

# **“*Savages and Sable Subjects*”: White Fear, Racism, and the Demonization of New Orleans Voodoo in the Nineteenth Century**

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This paper examines the dimensions of white New Orleanians’ mischaracterizations of Voodoo, both as an idealized racist designation and nomenclature of Haitian Vodou, and representation of the hypersexualized savage African who engaged in evil, “harmful magic” like witchcraft and devil worship. This antagonistic reinterpretation emerged in the early nineteenth century and reoriented Voodoo as threatening the dominant system of slavocracy. Central to white trepidations was the assumption that Vodou/Voodoo would inspire slave uprisings much like Vodou had in Saint-Domingue.

My central argument is that the demonization of Voodoo in late antebellum New Orleans had far less to do with pious devotion, but instead was exclusively built upon the exploitative anxieties harbored by the United States particularly and white New Orleanians specifically. These forebodings would echo the dread of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and would be widely shared by white slaveholders in Louisiana. Thus, as Voodoo existed with New Orleans’ creole culture throughout the nineteenth century, so too would its objectified image among white New Orleanians.

## **Introduction**

Before continuing, it is important to identify the differences between Saint-Domingue and Haiti, and Vodou and Voodoo for context. Prior to 1804, the Caribbean Island most known as Haiti was referred to as Saint-

Domingue. Originally called Española, or Hispaniola (“little Spain”) upon the invasion of Christopher Columbus, its name was changed to Saint-Domingue in 1697 when the French empire sieged control of Hispaniola from the Spanish. Once the Haitian Revolution ended in January 1804, the country’s name officially changed to Haiti, where it remains as such today.

Vodou (sometimes referred to as Vodun when indicating its position as an African Diaspora Religion) derives from the Fon, or Fon nu Agadja people of southern Dahomey (modern-day Benin) and represents “spirit,” “god,” or “image” in West African spirituality. Vodun is the conceptualization of the person to the world, as one Haitian intellectual explained.<sup>1</sup> Voodoo, conversely, is a term of condemnation; a divisive placeholder of white New Orleanians’ racist ideologies of enslaved men and women of African descent in the late antebellum period. Voodoo is, as one historian suggested, “an inexact connotation,” whose likelihood of extraction from the lexicon of American folklore, “is small.” Moreover, Voodoo is a term many historians and anthropologists reject. While scholar Leslie Desmangles described Vodou as “an inextricable part of Haitian life,” he identified Voodoo as a “distortion of the Dahomean (or Beninois) word *vodu* (meaning “god” or “spirit).”

While honoring the correct term of Vodou, this paper will use the American phrase Voodoo to denote its racially provocative theme. Vodou, then, will be used in relation to Saint-Domingue/Haiti references within the body of this work. In all other descriptions, Voodoo will be otherwise used. This, I feel, is in keeping with the language of the time and does not indicate my support for its

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<sup>1</sup> Guérin C. Montilus, “Vodun and Social Transformation in the African Diasporic Experience: The Concept of Personhood in Haitian Vodun Religion” in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, & Reality*, edited by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1.

continued usage unless within a frame of historical insight; not contemporary distortions.

An extension of West African Adja tradition, Vodou, and its substratum ‘Vodou culture,’ is a complex system within Haitian spirit theology whose primary deity Bondye (God) and multitudinous collective of spirits or orishas (*Lwa/Loa*) symbolize the clairvoyant reality and human connection to the external world. Enslaved men and women of African descent in the Americas believed the physical and divine elements were interconnected and acted in concert to each other. The sacredness of Vodou was an indispensable, irrefutable function of their connection to time, space, and history. Time offered the transcendence of the “now.” To conceive of time, according to Laurenti Magesa, was to understand it in a “cyclic and phenomenal way.”<sup>2</sup> Space occupied the physical land from which they were stolen; a place to which they could never return. Yet it also functioned as anchors to the spiritual margins between the living and the living dead; ancestors who were indeed “not dead,” but were everywhere, “in the thickening shadow...in the trees that rustles...in the wood that groans...in the breasts of the woman...in the child who is wailing...in the firebrand that flames...in the forest...in the house.”<sup>3</sup>

Those who worshiped the Vodou Supreme God Bondye believed he was the creator of all humankind. Their homes, or birth-space, were therefore sacred, stitching each person “into the natural world so closely as to share in the actual ‘livingness’ of animals, trees, rocks, and rivers.”<sup>4</sup> The external world intersected with the shadow of the

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<sup>2</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Obgu Kalu, “Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa” in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*. edited by Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2000), 54.

<sup>4</sup> S.A. Thorpe, *African Traditional Religions: An Introduction* (Petroia: University of South Africa, 1991), 120.

body, represented as *ye*. Objects, beings, events, and facts engaged with the external light segment of the shadow, known as the *ye gaga*, its separate physical life consciousness, (*ye gil*) and metaphysical dimensions. Practitioners (worshippers) experienced dreams and visions from orishas and engaged in veneration communion with Ancestors through multiple forms of rituals bestowed upon the Lwa/Loa; borrowed lexeme from the Yorùbá language for lord (*oluwa*). Space was such a sacred extension of the person that, “To remove Africans by force from their land” was a “great injustice.”<sup>5</sup>

As the African ritual of initiation between the Adja Fon was carried across the Atlantic on slave vessels and supplanted within Afro-Atlantic religions in the Caribbean, Haitian Vodou, like Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and Jamaican and Barbadian Obeah, became targets of scorn among white Christian missionaries in slave societies. Missionaries working to erase African paganism were also determined to “affirm the inferiority of Blacks and thus justify their repressive attitudes toward them.”<sup>6</sup> Haitian Vodou, however, remained tethered to West African indigenous religious uniformity and cosmology.

Voodoo in New Orleans, however, became the manufactured identification of slave ‘devil-worship’ in the Christian mind. While there are numerous spellings of Vodou/Voodoo, some of which exposed the depths of white racism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for the purpose of this work I will alternate between the more well-known Vodou and Voodoo when discussing Saint-Domingue/Haiti and New Orleans, respectively.

Truly, there are no outstanding differences between Vodou and Voodoo, aside from the subtle cultural and

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<sup>5</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 26.

