*, 1903), 43.

Rather does its name suggest to the natives of the present day the memory of ghostly stories of wild revelry of witches and bacchanals, and of a mysterious fetich [sic] worship, so strange, so awful, that for upwards of a hundred years it exerted over the minds of the ignorant of both races, a sway as powerful and tragic as that of witchcraft in the medieaval [sic] ages.

The guides quickly shift from never mentioning Voodoo before *Plessy* to using pejorative language to display the practice as illegitimate and a detriment to society, both black and white. The rituals are juxtaposed alongside witchcraft or drunken revelry—“bacchanals.” People without the sense to know that the practices are untrue are the only followers; only the civilized and those with intellect can decipher true practices from false ones. As Alejandra Bronfman describes, the same views surrounded African religious practice in Cuba during the early twentieth-century, in which followers supposedly fell under the “realm of primitive behavior” and such people were unfit to be granted the same levels of rights and citizenship as their fellow “civilized” neighbors.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, if only the uneducated are Voodoo workers, then they will also not succeed as informed, sophisticated citizens of the state. The writers also declare Voodoo having Haitian origins; they write, “For in Congo Square were held the weird Voudoo Rites, or worship of the serpent. This awful fetich [sic] worship was brought to New Orleans by the negro slaves who faithfully followed the fortunes of their masters after the San Domingo revolution.”<sup>23</sup> This statement enforces the hierarchy of master over slave, while showing New Orleans Voodoo workers as “weird” and incapable of autonomy.

The writers admit the religion was more powerful under the leadership of Marie Laveau, but they argue that its membership is rapidly diminishing, showing further proof

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<sup>22</sup> Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 101.

<sup>23</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (1903), 43.

that the religion no longer poses a threat. The guide states, “Though the cult was a secret one, [Marie Laveau] numbered her followers by the thousands...”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the writers admit that Voodoo had a significant following throughout the 1800s but has since been in decline after Laveau’s death in 1881. Also, by classifying the practice as a “cult,” the writers place the religion as outside the norm of traditional religions, adding to its illegitimate and unorthodox nature. Through this description, the religion is evidence of primitivism; this idea can be used as justification for revoking citizenship rights from African Americans, whether they practice the religion or not. The writers indirectly show that even those within the religion are leaving as they see its falsehoods; only those that remain are truly ignorant.

The writers also attempt to use Christianity as a tool for invalidating Voodoo. From the same edition of *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans*, the writers state that Marie Laveau condemned Voodoo and converted to Christianity on her deathbed.<sup>25</sup> By insisting that Laveau denounced her years of work as a Voodoo Queen and turned to the superior religion, Christianity, the writers are attempting to delegitimize Voodoo. They try to show that Laveau, essentially the leader of the practice, sacrificed her years as a Voodoo worker and priestess and converted to Christianity in her final moments. However, Marie Laveau, like most other practitioners past and present, saw Catholicism and Voodoo in communion with one another, not mutually exclusive faiths.<sup>26</sup> The religions were intertwined with one another and by worshiping the Judeo-Christian god, Laveau was also serving the Voodoo spirits. This also demonstrates how many workers

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 44.

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

viewed the blurring of religious lines in a web of both Christianity and Voodoo.

Throughout the era of Spanish rule in New Orleans, all slaves were required to be baptized Catholic and attend mass.<sup>27</sup> The two religions were equally important in many workers' lives; a person did not have to choose between Christianity and Voodoo. In fact, many people practiced both as one religion.

Not only do the writers consistently use a critical tone when mentioning Voodoo, but they also demonstrate their own lack of knowledge of Voodoo practices, further deepening the public versus the private face of Voodoo. *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans'* writers were outsiders to the religion, carrying a disparaging etic tone; they were neither sympathetic nor informed of their subject. They simply used the existence of African spiritual practices to denigrate African Americans and exclude them from political and civil rights. Scholars have established that the affairs at Congo Square were not authentic rituals; those were reserved for hidden gatherings in a more intimate setting, such as a worker's home or along Bayou St. John at night.<sup>28</sup> However, because the guidebooks and newspapers claimed that these were authentic rituals, they helped to deepen the separation between actual rituals and tourist folklore.

This created in New Orleans a similar situation that would emerge in Haiti a few decades later. Kate Ramsey demonstrates this break between the public and private face of Voodoo happening in Haiti during the United States occupation. Haitian Vodou was used for for tourist consumption outside of Haiti, while authentic rituals in the nation were repressed. Although the practice of Vodou was criminalized within Haiti, dances were performed in Washington D.C. to show Haitian tradition and pride to their

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 127.

occupiers.<sup>29</sup> This dual nature of both repression and celebration is evident throughout the history of Voodoo in New Orleans into the twentieth-century and is expressed in the legal repression of the religion.

Before *Plessy*, Voodoo was a threat, a force to be feared and evaded; however after the decision, it became contained and a spectacle. Questions regarding citizenship were still up for debate prior to *Plessy*. After *Plessy*, the races were clearly separated between black and white. To outsiders, Voodoo held little of its previous power after society was strictly divided by race. This shift was the starting point for New Orleans Voodoo to transform from an authoritative religion to one of commodification and commercialization.

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<sup>29</sup> Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 177-247.