<sup>6</sup> “Folklore and Racism” by William R. Ferris, Jr., n.d., SPC.2002.009, box 2, folder 223, William R. Ferris Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

locational variances. Indeed, any dissimilarities which emerged between the two were only composites of the exploitations and complete misunderstandings of Voodoo in the United States, including, but certainly not limited to, contemporary usage of charms, stones, and Voodoo dolls. The persistent vilification of Voodoo, then, is the result of hundreds of years of racial stereotypes. In contemporary western societies, all non-Christian religions are observed with a dose of skepticism, primarily due to the monotheistic and patriarchal worldview of religion and nationalism. Vodou was and remains in Africa.

Voodoo was always present in New Orleans from the moment the first enslaved Africans were transported from Dahomey, the Congo, and other areas in West and Central Africa. While colonial Christian dogma ordained and justified slavery – none more than the Catholic church – the interconnectedness of Vodou culture with Afro-Catholicism presented an opportunity for Christians in New Orleans to reorient Vodou as *Voodoo*. This sardonic nomenclature of Haitian Vodou did more than respell its name, however. It also reinvested in anti-Black rhetoric while directly leveraging white New Orleanians' contempt for the newly arrived Saint-Domingue refugees. Moreover, sensationalized tales of “Vaudoux” priests and priestess engaging in blood and cannibalistic sacrifices on the eve of the Haitian Revolution put many white New Orleanians in states of total panic, believing the Haitian rebels were sending, “the most warlike to Louisiana.”<sup>7</sup>

### **From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans, with Blood**

On March 24, 1791, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson confided in a letter to his eldest child that, “St. Domingue and Martinique are involved in a horrid civil

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<sup>7</sup> Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 28.

war. Nothing can be more distressing than the situation of the inhabitants, as their slaves have been called into action, and are a terrible engine, absolutely ungovernable. ... An army and fleet from France are expected every hour to quell the disorders.”<sup>8</sup> Months later, Jefferson lamented to his third cousin Thomas Mann Rudolph in a letter dated August 7th that the French colony had dissolved into a state of utter chaos, “A decree of the National assembly of France, giving the rights of citizenship to the free people of colour of St. Domingo, has thrown that colony into a dangerous fermentation.”<sup>9</sup> Exactly one month later, on September 8th, Sylvanus (Silvanus) Bourne, Barnstable, Massachusetts merchant sent an urgent message to Jefferson about the carnage inside Saint-Domingue. “A new and alarming Catastrophe hath assailed this devoted Island. An insurrection among the negroes took place at Lembay. They have burned and laid waste all the Plantations. Their whole plan is marked with bitter resentment for former injuries and the cry of '*les droits de l'homme*' (human rights) is echoed through their Camp. They still continue their depredations...Here we have a lively instance of the baneful effects of Slavery, and I wish that America might add another laurel to her wreath of Fame, by leading the way to a general emancipation.”<sup>10</sup>

As Secretary of State Jefferson looked over Bourne’s letter he may have weighed the moment in with a sense of introspection. Having offered gradual emancipation as a remedy to the problem of slavery in the United States and seeing it all but erased from the American Constitution, Jefferson was warm to the idea of general emancipation. And this he kept to himself. Instead, Jefferson’s approach to the progressive loosening of the

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 19:604.

<sup>9</sup> Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, *Papers*, 22:11.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvanus Bourne to Jefferson, *Papers*, 22:133.

French imperial grip on Haitian slavery was to maintain a position of ignoring the rebel's cause and demands. Indeed, Jefferson was not the only white man dreading the fallout of the insurrection. Every American, white, Black, free, or slave, was in some way and to varying degrees, aware of the "catastrophe" in Saint-Domingue. Jefferson, a slave owner himself, could not help but side with the planter class, while internally apprehensive of what might happen if that "wreath of Fame" Bourne so poetically referred to, became a bed of thorns for the newly founded United States.

The Haitian Revolution had waged on for nine years by the time Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison in 1799. Two years prior, he confessed to Judge St. George Tucker of the United States District Court for the District of Virginia that he questioned whether history would look back on the Haitian Revolution as a moment of divine atonement for whites. "Perhaps the first chapter of this history," he began, "which has begun in St. Domingo, and the next succeeding ones which will recount how all the whites were driven from all the other islands, may prepare our minds for a peaceable accommodation between justice, policy and necessity, and furnish an answer to the difficult question "Whither shall the coloured emigrants go?" Then, realizing that he fathered multiple children with his slave Sally Hemmings, Jefferson soberly and retrospectively acknowledged, "But if something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murderers of our own children."<sup>11</sup>

By the time he became President of the United States in 1801, Jefferson's private and written lamentations of the Haitian Revolution alternated between sympathy, empathy, and apathy. As the last moments of the Revolution closed and a French defeat was all but inevitable, Jefferson, Madison, Claiborne, and every white person from Boston to New Orleans grew increasingly

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<sup>11</sup> Jefferson to St. George Tucker, *Papers*, 29:519.

worried that an influx of refugees would flood into the Louisiana territory and threaten American sovereignty. However, as historian Emily Clark notes, the migration of free persons of color escaping Cap-Français in Saint-Domingue into Louisiana occurred in two stages, between 1792 to 1804, and 1809, when 9,000 immigrants fleeing Cap-Français entered New Orleans.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, seeking to ease tensions while protecting the nation's investments in slavery, Jefferson proposed to crush Haiti's post-war reconstruction by stripping crucial Haitian commerce, prohibiting ships' entry into and out of the island, and refusing to recognize Haiti's independence under Black leadership.

On January 1, 1804, Thomas Jefferson and the Atlantic World had no other option but to acknowledge the rebels' sovereignty as the Haitian Revolution came to its decisive end. In its wake, the United States was in a precarious position as no other slaving colony had ever defeated and ousted its overlord. The fact that the Haitian rebels gained their independence through a protracted military campaign waged over twelve years was mystifying and troubling.

On the night before the insurrection a Haitian Vodou ritual was performed by dozens of rebels in the densely wooded area of the northern Morne Rouge region of Haiti, southwest of Cap-Français (modern-day Cap-Haïtien), in what became known as the Bois-Caïman

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<sup>12</sup> Clark explains in the footnotes to her book *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* that a small number of Haitian refugees began to arrive in New Orleans in 1792. This intermittent exodus continued infrequently until the Haitian Revolution ended in January, 1804. In 1809, a larger migration occurred with 9,000 refugees indirectly entering New Orleans from Cuba. This mass exodus compelled Louisiana Governor, William C.C. Claiborne confessed to the French consul in New Orleans François Desforgues that the sudden appearance of so many immigrants into the territory would create massive inconvenience and embarrassment to the city's white citizens (42).



ceremony. Present that night was Jamaican Vodou priest Dutty Boukman, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Georges Biassou, a sugar master and confederate of Toussaint, Spanish officer and slave Jean-François "Papillon" also known as Jean-François Petecou, Juan Francisco, and General Jean-François, and Jeannot Bullet, the latter characterized as "utterly remorseless... even towards his own kind," who, "found inspiration in cruelty; a sadist without the refinements that so-called civilization brings."<sup>13</sup> An equally dreadful description of Bullet was of a slave whose soul was "perfidious" and countenance was "frightful and revolting." Bullet was described as "capable of the greatest crimes [who was] inaccessible to regret and remorse."<sup>14</sup>

Also present was Cécile Fatiman, a Mambo Vodou priestess.<sup>15</sup> Fatiman, the daughter of an African slave

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<sup>13</sup> Wenda Parkinson, *This Gilded African* (London: Quartet Books, 1978), 43.

<sup>14</sup> John Rely Beard, *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Negro Patriot of Hayti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1853; 2012), 63. It should be noted that Mr. Beard was a nineteenth century English Unitarian minister, and as such, may have exhibited racial bias in his description of Jeannot Bullet. As with many first person accounts from whites of this era, their personal assessments of Black people, especially those who engaged in rebellions, become complicated by the racialization of those they are describing. However, by some accounts, Bullet was indeed viewed as a vicious participant and leader in the early stages of the rebellion. After the execution of Dutty Boukman in November 1791, Bullet, along with Jean François Papillon, Georges Biassou, and Toussaint Bréda assumed leadership roles in the rebellion. Papillon would later arrest and execute Bullet that same month, reportedly due to the latter's uncontrollable depravity.

<sup>15</sup> Historian Etienne Charlier described Fatiman as a "the daughter of African Nègresse and a Corsican Prince," who was a "green-eyed Mulâtresse [with] long black and silky hair." in *Aperçu sur la formation historique de la Nation haïtienne* (Port-au-Prince: Presses Libres, 1954), 49; Aisha K. Finch "Cécile Fatiman and Petra Carabalí, Late Eighteenth-Century Haiti and Mid- Nineteenth-Century Cuba" in *As if She Were Free: A Collective Biography of Women and Emancipation in the Americas* edited by Erica L. Ball, Tatiana Seijas, and Terri L. Synder (London: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 295.

woman and a white Frenchman from Corsica presided over the Vodou ceremony during a torrential thunder and lightning storm. As those gathered prepared for battle, Fatiman emboldened everyone to take revenge against their French colonizers. Extending her sharpened knife to the sky in preparation to slaughter a pig in a ceremonial sacrifice, Fatiman and Dutty stood before the insurrectionists and demanded they, “Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us.” Fatiman was said to have invoked the *lwa*, no doubt for protection and success. The ceremony represented what Aisha Finch referred to as the concept of “sacred accompaniment,” where the one who calls upon the *lwa* becomes possessed and “walks with divine presence.”<sup>16</sup> Most Haitian Vodou practitioners believe Fatiman was possessed by the *lwa* Erzulie or Ezili, as Finch further remarks.<sup>17</sup>

Most whites believed only a supernatural force could have contributed to the rebellion's success, with many whites suggesting that it was the use of devil worship which aided the rebels. One such person was the late eighteenth-century French creole writer Moreau de St. Méry. Writing two years before the Bois-Caïman ceremony, Méry's sexualized fetishisms of “the mysterious cult of Vaudoux” spoke directly to how whites – both French and English – misunderstood and sensationalized Haitian Vodou. In his travel archive from Saint-Domingue, Méry characterized enslaved people as engaging in public dance, “without a doubt to weaken the alarm that [it] causes in the Colony.” Moreover, Méry maintained that “nothing is more dangerous...than this cult of Vaudoux.” His assessment affirmed that, “It can be made into a terrible weapon - this extravagant idea that the ministers of this

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<sup>16</sup> Finch, 306.

<sup>17</sup> Finch, 307.

alleged god know all and can do anything.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, for men like Méry, Vodou was unpretentiously a superstitious cult dangerous to the structure of Saint-Domingue slavery.

Despite white planters, travelers, writers, and government officials marginalizing Haitian cosmology, Vodou culture, and the ritual spaces, notwithstanding the overarching pursuit for liberation from French imperialism, the rebels of Haiti would indeed obtain their freedom, much to the chagrin and horror of white New Orleanians.

### From Vodou to Voodoo

Perhaps seeing the writing on the wall, William C.C. Claiborne, Governor of the Mississippi Territory and Governor General and Intendant of the Province of Louisiana ordered a proclamation just one month after the end of the Haitian Revolution in February 1804 by stating, “It having been represented to me that a number of Negroes belonging to the Citizens of Louisiana, had escaped from the service of their Masters, and were running at large to the injury of such their owners and whereas, I have been requested...to take some measures to induce such runaway Slave forwith to return to their duty.”<sup>19</sup> Several months later, in July 1804, Governor Claiborne wrote a correspondence to Lieutenant Colonel Constant Freeman seeking assistance with the problem of immigrants from Saint-Domingue. “There is another duty,” the Governor wrote, “which I must request you exact from the Officer...to bring hither, as great a number as possible...of *persons* without regard to their Character.” Those *persons* the Governor was requesting were slaves from “the English Island” who, “may be imported,” with some coming from

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<sup>18</sup> Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: Le Natal, 1983), 3; Finch, 301.

<sup>19</sup> William C.C. Claiborne to Secretary of State James Madison, *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne*, 1:379-80.