## Chapter 2: Spiritual Communities and Public Opinion

Voodoo and New Orleans are intertwined in the minds of many people throughout the South and the greater United States. When New Orleans enters the conversation, Voodoo shortly follows. However, Voodoo is regularly presented as an enigmatic, cult-like phenomenon used by individuals for nefarious means. A recent skit on *Saturday Night Live* narrates the trip a naïve couple took to New Orleans, in which they thought they participated in a Voodoo ceremony. Instead of an authentic ritual, they were robbed of their possessions in the back alleys of the French Quarter.<sup>1</sup> The Disney film *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) centers around two characters that are bewitched into frogs by the villain, the Shadow Man, a malicious Voodoo worker.<sup>2</sup> The monolith that is Disney portrays Voodoo as a sinful, prevailing tool to conduct dark deeds at the expense of others. Even a 1996 Levi's commercial to sell jeans features an older black woman in the swamps of Louisiana hexing the doppelganger doll of a cheating boyfriend.<sup>3</sup> In popular media, both past and present, Voodoo continues to be sexualized and criminalized; yet, to many workers, in both the past and present, Voodoo is an integral element in their lives and is neither sensual nor unlawful. These are recurring motifs within the public perception of Voodoo since the twentieth-century. This is clear in newspapers and judicial records from 1890s New Orleans, when Voodoo is both viewed as a black religion and used by non-black people. In public opinion and the courts, Voodoo was both criminalized as deviant and validated as a legitimate service.

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<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Night Live*, "New Orleans Vacation," directed by Don Roy King, *NBC*, January 26, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1vFZ6Wal3g>

<sup>2</sup> *Walt Disney Pictures, The Princess and the Frog*, directed by Ron Clements, John Musker, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> IdeaOnMind, "Levis 501 Voodoo Ad (1996)" *YouTube*, August 13, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt8g2j9wKUg>

This chapter traces the origin of the religion, as well as its workers' basic practices and rituals. I explain how Voodoo is recognized as a service to be rendered and simultaneously criminalized by both the newspapers and judicial courts at the turn of the twentieth-century. Lastly, I demonstrate the diversity of Voodoo through interracial worship and Creole workers.

## **ORIGINS, NATURE, AND ROLE OF VOODOO FOR WORKERS**

Voodoo was practiced in New Orleans, if only in its infancy, since the first slaves arrived from West Africa in 1721. Gwendolyn Milder Hall's extensive research demonstrates that these first slaves were primarily from the Senegambia region along West Africa.<sup>4</sup> A syncretic religion emerged as Voodoo was placed alongside various Native American religions, such as "the Choctaws, the Natchez, the Houmas, and other[s]."<sup>5</sup> Although many people account Voodoo's presence to the influx of Haitian immigrants to the city after the Haitian Revolution which ended in 1804, Voodoo was present in New Orleans prior to the revolution.<sup>6</sup> Several key elements from African religions, such as various spirits, the hierarchy of priests and priestesses, and *gris-gris* carried over into New Orleans Voodoo.

Although Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo are similar in many aspects, they arose independently from one another in their respective countries. However, after the Haitian Revolution of [year], many people emigrated from Haiti to the United States, causing a revitalization of the religion in New Orleans over the next decade into the early

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<sup>4</sup> Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 29-55.

<sup>5</sup> Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 283.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Jeffery Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook* (London: Greenwood Press, 2008), 14.

nineteenth-century.<sup>7</sup> After the revolution, more citizens, especially plantation owners, feared slave revolt, while people of color were catching glimpses of unified black power. As Carolyn Long describes, “[T]hey saw Voudou as a potential breeding ground for slave rebellion and a threat to public safety.”<sup>8</sup> Through this mode of thinking, Voodoo was viewed as a threat to white supremacy. That is why, even after it was portrayed as hollow superstition in guidebooks, it was also criminalized by police and the courts.

Both Voodoo and certain sects of Christianity intertwine coherently to many Voodoo workers and complement one another. Although the combination of Voodoo and Christianity seems heretical to some outsiders, many workers view their combination as one integrated faith. By successfully serving the Voodoo spirits through ceremonies or prayers, a worker also fulfills his or her Christian duties to the Judeo-Christian god.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the 1800s to the early 1900s, many residents of New Orleans were Catholic, both blacks and whites, so the Christian faith played a sizable role in the lives of many Voodoo workers. Unlike in other areas and aspects of life within the city, blacks were welcomed and encouraged to join the Catholic Church. In Voodoo, the creator god of certain African religions was syncretized with the overseeing god of Christianity, while the lesser deities from African religions were associated with Catholic saints. Even though the creator being remains at a higher level in the pantheon of deities, the lesser spirits have greater influence over life.<sup>10</sup> For example, Ezili Dantò is the *lwa*, or spirit, of motherhood and love and is associated with the Virgin Mary, or Madonna. Like Madonna

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure*, 14; Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, Marie Laveaux, 38-40.

<sup>8</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, & Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 95-97; Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, Marie Laveaux; Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure*, 14-15.



iconography, images of Ezili Dantò show her holding a small child in her arms, signifying her maternal nature. Similarly, Legba, as he is known in Haitian Vodou, is the spirit of the crossroads and gatekeeper to the spirit world; in New Orleans he is known as Limba or La Bas and is associated with the Catholic St. Peter, keeper of the keys to heaven.<sup>11</sup> The spirits are the intermediaries between the spirit and human world and can have control on daily life.<sup>12</sup>

The egalitarian leadership between genders from some West African religions also exists partially in New Orleans Voodoo. In the Crescent City, priests and priestesses are the leaders of Voodoo rituals, following the format of Haitian Vodou in which a *houngan*, or priest, and *mambo*, or priestess, perform ceremonies.<sup>13</sup> Within Haitian Voodoo, roles are split more equally between males and females than in New Orleans, in which women are the predominant leaders. In the documentary *Divine Horsemen*, adapted from Maya Deren's book of the same title, a *mambo* is shown leading the ceremony of marriage between Agwé, the god of sea, with the goddess of love. This ritual is considered one of the most elaborate services and takes days of preparation, and a woman, not a man, performed one of the most complicated ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the Haitian ceremony, men and women dance with one another and alternate leadership roles, rather than being purely a male dominated experience. In New Orleans, priestesses or queens primarily oversee rituals, like the infamous Marie Laveau. Unlike the predominantly patriarchal Christian religion, Voodoo is comparatively more egalitarian between genders. Rituals are conducted by both priests and priestesses, yet the large

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>12</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>14</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, directed by Teiji Ito, 1985.

gender imbalance within the city and the elevated status for women of color allowed for more priestesses to be present than priests during rituals.<sup>15</sup> The gender dynamics of ritual practice in New Orleans will be addressed later in this chapter.

Charms, amulets, and talismans are essential to the practice, since these physical elements are produced by workers to affect one's life or the life of another. Termed *gris-gris*, these charms arrived with the first slaves in Louisiana.<sup>16</sup> As stated in the previous chapter, in 1773, one of the first court cases to appear dealing with Voodoo describes several slaves attempting to kill their master using *gris-gris*. Carolyn Long describes these items best when she writes, "In New Orleans, gris-gris has come to mean any assemblage of magical substances employed by believers to attain control over others, success, protection, revenge, or luck."<sup>17</sup> Once again, the motif of influence over others is an essential component for many workers.

Since Voodoo imposed a threat against white supremacy, very little written sources exist for rituals. Many of those that are available are sensationalized accounts. The first official interviews of New Orleans' black residents only appear in the 1940s by the Louisiana Writers' Project; therefore, the authentic practice of the nineteenth-century is partially lost to history. A ritual is described from *The Picayune* (1903) guidebook, in which snake worship takes place within Congo Square. The guide states, "They met at the midnight hour to work their spells..." The guide states that once the Square rituals were repressed under "strict police surveillance," the workers would move their ceremonies to Bayou St. John. A large dance would take place in which participants

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<sup>15</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*.

<sup>16</sup> Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 94.

threw “bits of the skins of alligators, frogs and snakes from the bayou beyond, pieces of human hair, fingernails and toe nails” into a large caldron.<sup>18</sup> Such accounts are probably inaccurate, as they were written by those outside of the religion with intentions of selling their accounts for tourist consumption.

Since accounts of Voodoo in New Orleans are unreliable, many scholars turn to Voodoo in other locations such as Haiti, like Carolyn Long, or New York, like Karen McCarthy Brown, to piece together the possibilities for a New Orleans ritual.<sup>19</sup> In Haitian Vodou, once the ceremony begins, libations are poured onto the ground as offerings, and *vèvès*, or symbols of various spirits, are drawn into the dirt. Animals, such as chickens, pigs, or cows, are sacrificed during the rituals with a swift knife across the animal’s throat, allowing the blood to soak into the earth.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the spirits inhabit the workers through possession as they dance and convulse. As Long describes, “[T]he deity ‘mounts’ the body of a worshiper and speaks through the possessed...”<sup>21</sup> Afterwards, the community participates in a banquet. Even though this is the closest scholars can currently glimpse into an authentic New Orleans ritual, it should be noted that Voodoo is multifaceted and complex. The experience of Voodoo varies for each worker, as even ceremonies and rituals performed within the same neighborhood could diverge from one another.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans: *The Picayune*, 1903), 43.

<sup>19</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 93-118; Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 96-97.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Palmié, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: Santería, Anthropology, and the Semiotics of “Belief” in Santiago de Cuba,” *New West Indian Guide*, 84(1-2) 2010.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Voodoo was perceived as a threat to white supremacy as it inverted the prevailing social hierarchies and endangered the goal of segregation prior to *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Voodoo empowered many within the disenfranchised classes, which were predominately women of color. In a white, male-driven society, Voodoo afforded spiritual power for groups that had very little economic or political control. By using *gris-gris*, serving the spirits, or playing a leadership role in the community, spiritual workers influenced the daily lives of those around them. Even though Voodoo was viewed as a superstition of African Americans, the potential threat from racially integrated religious rituals loomed in the minds of many New Orleans' ruling classes.

Although workers of Voodoo were subject to criminalization, the religion remained a functional and transactional service to many for healing loved ones, revealing fortunes, producing charms, evoking spirits, or navigating life's difficulties. Newspapers constantly labeled Voodoo as a form of black savagery, while simultaneously portraying it as a form of service, thereby showing it as both functional and illegal. An article entitled, "An Astounding Revelation" from *The Times-Picayune* in 1889, described an instance in which several white women were arrested alongside multiple black men under the guidance of a self-proclaimed black physician and Voodoo worker.<sup>23</sup> From the article, it is inferred that the women were involved in the ceremony for some type of healing action, since they were following the orders of a Voodoo doctor. Since the practice appeared in the judicial system, this shows that the courts considered it to be a sign of

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<sup>23</sup> "An Astounding Revelation," *The Times-Picayune*, May 30, 1889.

criminality even as they showed Voodoo's popularity as a service for black and non-blacks alike.

Voodoo allowed for domestic healing practices and homemade remedies apart from the medical community. In 1886, when regular doctors could not heal a man's sick son, A.C. Glapion, a Voodoo worker and apparent grandson of Marie Laveau, was hired for his services. Presuming the son had been "voudoued," Glapion examined the house and found a "bottle containing vinegar, gunpowder and other stuff, a package containing a red silk cord wrapped around a piece of gold leaf, full of large needles."<sup>24</sup> After removing the charm and prescribing a counter-remedy, the patient seemed to improve. The sickness the man felt was not due to an internal disease but rather to the external charm used against him; therefore, traditional medicine could not cure his illness, while spiritual power could.