“the Brigands from St. Domingo,” however, with “precautions.”<sup>20</sup> Claiborne’s request offers an interesting glimpse into the struggles the territory was facing. On one hand, men and women from Boston to New York, Philadelphia to Richmond, and Charleston to New Orleans were knowledgeable of the insurrection in Saint-Domingue to varying degrees, with many having varying opinions. On the other hand, a ban on the importation of slaves into Louisiana was received by the U.S. Senate in January 1804. Indeed, a portion of those entering New Orleans were slaves coming with their slave masters. But this was far less than the total number of native-born slaves in the city. However, this still placed New Orleans in a precarious economic position.

Juan Vicente Folch y Juan, Governor of West Florida, was equally invested in the problem in New Orleans. In a private letter to Secretary of State Robert Smith in May 1809 and found within the official letters of Governor Claiborne, remarked upon his ten days spent in the Crescent City by emphatically stating, “I can assure you, without being afraid of incurring a mistake, that there exists at present in this city and its limits from four to five hundred deserters and malefactors... who have come to take refuge under the sovereignty of the U. States.”<sup>21</sup>

By the time Louisiana joined the Union in 1812, Haitian Vodou was resurrected as Voodoo in the white imagination. As the Haitian Revolution moved further into America’s rearview, so too did the looming threat of Haitian Vodou. However, white New Orleanians remained ever cautious of potential slave uprisings. In New Orleans it was imperative that free persons of color and enslaved men and women from the former Saint-Domingue not influence

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<sup>20</sup> Claiborne to Col. Freeman, *Official Letter Books*, 2:361.

<sup>21</sup> Governor Floch to Robert Smith, *Letter Books*, 4:353-4.

the city's slave population, especially as it pertained to the presence of Haitian Vodou. The transformation of the creole culture of New Orleans coincided with the gradual modification of Vodou into Voodoo. While on the surface this shift could be viewed simply as an alternative spelling, what Voodoo would embody in the succeeding decades after the Haitian Revolution reinforced the racism from those like Moreau de St. Méry.

Voodoo, as far as whites were concerned, was not a religion, but an exhibition of savagery, fetish and demon worship, animal sacrifice, cannibalism, nudity, drumming, sexual promiscuity, and interracial orgies.<sup>22</sup> Among enslaved men and women in New Orleans, however, it represented what a true liberation force could look like. Those already suspicious about what enslaved people were doing religiously were now terrified at the prospect that their "Voodoo" would inspire domestic rebellions. One such incident was reported in 1825 when "One of the Negresses brought from Santo Domingo [was] said to have purchased her freedom through secret Voodoo practices." This Haitian refugee named Sanité Dédé, was said to have earned enough money by selling sweetmeats, "in front of the Cabildo in order to support herself." However, this would have not earned her enough money to purchase her freedom. Still, it was believed that Dédé conducted her business "at the brickyard in Dumaine Street and was probably the first to lead a band of cultists into the habit of holding their gatherings on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain."<sup>23</sup> The story of Sanité Dédé and Voodoo's hypersexualized powers would be written in an account by J.W. Buel, who claimed to have witnessed a ceremonial

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<sup>22</sup> Michelle Y. Gordon, "Midnight Scenes and Orgies: Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2012): 769.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (New York: Pelican Publishing, 2003), 44.

ritual involving snakes, a Black cat, drums, a banjo, and “half a dozen white men and two white women.” “Zoro,” an older slave who Buel identified as a seller of palmetto and sassafras roots, “leaving his tam-tam, went up to the altar...and again drew forth his snake. He forced it to wriggle and writhe over and around the company, uttering the words which were repeated by sixty voices, “Voudou! Vodou Magnian!”<sup>24</sup>

To any casual observer in the late antebellum and Reconstruction period, first person narratives from men like Buel were terrifying and damning. Unlike Marie Laveau, the famous nineteenth century New Orleans Vodoo priestess who captured the imagination and service of white and Black New Orleanians, women like Cécile Fatiman and Sanité Dédé in Haiti and New Orleans respectively, Cuban priestess Petra Carabalí, and men like Haiti’s Dutty Boukman or the New Orleans figure known simply as Zoro, were largely considered dangerous orchestrators of violence, sexual degeneracy, witchcraft, and of course, in the case of Fatiman and Boukman, anarchy.

Vodou/Voodoo, thus, emerged in the post-Haitian Revolution Atlantic world as a symbol of spirit worship for descendants of Africa, but an emblem of slave revolution in

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<sup>24</sup> Tallant, 44-46. At the time, Buel’s assumed account was one of the only narratives of pre- Marie Laveau female Vodoo priestess in southern Louisiana. Laveau, the famous New Orleans Vodoo priestess in the mid to late nineteenth century, married a Saint-Domingue refugee, Jacques Paris, and was herself a child of a free man of color. Laveau’s influence in the Black and creole communities of New Orleans was due, in no small part, to her familiarity with Haitian Vodou, her status as a quadroon, and her ownership of property, including two slaves and \$500 worth of personal artifacts bequeathed to her by her father upon her marriage to Paris. Though Laveau’s rich legacy as the leading Vodoo priestess of her time would be most certainly a welcome addition to the body of this work, I will only briefly mention her here since Laveau was revered and celebrated during her time, avoiding the demonization that many others could not escape.

its most perverted and destructive form to white Americans. As one historian explains, “In terms of revolution, Vodou was a definite advantage because of the way it’s organized. It is cellular, it is nonhierarchical, and it might just as well have been copied from a manual on guerilla warfare, it’s just that strategically sound.”<sup>25</sup> However, the real threat to white New Orleanians reached beyond what Voodoo represented in its revolutionary sense, but also what it signaled to the changing socio-political and economic landscape in the Atlantic. As mentioned above, as more free persons of color escaped the carnage of war-torn Saint-Domingue, their presence caused much disconcertion among white citizens. Chiefly affected were the plantation owners, both small and large, who not only had to contend with a sudden influx of persons of color who were free, some of whom were themselves slave owners, but the perception that the territory’s administration was interfering with its established slavocracy.

Months after the end of the Revolution, Governor Claiborne wrote privately to Etienne de Bore, Mayor of New Orleans, about the problems of new slaves the territory was facing. “With the view of remedying the evils to be apprehended from the improper introduction of Slaves and other people of Colour from the Islands, I had thought it sufficient to cause all persons of this description to be stopped at Plaquemines until they obtained my permission to ascend the River.” Concerning the prohibition of any person of color, free or slave, into the territory Governor Claiborne added, “I shall avail myself of your proposition for additional precautions: therefore no person shall introduce Negroes into Louisiana of any description

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<sup>25</sup> Madison Smartt Bell, *All Souls' Rising* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 52. Also see: Kirstin L. Squint “Vodou and Revolt in Literature of the Haitian Revolution.” in *CLA Journal* vo. 51, no. 2 (December 2007): 173.

whatever, until they have first been stopped, by the Commandant of Plaquemine who shall forward to me list of their number.”<sup>26</sup>

Speaking on behalf of slaveholders in a letter dated September 20, 1804, to James Madison, Governor Claiborne addressed the continued concerns of white New Orleanians. “Sir, I enclose [for] you a Petition addressed to me and signed by a number of respectable Inhabitants of this City. You will discover there is some apprehension of an insurrection among the Negroes and that much alarm exists, altho’ I am not myself of opinion that we are in as imminent danger, as the Memorialists seem to think, I have nevertheless taken every means of precaution in my power.”<sup>27</sup>

On the 16th of October 1804, Governor Claiborne received an urgent letter from the Civil & Military Commandant Edward D. Turner. Turner informed the Governor of an uncovered slave uprising which involved, “the Negroes of one or two plantations,” planning to “scheme to desert to Nacogdoches.” Before anyone could be forewarned, the nine runaways, “had got off, after breaking open a House and stealing a quantity of powder and Lead Arms & they took with them a number of slaves one who was preparing to join their gang, was discovered and shot at by the Patrol and though not wounded, was so bewildered in consequence, that he lost his way and the next day gave himself up he has turned informer and has already implicated thirty.”<sup>28</sup> Information about runaways plotting insurrections was certainly not new in any slaveholding territory or state, even in Louisiana. However, the unique circumstances which the territory faced was its proximity to Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, and Barbados. Runaway slaves who may have heard of the Haitian Revolution were

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<sup>26</sup> Claiborne to Mayor Bore, *Official Letter Books*, 2:113.

<sup>27</sup> Claiborne to James Madison, *Official Letter Books*, 2:337-8.

<sup>28</sup> E.D. Turner to Claiborne, *Official Letter Books*, 2:387.



certainly inspired by the fall of the French. Moreover, it is probable that much of the rumors spread around plantations about the usurpation of power came from those who either had first-hand knowledge or were at the very least deeply familiar with its ties to Vodou. That the Governor continued to feel the pressure of imported slaves infiltrating his territory showed that the insurrection in Haiti had a profound impact upon New Orleans, and if that were the case, Vodou was just as dynamic.

Six years prior to Louisiana earning statehood, legislation was used as a vehicle of racial oppression in Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution. None of the legislation, however, spoke about Voodoo as a religion, yet it was highly implied that Voodoo was the culprit for what Emily Clark identified as fears of “racial amalgamation.”<sup>29</sup> The territory’s reactionary tactics to prevent insurrections like Stono notwithstanding, additional legislation was passed like the April 1807 Act to “*prevent the emigration of free negroes and mulattoes into the Territory of Orleans*” and the February 1809 Act to “*provide for the delivery fugitive Slaves to their owners, inhabitants of the Spanish Provinces adjacent to the Territory of Orleans.*” Moreover, those suspected of “pretending to be free” had to produce documentation from a magistrate of their free status and obtain a certificate, or otherwise be considered a fugitive slave according to slave acts of the time.

Over the next two years white New Orleanians witnessed an unsteady stream of migrants from Haiti enter the Crescent City. Their anxieties growing, time had arrived to put a stop to the continued wave. In 1806, Louisiana legislators submitted several proposals specifically targeting free persons of color. Among these initiatives was the territorial legislation prohibiting entry of free Black men into the territory while at the same time ordering all Black non-native born Louisianans fifteen and

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<sup>29</sup> Clark, 120.

older to leave. While this portion of the legislation was never fully enforced, others were, including limiting the movement of Black slaves in and out of New Orleans. In 1807, Congress passed federal laws “to prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States.”<sup>30</sup> Also illegal was the crossing of borders and state lines by slaves without accompaniment by their owner. What would later become the Fugitive Slave Act, this racially discriminatory legislation, also known as the *Territorial Legislation/Black Code of 1806*, was loosely borrowed from the South Carolina Act of 1740, itself a reactionary set of laws passed in response to the Stono Rebellion.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> While certainly ambiguous to most states, and otherwise ignored in part or wholly, the gradual abolition of international slave trafficking into the United States did not affect slaveholding states all the same, nor did it deter most slaveholding states from continuing to import slaves from Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. In fact, most slaves who came into New Orleans after the 1804 legislation were considered to have breached the law and could therefore be reenslaved. Moreover, Governor Claiborne protested the legislation, noting in a letter addressed to Secretary of State Robert Smith dated May 19, 1809 that, “The difficulties which the Law of the U. States oppose[d] to the introduction of these slaves into the Territory, have induced a number of a very respectable and humane [sic] Citizens, to address to me a Petition...The situation of these unfortunate People excites in a great degree my sympathy. But my powers do not permit me to interfere in their favour, otherwise than to lay their case before the President” (4:354). As shown, Claiborne felt his hands were tied and sought to steer petitioners in the direction of President Madison.

<sup>31</sup> The Stono Rebellion of 1739 began on September 9 on the banks of the Stono River 20 miles southwest of Charleston, South Carolina. It was the largest slave insurrection on United States soil until the Nat Turner Rebellion a century later. While what triggered the uprisings that September in South Carolina remains speculative, some blamed the Spanish for enticing slaves to flee to St. Augustine, Florida. In turn, those who ran away were promised emancipation. Despite the rebellion being swiftly put down less than a day later, an estimated twenty whites were murdered until a militia between twenty and one hundred armed

The Stono Rebellion was the largest slave uprising up to that point and signaled for colonial and later white Americans that enslaved men and women of African descent would continue to resist their enslavement, even if it meant the deaths of themselves and their white captors. Despite the Stono Rebellion erupting near Charleston, South Carolina sixty years before the Haitian Revolution would set the island of Saint-Domingue ablaze, whites remained in a constant state of panic and fear that those they held in captivity would eventually seek their freedom. No less inspired by the purpose of being a free human being, many white New Orleanians recognized the relationship between Haitian Vodou and the insurrection. In fact, some understood it in a comparative light, as Christianity represented whiteness and white dominance. Thus, as Louisiana gained statehood in 1812, it carried not only the massive prospect of national expansion through the fabled Louisiana Purchase, but something more depressing in the minds of many white planters: if given the opportunity, Voodoo would become a dangerous instrument of rebellion.