Archival records housed in the City Archives of the New Orleans Public Library also demonstrate the diversity of the clientele for Voodoo services. These cases, taken together, also unwittingly add to the unspoken sense that Voodoo was legitimate, real, and subject to the law. In 1903, John Hoskins, a self-proclaimed preacher, paid for the services of a black woman, Bertha Bernard for "hoo-doo purposes." Hoskins paid \$4.50 for Bernard to bring back a lost love from Greenville, Alabama.<sup>25</sup> However, Hoskins became disgruntled when his request went unfulfilled, and brought Bernard to court for petty larceny since Bernard took his money under false pretenses. Hoskins operates within the realm of Christian orthodoxy, and he sought out a Voodoo worker to perform a

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<sup>24</sup> "Death of an Alleged Victim of the Fetish Charm," *The Vicksburg Herald*, Vicksburg, Mississippi, July 2, 1886.

<sup>25</sup> *The State of Louisiana v. Bertha Bernard*, New Orleans: City Archives, August 17, 1903.

ritual. Perhaps Hoskins believed his romantic interests were out of the jurisdiction of the Judeo-Christian god, or he felt his desires were not worthy of godly intervention. As stated before, many workers saw Voodoo as being intertwined with Christianity and not separate from it; therefore, Hoskins perhaps viewed his actions as legitimate within the confines of both religions. As in other cases, the court shows the diversity of clients, implicates the legitimacy of Voodoo, even when it criminalizes practitioners.

Although considered a purely African American religion, Voodoo actually serves a diverse range of clients. Voodoo is not a purely black practiced religion, but rather blurs between racial lines. As Kodi Roberts demonstrates in his book, *Voodoo and Power*, both blacks and whites were an integral part of the practice.<sup>26</sup> The guidebooks and newspaper articles addressing Voodoo tended to ignore the interracial element to the religion because it was easier to call Voodoo a black religion. This keeps the races neatly separated, furthered the goal of segregation by implying practitioners' inferiority, and added to Voodoo's mystique.<sup>27</sup> To outsiders, if whites served the spirits, then it would add legitimacy to Voodoo, one in which people of color were the principal leaders, such as the countless mixed-race Voodoo priestesses. The subversion of racial hierarchies made many whites nervous pre-*Plessy v. Ferguson*, and this anxiety continued through the Jim Crow era. Throughout the guidebooks, the myth of Voodoo's single ethnicity was perpetuated. For example, the 1903 *Picayune* guidebook states, "This awful fetich [sic] worship was brought to New Orleans by the negro slaves who faithfully followed the fortunes of their masters after the San Domingo revolution."<sup>28</sup> In reality, New Orleans

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<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 67-102.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>28</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans: *The Picayune*, 1903), 43.

Voodoo was an interracial faith, blending multiple beliefs, and was practiced by people of all colors in New Orleans, not solely African Americans. Even though the origins of Voodoo were African, practices, workers, and clientele were Creole, or born in the New World.

Both blacks and whites were attending Voodoo gatherings, as demonstrated from court cases and newspapers despite the religion's absence from travel guides published before 1896. In a time of Jim Crow segregation, interracial religion was unheard of elsewhere in the United States, yet it existed in New Orleans.<sup>29</sup> From the newspapers at the time, multiple cases exist for interracial gatherings and practices, especially in which white women are arrested in the homes of black workers. In the above-mentioned case about the unnamed white women and the Voodoo doctor, the white women were deemed "respectable," while the black men were the root of the women's debauchery.<sup>30</sup> For an outsider, even moments of interracial religious practices could be read with racial bias.

The 1889 article could also demonstrate how the public and press constantly sought to get each case to fit the narrative of white victim and black criminal. Reinaldo Román and Matthew Casey demonstrate this same model occurring in Cuba during a panic of child-murder cases supposedly inflicted by black *brujos*, or people practicing witchcraft. The press actively sensationalized elements of the stories and perpetuated these myths even as counterevidence emerged.<sup>31</sup> As Casey reveals, these dramatized journalist accounts led to "shaping public perceptions of African religions and urging

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<sup>29</sup> James Bennet, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> "An Astounding Revelation," *The Times-Picayune*, May 30, 1889.

<sup>31</sup> Román, *Governing Spirits*, 90; Matthew Casey, *Empire's Guest Workers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

state repression.”<sup>32</sup> It is much easier to confirm a narrative already in place in society that confirms social stereotypes than to completely reverse ingrained prejudices.

While Voodoo is an interracial religion, people of color, especially women, were predominant in ceremonies. For example, Louise Johnson, a mixed-race woman, was detained after performing a “Voudou dance” in 1893. With a surname of Johnson, she is an example of how Voodoo was not solely practiced by first generation African Americans but maintained through second and third generations. Her name denotes European ancestry, aside from the obvious French and Spanish ties to the city. Likewise, a decade later in 1903, Bertha Bernard, an African American woman, was arrested regarding the false fulfillment of a ritual.<sup>33</sup> Women of color in New Orleans during the late eighteenth to nineteenth-centuries had more freedom and prestige than in other parts of the United States. Women with full African heritage were still seen as inferior, but women that had mixed ancestry between African and European were elevated in society from their African ancestors.<sup>34</sup> Practices of *plaçage* and well-known Quadroon Balls harkened back to the Spanish era of the city, but hints of these practices permanently left their mark on the city and its people by bestowing a different status to women of color.

In terms of gender, as well as race, outsiders were scandalized by egalitarian religious gatherings that flew in the face of prevailing social hierarchies. Again, they emphasized hierarchies within mixed spaces, though it is unclear the extent to which these actually mattered to practitioners. In 1889, from “The Voudou Humbug” in *The Times-Democrat*, observed:

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<sup>32</sup> Casey, *Empire's Guest Workers*, 186.

<sup>33</sup> City Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1893.

<sup>34</sup> Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon*, 53.



The old school admitted at least equal right and power to priests and priestesses—some of them even going so far as to advance the not improbable proposition that in matters requiring thorough and extreme deviltry, women were likely to be the most powerful. In the New Orleans Lodge of Voudou adepts two-thirds of the members are females. But the new school assumes that knowledge of the mysteries should be restricted to men, as women should not be entrusted with such awful secrets and dreadful powers.<sup>35</sup>

According to such accounts, Voodoo was a religion of authoritative, seductive women.

Fandrich partially agrees with this thought and argues that New Orleans' Voodoo was predominantly a women's religion; men could join and hold positions, but they were not as prevalent as women leaders and members.<sup>36</sup>

Even though Voodoo is predominantly thought of as a New Orleans phenomenon, the religion was practiced outside the confines of the city and Louisiana, albeit in limited ways. Jeffrey Anderson wrote about an account from William Wells Brown, a former slave, about a Voodoo ceremony taking place in St. Louis, Missouri, in the 1840s.<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, a newspaper article from 1899, in Jackson, Mississippi, was headlined "The Voodoo Dance is Now On in Chattanooga: Negroes Are Gathering From Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi to Take Part in the Weird Exercises and Strange Worship."<sup>38</sup>

The same motif of "strange" and unnatural worship is used, but New Orleans is not cited.

Both cases show that the grasp of Voodoo and its workers extended far past the geographical confines of the Crescent City.

The religion was everywhere in the city and simultaneously hidden from view. Workers were criminalized for their practice while also sought out for their expertise. Voodoo was both validated and refuted through the legal system, further cementing the

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<sup>35</sup> "The Voudou Humbug," *The Times-Democrat*, New Orleans, Louisiana, Apr. 25, 1889.

<sup>36</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, 123.

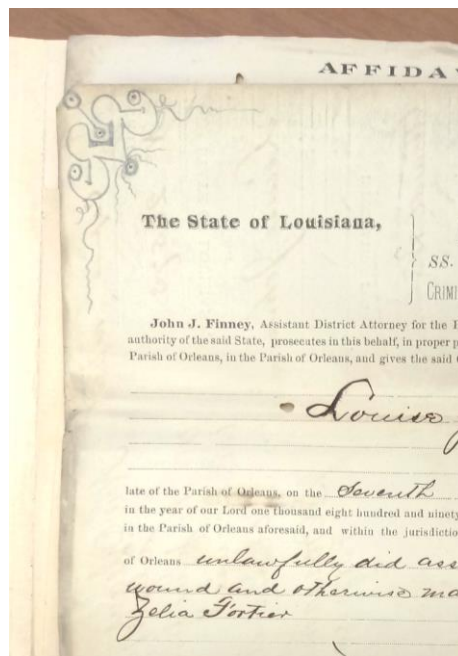
<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> "The Voodoo Dance is Now on in Chattanooga," *Clarion-Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi, July 24, 1899.

dualistic nature of the practice. This chapter exhibits Voodoo's origins, practices, threatening nature, element of service, and diversity of workers. To many people within and outside of New Orleans, Voodoo was seen as black magic but a prevailing force nonetheless.

### Chapter 3: State Power Versus Spiritual Power

Within the Crescent City, Voodoo is both omnipresent and hidden, perceived as a superstition and a threat; this paradox expressed itself in the judicial system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. While the legal structures blatantly criminalized Voodoo workers, the courts also inadvertently provided legitimacy when it recognized Voodoo's power and acknowledged transactions between practitioners and their clients. Voodoo now exists around every corner, but I did not expect to find clear evidence of it in a criminal case from 1893. In the top-left corner of one of the yellowed documents from the Louise Johnson case, a curious symbol is sketched in pencil as shown below.<sup>1</sup>



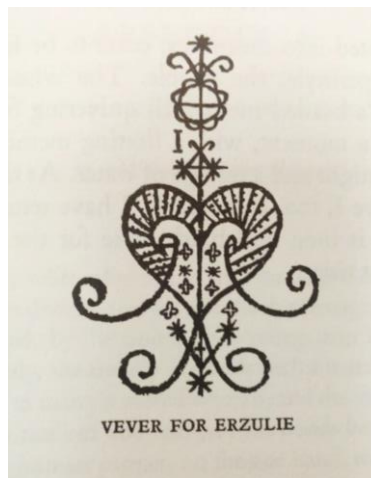
*Illustration 1: Marginalia in Court Document with Probable Religious Significance. Source: The State of Louisiana v. Louise Johnson, New Orleans: City Archives, June 7, 1893.*

My research in New Orleans was the first time the case had been opened since it was deposited; therefore, the probability of someone else representing the practice and

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<sup>1</sup> The State of Louisiana v. Louise Johnson, New Orleans: City Archives, June 7, 1893.

drawing the symbol is doubtful. Although there is not a way of identifying the artist, determining whether they worked for the courts or the archives, or uncovering their intentions, the symbol expresses Voodoo's familiarity to a wide audience, including those residing in the halls of power. This sketch closely resembles a Voodoo *vèvè*, or symbol, for Erzulie, the spirit for love and womanhood. These icons are normally drawn on the ground in flour during a ritual, but they also appear in artworks and other renderings of spirits and practitioners. In Catholic renderings, Erzulie is attributed to the Virgin Mary or the Black Madonna.<sup>2</sup> Modern renditions of her *vèvès* include a heart-like shape with a sword, or lines, going through the heart as shown below.<sup>3</sup>



*Illustration 2: Vèvè for Erzulie Identified in Early Twentieth-Century. Source: Maya Deren, The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), 261.*

There are stark disparities between each figure, but there are also resemblances. This hand-drawn image embodies one of the claims of this chapter—namely, that through the criminalization of Voodoo practitioners, the courts also provided a source of spiritual legitimacy to the religion.

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<sup>2</sup> Bellegarde-Smith and Michel, *Haitian Vodou*, 95-97.