### **“Voodoo is Not Always Harmless...It Can Kill”**

Although *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* was published in 1926, Newbell Niles Puckett echoed the opinions of a prior generation by coolly placing the onus of white New Orleanians' fears about Saint-Domingue migrants on Voodoo. “In 1809... Haytian (Haitian) planters with their slaves fled from Cuba, where they sought refuge during the Haytian Revolution, to New Orleans and made their residence there. These Africans too, were faithful adorers of the serpent. Such were the principal sources of the Voodoo religion in the United States.”<sup>32</sup>

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whites put down the insurrection.

<sup>32</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 178.

As shown above, the serpent as a figure in Vodou/Voodoo rituals helped to shape Black men and women as purveyors of evil and witchcraft in the imagination of whites. That the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) characterize the serpent as the enemy of God, the trickster of humanity, was certainly not lost on those who found Voodoo to be perverse. Still, professed first person accounts of animal and human sacrifices over saturated the imagination of whites. One such “Story of Voudou Horrors” spun a horrific tale of a ritual where a white goat was sacrificed along with a “female child [who was] stupefied with drugs, its veins opened, and the blood sucked.”<sup>33</sup> As Michelle Gordon explains, “Nineteenth-century public Voodoo narrative played an authenticating role in the social construction of black criminality and predatory hypersexuality, which became “the central justifications for the terrorism, mass black incarceration, labor exploitation, and regulation of female sexuality.”<sup>34</sup>

Images of serpents, sacrificial goats, and the dissection of children played directly into the hands of white patriarchal supremacy. If the Black male could be linked to the most perverse physical violence, then white men were inclined to respond in kind. Rumors of Voodoo orgies involving white women struck a nerve so viscerally that white men in New Orleans were encouraged to take up arms against Voodoo’s public and private eroticism, a racial play which was allegedly for the protection of white womanhood. However, white men’s fanatical defense of the white woman masked their more authentic motives; unyielding racial oppression and anti-Black violence. Indeed, whites never organized around Black Catholics in New Orleans the way they mobilized against Voodoo. “Black barbarity, criminality, and sexual promiscuity,”

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<sup>33</sup> Gordon, 774.

<sup>34</sup> Gordon, 772.

Gordon further emphasized, “rendered Voodoo such a fertile site for white supremacist imagination and discourse.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, New Orleans’ Black creole culture became the target of scorn from white Christian missionaries equating the Crescent City as a haven of spiritual wickedness. Such perceptions twisted in the psyche of white New Orleanians. By the middle of the nineteenth century Voodoo was unequivocally known as the most “evil and repulsive form of African slavery.”<sup>36</sup>

Although it would not be until the 1850s when Louisiana newspapers would consistently print biased and highly exaggerated reports of “sorcery under the name of Voodooism,” rumors of children being “stolen and made away with,” or accusations about the “evil practices attributed to the “Vaudous” of Louisiana,” Voodoo continued to be presented as an inherent illness of slaves. In *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, Newbell Niles Puckett predictably drew from a Kentucky study the deeply inaccurate assessment that, “the only class of contributions made by the Negro to our stock of superstitions is that of the Voodoo or hoodoo signs.”<sup>37</sup> Depicting Black depravity as generational became a successful trope to maintain white supremacy and would continue to have unfortunately long-term effects of anti-Black racism. Indeed, discounting Black any form of spirituality that is not Christian remains a strong tactic employed when racists attempt to pin the woes of Black people on so-called Hamitic and generational curses of people of African descent.

As accounts of Voodoo’s horrors intensified, journals and newspapers seized upon opportunities to sensationalize their worries. It should be noted most

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon, 772.

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Morrow Long, “Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment, and Religion” in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (October 2002), 87.

<sup>37</sup> Pucket, 166.

accounts of Voodoo followed the same trope and was given almost exclusively by white men. How or perhaps more importantly why these white men found themselves in the company of Voodoo priests/priestess and witnessed Voodoo ceremonies strains credulity. Vodou was and remains an extremely secretive religion. While some aspects of Vodou's rituals can be performed openly during certain holidays or celebrations, most of them are private and only shown to those who are considered initiates. That white men in New Orleans during the late antebellum period were so privy to such intimate information suggests that much of their "accounts" were either strongly exaggerated retellings or flat out lies. However, the sensationalizing of Voodoo captured the imaginations of whites while exploiting their deepest fears.

One of the earliest newspaper articles documenting the evils of Voodoo was published in the *Louisiana Gazette* in August 1820. Dated the 16th of August, the story notes that several illegal nighttime meetings for "occult practice and the idolatrous worship of an African deity called *vaoodoo*" was discovered, resulting in the arrest of several persons of color and one white man."<sup>38</sup> Stories with outlandish headlines like, "*Voudous on the Rampage*" and "*The Virgin of the Voudous*" fed into the stereotype of sexually perverse Black women "sables" and male "savages" attacking white women further fanned the flames of anti-Voodoo racism. Sexual politics soon replaced secular misgivings which reinforced opinions that Voodoo operated as a pseudo religion preying on white women and children by lustful Black beasts. Nineteenth century writer Thomas Nelson Page, playing into the trope of Black savagery vis-à-vis Voodoo, insisted, "The crime of rape had its baleful origin in the teaching of equality and the

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<sup>38</sup> "Idolatry and Quackery," in *The Louisiana Gazette*, 16 August 1820. See: Long, 88-89.

placing of power in the ignorant negroes hands during Reconstruction. The intelligent Negro may understand what social equality truly means," he conceded, "but to the ignorant and brutal young negro, it signifies but one thing: the opportunity to enjoy, equally with white men, the privilege of cohabitating with white women."<sup>39</sup>