<sup>3</sup> Maya Deren, *The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), 261.

This chapter attempts to show how the legal system enforces the duality of Voodoo, in which it is both an authentic and illegal religion. I will do this by focusing on the lawful status of Voodoo workers in the Louisiana Court system. Then, I will analyze two court cases, one from 1893 and one from 1903, to show the ways that the law acted as both a challenge and a support for practitioners.

## **LEGAL STATUS OF VODOO IN THE COURTS**

The law both validates and rescinds Voodoo as a legitimate practice. This dichotomy is evident in the legal institutions of New Orleans throughout the city's existence, yet it is blatantly obvious during Jim Crow segregation. The criminalization of Voodoo is tangled with the criminalization of African Americans, and the laws governing segregation harken back to the various racial laws instituted by each of the three ruling nations (France, Spain, and the United States) of the Crescent City. Even though workers were technically free to practice Voodoo in the late nineteenth-century, the echoes of prior laws gripped the legal institutions and public perceptions even after their demise.

Racial laws kept people of color under repression throughout New Orleans well before America's reign. During the French rule beginning in 1718, the *Code Noir* laws were put in place to address issues between slaves and their masters. As Vernon Palmer describes them, "In these colonies where slaves vastly outnumbered Europeans and slave labor was the engine of the economy as well as its greatest capital investment, the Code was a law affecting social, religious and property relationships between all classes."<sup>4</sup>

Although there were far more slaves than masters in the colony, these laws were made to

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<sup>4</sup> Vernon Palmer, "The Origins and Authors of the Code Noir," *Louisiana Law Review* 56, no. 2 (1996): 363.

protect the owners and to legally dehumanize the slaves; similar degrading laws continued to be implemented throughout Jim Crow segregation.

After Spain took over the colony in 1769, the quality of life for enslaved people and free people of color seemed to improve through increased rights. Kimberly Hanger writes, “In New Orleans slaves and free blacks had more rights and opportunities, exercised those rights more readily, and received better treatment under Spanish rule than under either French or United States rule, but this was due more to material than cultural factors.”<sup>5</sup> When the Spanish took over, they became the minority between the enslaved Africans and French planters who had settled there; to gain a foothold in the colony, the Spanish sought to ally with the growing class of free people of color.<sup>6</sup> The Spanish did not implement liberal, egalitarian ideologies but rather tried to legitimize their rule through the support of the growing class, *gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color, by granting them more rights. With more freedoms than before, a three-tiered social structure developed, in which white slave masters remained at the top, *gens de couleur libres* in the middle, and African slaves at the bottom. The Spanish laws, *Siete Partidas*, were less harsh than the *Code Noir* laws but were still used to separate people racially. Slave holders during the period of Spanish rule were more likely to grant their slaves manumission, or freedom; therefore, going into the era of American rule, there was a larger population of free people of color in New Orleans than elsewhere in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kimberly S. Hanger, “Personas de varias clases y colores: Free people of color in Spanish New Orleans, 1769-1803” (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1991), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, 82.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 87.

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States took control of New Orleans. Many Americans were not accustomed to the diverse culture that had developed in the city. Stricter laws regarding slaves and African descendants were enforced, deemed the American Black Code, and rights that had been afforded to enslaved and free people of color were swiftly stripped away. The extravagant ways of the French and Spanish, through their holidays, cuisines, and balls, clashed with the simplified Puritan American customs of the nineteenth-century.<sup>8</sup> Free people of color, who had maintained basic rights and privileges up until American rule, were grouped in with those of pure African ancestry.

Even though the United States Constitution promised a freedom of religion before Emancipation, Voodoo workers were arrested for “unlawful assembly” if slaves were present during ceremonies. An apprehension from the *Daily Delta* ran in 1850 and stated, “When the arrests were made, it was stated that the Voudous were engaged in an unlawful assemblage” because a “slave girl” participated in the ceremony.<sup>9</sup> The same article continued, “[T]he members of [Voodoo] are respectable and...that, altogether, the proceedings...against the whole party were oppressive and illegal.”<sup>10</sup> The *Delta Daily* acknowledged the unlawful actions of the police, since a raid against religion ran counter to the basis of the American Constitution; however, Voodoo in New Orleans seemed to exist outside this legal framework. Since Voodoo was viewed as the foundation for slave revolts, white citizens feared the power it granted workers, so slaves were not allowed to gather with people of color or other white citizens. After the Civil War, this justification

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>9</sup> *Daily Delta* (New Orleans, LA) July 14, 1850.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

could no longer be exploited, which forced the repressors of Voodoo to employ different terms.

In the Criminal District Court of New Orleans after 1865, practicing Voodoo was not a defensible reason for arrests, yet the seizures were hidden behind infractions such as “disturbing the peace” or “petty larceny” or in the case of Louise Johnson mentioned above, “assault and battery.” People were not detained for practicing Voodoo, since this went against First Amendment rights. As Fandrich maintains, many workers were “keenly aware of their constitutional rights,” so arrests had to be disguised under different conditions.<sup>11</sup> Voodoo workers were not passive, mindless victims, but rather conscious citizens attentive to legal institutions.

In both New Orleans and areas of Latin America, African religions can be repressed under different names, even if they are legal. In early twentieth century Cuba, itself strongly influenced by the United States, religious freedom existed, so other means were found to repress *brujería* and *ñañiguismo*. As Bronfman and Casey demonstrate, through enforcing sanitation laws, any person holding objects that threatened public health could be convicted; conveniently, ritual objects fell into this category during police raids.<sup>12</sup> Although practicing these religions were legal, people were still brought into custody on different charges. Likewise in Cuba, during a public epidemic of child-kidnapping cases in the early twentieth-century, *brujería* practitioners, or *brujos*, became the center of suspicion, since it was a widespread rumor some used the blood of white children for rituals. After a kidnapping, known *brujos* were arrested and convicted for the crime with little to no evidence. Public fear and press coverage played an essential part in

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<sup>11</sup> Fandrich, “Defiant African Sisterhoods,” 195.

<sup>12</sup> Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, 23-25; Casey, *Empire’s Guest Workers*, 185.



the conviction of many, yet the legal system allowed for the arrest of many innocent people.<sup>13</sup> Blackness became associated with *brujería*, and *brujería* with offenders of the law.

In theory, each person has equality before the law, but in practice, this rarely played out for discriminated members of society, as seen in Jim Crow era Voodoo workers. A person's character should not determine the outcome in court; however, as demonstrated previously, both Bernard and Johnson's characters were denigrated due to their religion. As in other areas of Latin America, this is shown in both Brazil's poor and Haiti's Vodou workers. Brodwyn Fischer demonstrates "rights poverty" implemented in early twentieth-century Brazil, in which society's disenfranchised do not receive the same levels of citizenship since they do not fit the typology of an upstanding citizens that society and the state create.<sup>14</sup> She writes, "Legal inequality thus has to be sought not in the letter of Brazil's laws but instead in the assumptions that underlay them, and in the processes that enforced them."<sup>15</sup> In New Orleans, Voodoo was not the crime, but workers were criminalized from the beginning because of society's notions about the practice. Kate Ramsey shows the repression of Vodou workers in Haiti which "rendered practitioners perennially delinquent before the law."<sup>16</sup> Although Voodoo was not explicitly criminalized in New Orleans, like it was in Haiti, the practitioners in both places were still viewed as subjects of illicit actions.

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<sup>13</sup> Román, *Governing Spirits*, 82-94; Casey, *Empire's Guest Workers*, 186.

<sup>14</sup> Brodwyn Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 11.

Even when those in power sought to denounce Voodoo, the law inadvertently offers it a source of power. Through the criminalization of Voodoo, the religion becomes an entity of concern and anxiety for its potential dominance. As Ramsey shows, this same paradoxical feature appears in Haiti against Vodou. The laws both “contribute to the political marginalization, economic exploitation, and social stigmatization” of practitioners while adhering legitimacy to the religion.<sup>17</sup> For Ramsey, the enforcers of the law became “implicated...in the local logics of sorcery belief.”<sup>18</sup> The law is a creative agent in which it forms legal fictions, in which Voodoo is both legitimate and a superstition. In other words, in order to repress something, it must be deemed a threat.

The same was true in New Orleans. On June 11, 1893, *The Times-Picayune* ran a story about Louise Johnson, the Voodoo worker mentioned prior, who was arrested a few days before on charges of assault and battery against her landlord, Madame Zelia Fortier. In chronological order, the article lays out the sensationalized series of the events that led to the arrest of Johnson. Fortier asked Johnson to move out of the house she was leasing, but Johnson “became very abusive” and assaulted Fortier.<sup>19</sup> Fortier claimed that Johnson “pushed [her] against the fence and struck [her].”<sup>20</sup> Johnson then threw powder into Fortier’s face, rendering her unconscious. Fortier refrained from contacting the police for fear of being “voudoued,” so a third party brought it to their attention. As Román suggests, the press is a “vehicle for the propagation of fantasies and misguided practices” and another tool that crafts Voodoo workers’ deviant reputations.<sup>21</sup> The article clearly

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 156-157.

<sup>19</sup> “A Voudou Case,” *The Times-Picayune*, June 11, 1893.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Román, *Governing Spirits*, 19.

takes the stance that Johnson was impulsive and irrational in her attack upon Fortier, drawing a line between the worker and innocent victim. But it also told the story in a way that stressed the power of the powder in instantly incapacitating its target. Through the press, the duality of Voodoo is once again shown through the criminal nature of workers and the potential threat of its power.

In New Orleans, as in Cuba and Haiti at the same time, court proceedings show a more complicated picture, in which the testimonies are both less embellished and also reveal the sexualized and anti-Christian notions of Voodoo. When the questioner brought up Voodoo in the form of “dancing in a shameful and dirty manner,” the judge objected to the question.<sup>22</sup> The judge may not have discussed the matter due to the lewd or extraneous nature of the dance, but by doing so, he further criminalized Voodoo. The witnesses start by stating that an unknown person tied a potato with a string to Fortier’s door. When Fortier noticed, she cut the string and set the potato on fire, which angered Johnson; Johnson then began wildly dancing a “voudou dance” to the displeasure of Fortier. Fortier stated she lit a candle to “drive Satan away from the yard.” By doing this, Fortier expressed Voodoo’s potency and use of her own spiritual elements to overcome its force. This challenges the idea that a practitioner of Voodoo was attacking a non-believer. Later in the day, when Fortier threw sand in her yard after a rain, Johnson asked Fortier to not throw sand on her steps. This request somehow escalated into both women throwing sand or powder upon each other. Since both women were aggressors in the case, this goes against the idea that there was a Voodoo assailant and a nonpracticing victim. Most of the witnesses could not definitively state who threw their substance first,

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<sup>22</sup> The State of Louisiana v. Louise Johnson, City Archives: New Orleans, 9.

although most claimed that Johnson harshly gripped the hands of Fortier, which led to the assault charges. Johnson was given a bail of \$250, but was later determined to be innocent, as it was difficult to tell for the witnesses to determine who first started the proceedings. Fortier did not dismiss Voodoo as superstition or primitivism. Indeed, her decision to light a candle against a neighbor implied her recognition of its power. Rather she used the judicial power of the police against the spiritual power of her neighbor.