By the middle of the century, the demonization of Voodoo had hit its injurious stride. An August 1850 article in the *New Orleans Weekly Delta* described a commotion which erupted among a group of free Black people in the city. The cause of the outbreak was listed as a Voodoo celebration. Receiving word of the disturbance, the third municipality, "Made a descent on a party of colored people, engaged in celebrating the rites and mysteries of Voudouism...No spell or incarnation which they could weave was sufficient to prevent the police from doing their duty, and so they made prisoners of the party."<sup>40</sup>

A Virginia chronicler, warning of the dangers of Black emancipation and Voodoo, lamented free Blacks would, "reapse promptly into the Voodooism of Africa."<sup>41</sup> Remarked a white New Englander in 1867 after visiting the South, "The great mass of the colored people [are] deplorably ignorant, often sadly immoral, and in their manner of religious worship, wild and extravagant, often mistaking mere animal excitement for true religious emotion and joy."<sup>42</sup> As always, African folk beliefs and rituals represented in Voodoo were reinterpreted as harmful supernatural occurrences, visions of ghosts or spirits, or

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Nelson Page "The Lynching of Negroes - Its Cause and Prevention" in *North American Review* Vol. 178 (1904): 36, 45.

<sup>40</sup> "The Virgin of the Vodous." in *New Orleans Weekly Delta*, 12 Aug 1850.

<sup>41</sup> Basil Davidson, *The African Genius: An Introduction to African Cultural and Social History* (Boston: Little & Brown Publishing, 1969), 126.

<sup>42</sup> Davidson, 126.

other afflictions. Interestingly, whites also sought to undermine Voodoo by suggesting supernatural harming was reflective of a larger problem among the Black population: rebellion. Writing in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Julien A. Hall declared: “The readers of the Journal are no doubt familiar with many of the superstitions and beliefs of the Negro race regarding ‘conjuring’ and ‘tricking.’ These beliefs were brought here from Africa by the first comers and continue in full force to this day.”<sup>43</sup> Also, in the *Journal* William Wells Newell wrote: “It is very desirable that someone should examine these beliefs and ascertain whether any form of Voodoo worship can be substantiated in Louisiana.”<sup>44</sup>

A June 1896 *New Orleans Times-Democrat* article described a particularly frightening Voodoo ceremony, which included the boiling of a Black cat. “The Voodoos had worked themselves to such a frenzy,” the article begins, “that they began tearing off their clothes . . . until finally . . . nearly a half hundred impassioned black savages danced as naked as islanders to the beating of ox skulls and tom-toms, the weird crooning of the hags, and the sharp ejaculations of bucks and wenches.” To the targeted reader, labels like “hags, bucks, and wenches” would have conjured up memories of slavery when older Black women were “hags,” Black men being used as breeding instruments were known as “bucks” and young slave girls were called “wenches.”

The article continues to describe the scene. “At the height of the revel the King kicked out the fire, and in the light of the embers upset the cauldron on the ground, and grasping the cat in his fingers, began thrusting the awful mess into his mouth, the others following his example. The

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<sup>43</sup> *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 10, no. 30 (September 1897): 241.

<sup>44</sup> “Reports of Voodoo Worship in Hayti and Louisiana.” in *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 2, no. 4 (March 1889): 42.



dance was now nothing but the lewdest and most outrageous orgy.<sup>45</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the language used in this article would have ensnared every white man from Missouri to Louisiana. Likewise, the description spared no imagination about immorality on display. By overlapping Black male hypersexuality and Black criminality with terms like “orgy” implies a type of racial “amalgamation” which threatened white men through the threatening of the white woman. The description of the Black “buck” engaged in unfiltered “ejaculation” furthermore portends the idea that white women could become victims of Black savagery. The irony only lies in the fact that a white man writing in a white newspaper would alert white readers to the “diabolical practices of enslaved Black men.”<sup>46</sup> This was and remains a centuries-old allusion used by white men to create fear of Black men as “savages and sable subjects, typically of the darkest skin and unattractive features,” or the Black “beast rapist” that the white racists declared were, “a real and symbolic threat of Negro domination.”<sup>47</sup>

The cynical and deliberately racist tone of journals and newspapers of the late nineteenth century mirrored most public opinion of Voodoo. White New Orleanians saw justification in their racist attitudes toward Voodoo because of bizarre and dangerous reports which spoke to their phobias and racist conceptions about Black men and women; both free and slave. Moreover, white New Orleans newspapers navigated through a deceptive web of lies to convince its readers that Voodoo posed the greatest threat to the safety of white women and children. Yet, those who often gave testimonies of what they witnessed often failed

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<sup>45</sup> “Dance of the Voodoos,” in *The New Orleans Times-Democrat* (24 June 1896), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 76.

<sup>47</sup> Gordon, 769.

to realize that they were also complicit in the sexual barbarity of Black men by attending these rituals as simply “observers.”

A September 1893 story in the *Times-Picayune*, titled “A Voodoo Priest Terrorizes Kentucky” sought to distinguish Voodoo during slavery from Voodoo post-emancipation, no doubt to infer that Blacks were less harmful –and thus whites much safer– when Black people were enslaved. The story reads in part: “While many features of this sacred lore, so vividly described in Sir Spencer St. John’s work on the sect in Louisiana and other gulf states will not be found faithfully produced at this period, yet it is synthetically similar to be easily recognized as a part of that barbarous ceremony peculiar to the superstitious adherents of Voodoo worship. Their rites, however, do not partake of those ghastly features that characterize the practices of many of the slaves imported directly from the African coast to the United States.”<sup>48</sup>

In extrapolating the context of this story, it is easy to recognize the paternalistic mentality gripped by the writer. While the story uses the phrase, “this sacred lore,” it simultaneously uses words like “barbarous,” “ghastly,” and of course, “Voodoo worship” as racist language. Nowhere in this story is New Orleans Voodoo compared, favorably or unfavorably to Christianity. In fact, as the writer continues, familiar tropes of Black superhuman qualities are invoked to further white patriarchal supremacy. “About the close of the war,” the writer persists, “a powerfully built negro calling himself Elisha Bordeaux made his appearance in this vicinity. At the time he appeared to be about 70 years old, though vigorous as a mule.”