Even though Voodoo is never directly the cause for the arrest, other charges are used as the terms for criminalization. Johnson was not arrested for her “voudou dance,” but rather because she “unlawfully did assault, beat, bruise, wound, and otherwise maltreat” her landlord.<sup>23</sup> But in criminalizing Johnson, the courts were forced to legally recognize the power of Voodoo. To identify Johnson as an aggressor was to accept that the ritual objects she used against Fortier were powerful. To do otherwise would make her actions negligible and without the circumstantial context necessary to press charges. Even though some sources treated Voodoo as a black superstition, the courts implied its power, thereby legitimizing it in the process.

Although Voodoo is not the impetus for an arrest, when it arises in the courts, it adversely influences one’s reputation. As established in the previous chapter, Bertha Bernard, a supposed Voodoo worker, was not arrested for practicing Voodoo but for “petty larceny” in 1903.<sup>24</sup> This dispute between Bernard against John Hoskins and Willis Dixon, a self-proclaimed preacher, arose over funds taken under false pretenses for a Voodoo service. The terms for the arrest do not include Voodoo, but the accusations are clearly over its element as a service; Dixon paid Bernard for mending his “family

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<sup>23</sup> The State of Louisiana v. Louise Johnson, City Archives: New Orleans, 1893.

<sup>24</sup> The State of Louisiana v. Bertha Bernard, City Archives: New Orleans, 1903.

troubles.” Hoskins later stated that “[Bernard] could lay down and go to sleep and her spirit could descend in Alabama...[S]he said she could give us charms.”<sup>25</sup> Here, we see the shamanistic practice of soul-travel, as well as the use of *gris-gris*, both services of a Voodoo worker. When asked if Bernard was a worker, she firmly replied that her profession was as a sick nurse and had never previously thought about pursuing the practice. The claims are clear that Dixon and Hoskins went to Bernard to perform a spiritual service, yet she denied the accusation, whether for fear, shame, or inaccurate terminology. The examiner questioned Bernard’s character asking witnesses, “Do you know what her reputation is, good or bad?”<sup>26</sup> Instead of assuming an accused person is “innocent until proven guilty,” the court presiders take the stance that workers are inherently guilty because of their practice. When Bernard’s sister was brought in for questioning, she also responded that Bernard was a sick nurse, and Bernard’s brother similarly stated that Bernard was not a “hoo-doo” worker. Clearly, her reputation could influence her standing in the court and it was best to deny that Voodoo was being practiced. Even though Bernard and two other witnesses claimed she was not a worker, Bernard was still charged as guilty. Likewise, in Johnson’s case, several witnesses spoke to the disrespectful and lewd actions of Johnson. Fortier called Johnson’s dance the “dirty, most shameful thing” and later stated, “...I am too much of a lady to throw sand...I will never try to throw it in anybody’s eyes as she done me.”<sup>27</sup> Fortier is implying that Johnson does not have the same level of respectability that she, a Christian

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>26</sup> The State of Louisiana v. Bertha Bernard, City Archives: New Orleans, 1903.

<sup>27</sup> The State of Louisiana v. Louise Johnson, City Archives: New Orleans, 1893, 8.

woman, holds. The tones used to describe both Bernard and Johnson's actions, and whether the women were innocent or guilty, suggest immorality and debauchery.

Together, these cases show the inherent criminalization of Voodoo practitioners, even when the religion was not the actual impetus for the arrests, and its recognition as legitimate by legal powers. Workers were often inherently criminalized because of their associations with Voodoo. It is this context where Voodoo was criminalized as deviant but recognized as powerful which allows the *vèvè* drawing (Illustration 1) to make sense. The person who drew the *vèvè* recognized that this case, which was not directly about Voodoo, actually was. The artist knew enough about Voodoo to sketch a *vèvè*; they also had access to the halls of power—whether within the courts or the archives. He or she felt strongly enough to leave the legacy of Voodoo embedded on the page of a document that wished to denounce it. Continuing with the motif of duality, each case shows how Voodoo blurs lines of belief and disbelief, respectability and impropriety, superstition and power.

The law both legitimizes and denounces the practice of Voodoo. Both Voodoo workers, Louise Johnson and Bertha Bernard, were criminalized for their practice and subject to the biases of the court. By drawing upon similar cases in Latin America and the Caribbean, discrimination of African-disasporic religions were evident throughout the Americas. Yet, even when society wished to denounce Voodoo and its workers, the legal system also helped to sustain it.

## Conclusion

In reference to Haitian Vodou, Kate Ramsey writes, “Arguably no religion has been subject to more maligning and misinterpretation from outsiders over the past two centuries.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, New Orleans Voodoo is cast to fit whatever goal is at hand, whether for repression or power. In the Crescent City today, Voodoo is celebrated as a distinct marker of Creole heritage and culture; however, this recent designation is unique to the history of Voodoo within the city. The constant denigration of Voodoo and its practitioners was prevalent throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Because of its association with African Americans, it was deemed a purely black superstition and a form of primitivism. Yet it was feared for being the exact opposite—a powerful tool used by workers to invert prevailing social hierarchies of southern Jim Crow segregation. In a time when questions regarding African American citizenship were still up for debate, Voodoo played an integral role in those discussions.

Religion, as promised by the Constitution of the United States, is a civil right, and to many, a basic human right. By practicing Voodoo, workers were subject to arrests, as well as a withholding of their rights due to their religion. This study provides another lens into Jim Crow policies, in which basic rights are promised in theory to all people, but in reality are only extended to a select few. In a predominantly white, Christian society, Voodoo is used as a instrument to justify and revoke the rights of workers, predominantly African Americans and other people of color. This blatant discrimination in the name of religion is sadly still an entrenched part of our society and is continually used as justification for acts of violence and hatred against others. Even though many workers

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 1.

were silenced in their own lifetime, their accounts, even if only in the confines of this work, may continue to survive.



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