The *Times-Picayune* writer further included that Elisha immediately became prominent in the community, though no one could utter his name. To this point, the

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<sup>48</sup> “A Voodoo Priest Terrorizes Kentucky,” *Times-Picayune*, September 8, 1893.

writer attempted to make clear that the old man had simply tricked everyone, continuing: “Before the old man had resided in the vicinity a year, miraculous powers were attributed to him by the ignorant negroes. A few of the colored people were too intelligent to be deceived, but his influence with the majority was so great that those better informed were not anxious to assert their skepticism.” An article in the *New York Evening Post* attempted to calm the fears of white New Orleanians by confirming that reports of Voodoo rituals were “tame compared to their horrible midnight orgies...which the white man is not allowed to witness.” The writer goes on to state, “we can only form an idea of their barbarity from the rumors that come to us...or the reports of some of their more enlightened brethren.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Voodoo was not that harmful to white men, after all.

### **Conclusion**

By 1900, most Louisiana newspapers began to move away from their campaign to demonize Voodoo. Part of the reason was the massive expansion of the nation which caused more attention to be paid to the political and economic fortunes of the Union. While Voodoo still hovered around the periphery of the white consciousness, it quietly ceased to be the prevailing thought on most white men’s minds.

The passion to associate Voodoo with witchcraft was simply a racist patriarchal system predicated on maintaining slave subordination through fanatical fear mongering. William Adams, a former slave from Texas noted that whites rejected what they scoffed at as Black superstitions because they did not appreciate enslaved people’s relationship with God:

“There am lots of folks, and educated ones too, that says we-uns believes in superstition. Well, 'tis cause

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<sup>49</sup> Gordon, 774.

they don't understand. 'Member the Lord, in some of His ways, can be mysterious. The Bible says so. There am some things the Lord wants all folks to know, some things just the chosen few to know, and some things no one should know. Now, just 'cause you don't know 'bout some of the Lord's laws, 'tain't superstition if some other person understands and believes in such.....When the Lord gives such power to a person, it just comes to 'em."<sup>50</sup>

Whites saw no failure in their ministry despite preaching salvation to those in life bondage.

The burgeoning Black press of the late nineteenth century sought to reorient its Black readership to the truth of white newspaper's disingenuous reporting of Voodoo. The *New Orleans Republican*, *New York Age*, and *Chicago Defender*, among others, realized the harm white Louisiana newspapers were causing innocent Black men and women and became vocal opponents of anti-Black racism permeating through the pages of multiple newspapers. While the damage had no doubt been inflicted, Blacks were made aware of the "intentionally distorted" reports of Voodoo. That aside, what may be most remarkable is the tenacity of the spirit of Voodoo to survive such a vicious onslaught. A significant amount of this is due to the descendants of enslaved Africans in Louisiana whose cultural footprint could not be erased. White Americans, like the French before them, were less threatened when they believed enslaved men and women were unlikely to revolt against their oppressors. It was only after the Haitian rebels successfully overthrew the French crown that white New Orleanians began to panic over Voodoo. The paradox of a

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<sup>50</sup> Chireau, "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic." in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 231.

religion used as a source of resistance was ignored because of their racist ideologies. So long as white New Orleanians convinced themselves that enslaved men and women of African descent were docile and compliant, they paid little mind to Voodoo. White fear, hatred, and demonization of Voodoo came from a place where whites could not understand or appreciate the special bond enslaved people shared with their ancestors and homelands. Whites did not fear or hate Voodoo because it stood contrary to all things European and Christian, but because of what it could represent in the hearts and minds of the enslaved, especially after the Haitian Revolution. As Stephanie Mitchem remarked, “Beyond enslavement, the continued social construction of black bodies to be perceived as inferior was held firmly in place with the use of technologies of racism.”<sup>51</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, whites had all but managed to successfully demonize Voodoo in the American imagination. As the Black church morphed into the prominent role of revolutionary vanguard of Black people during the first half of the twentieth century, Voodoo’s place as the religion of revolution receded. Black Christians, tethered to the salvific model of Black bourgeoisie adopted some of the racialized stereotypes of Voodoo employed by whites a century earlier. Eventually, Voodoo became marketable primarily because it was no longer to be feared. Once this occurred, whites seized the opportunity to exploit Voodoo once again, this time for fetish commoditization. Thus, the white man’s magic was not the Black man’s magic.

Today, the American concept of Voodoo is displayed in the most profitable of ways. The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum entices visitors on its website to

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<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 44.

“Explore New Orleans Voodoo: Unlike anything you’ve ever seen before.” While certainly an engaging and interesting composite of New Orleans Voodoo history, it fails to cover most of the authentic elements of Haitian Vodou or the history of its demonization. Instead, it offers a visual aid to draw in curious spectators, researchers, and those seeking psychic readings. To say this is a long way from the moments in history when Voodoo practitioners in New Orleans were doing the “devil’s work” is certainly an understatement.

This is not to cast aspersions against the museum, but to illustrate the dynamics of Voodoo, both then and now. Voodoo sells, in many forms, which is understandable to a certain point. Beyond that, it is a gross exploitation of a religion which Haitian rebels looked to as they prepared to die for their independence. Could there be no bigger dichotomy than this?

And yet, this is where Voodoo retains its power. Through the memory of resistance. As one historian notes, “In terms of the slaves’ condition or black-white relations, magic never significantly altered the status quo. But it gave the slaves and later the freemen, who were effectively denied any semblance of collective power, a measure of individual power.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, Voodoo never lost its power. It was simply reset for greater purposes.

Religion then, was never truly the source of white anti-Blackness toward Voodoo. It was always about power and the attempt to strip it away from those who understood its value in association with freedom. It was only when whites began to feel threatened that slaves would be influenced by the events of the Haitian Revolution that they began to think of Voodoo as evil. But Voodoo was only evil to those whose deeds were evil themselves.

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<sup>52</sup> Jim Haskins, *Voodoo and Hoodoo* (New York: Original Publications, 1978), 72.

The legacies of Haitian Vodou and late antebellum Voodoo in New Orleans have not been extinguished but remains a symbol of resistance for Black men and women in the Diaspora. Indeed, there are those who remain ever diligent in protecting its power and mystique. Therefore, Voodoo shall always be at the core of the Black resistance experience to be displayed as a foundational element of ancestral veneration and spirit worship.