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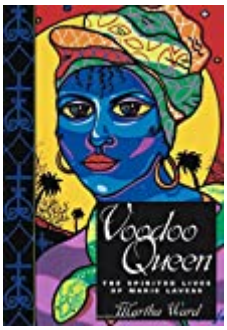

Martha Ward. *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. xvii + 246 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-629-2.

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The Real Marie Laveau

In June 1874, twelve-thousand New Orleanians, both black and white, flocked to Lake Pontchartrain to see Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau perform her famed religious rites on St. John's Eve. Even today, the power of Voodoo and the "spirited" women who wielded that power draws thousands of annual visitors to the Laveau tomb in the city's St. Louis Cemetery One, located on Basin Street. In her exploration of the Laveau phenomenon in *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*, anthropologist Martha Ward offers a synthesis of secondary and primary sources, including first-hand testimonials collected between 1935 and 1943 by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. She has reaped a rich harvest.

Voodoo, meaning "deity," first emerged in Louisiana in the eighteenth century after a number of West African ethnic groups melded their ancient religions to produce a new belief system with parallels to Catholicism. In 1809, in New Orleans, a huge influx of Haitian refugees nearly doubled the size of the city. The migration's Voodoo adherents, having developed their beliefs in similar circumstances in the French Caribbean, infused New Orleans Voodoo with Afro-Caribbean variants of the religion.

Like African religions throughout the Americas, Voodoo served as a force for resistance and change in both Haiti and Louisiana. In the 1791 Haitian Revolution, Voodoo priests mobilized 40,000 followers. In New Orleans, Voodoo's egalitarian religious ethic and interracial appeal offered a dramatic challenge to an increasingly harsh Anglo-American racial order. In the city's relatively tolerant religious milieu, Haitian believers joined with enslaved Creoles, free blacks, and even whites to assure Voodoo's vitality.

Marie Laveau, one of a line of women who fashioned New Orleans Voodoo into one of the nation's most enduring religious and folkloric traditions, was born out of wedlock in 1801 to Marguerite Darcantel. She inherited her mother's free status as well as her West African, Native American, and Latin European ancestry. From Darcantel, the young girl also acquired skills as a yellow fever nurse, a herbalist, and a Voodoo practitioner. From her father, Charles Trudeau Laveaux, she inherited property, legal recognition, and the name Laveau.

At seventeen, she married Jacques Paris, a free man of African descent from Saint Domingue/Haiti. When he disappeared from her life, she entered into a quasi-marital arrangement with Jean Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion, a white veteran of the Battle of New Orleans with a distinguished French lineage as well as relatives on both sides of the city's color line. To lend respectability to their relationship, Glapion "passed" into the population of color and lived openly with Laveau for the rest of his life.

In alliance with her equally enigmatic mentor and confessor, PÃ¨re Antoine (Father Antonio de Sedella), the pastor of St. Louis Cathedral, Laveau embraced Catholicism as fervently as Voodoo. In an apparent *quid quo pro*, Ward proposes, the priestess guaranteed PÃ¨re Antoine the support of her followers in return for the sacraments of baptism and marriage for interracial couples and their illegitimate offspring.

Ward describes how the two larger-than-life personalities stepped into the breach opened by the abysmal state of nineteenth-century medical science, the city's appalling death rate, and the absence of vital social services. Together, Laveau and Antoine braved the filthy city jail to minister to prisoners and death-row inmates. During the city's frequent bouts of yellow fever, cholera, malaria, and other deadly diseases, they dispensed spiritual comfort and medical aid to the sick and the dying. Before long, Laveau's knowledge of the healing qualities of indigenous herbs won her a reputation as one of the most successful of the celebrated yellow fever nurses. In 1830, city newspapers began referring to her as "head of the Voudou sisterhoods" (p. 61).

In 1827, Laveau's union with Glapion produced a daughter, Marie Heloise Eucharist Glapion, who PÃ¨re Antoine baptized despite her illegitimate status. The baby girl was one of only two daughters of Laveau's five children to reach adulthood. Unlike her mother, Ward concludes, Marie Eucharist was not an observant Catholic. Her disaffection undoubtedly stemmed from the church's embrace of the repressive, proslavery religious orthodoxy that swept the South after PÃ¨re Antoine's death in 1829. In such an environment, Marie Eucharist adopted her mother's name and appears to have redoubled her efforts to offer a viable religious alternative to disaffected Catholics. Her actions merged mother and daughter into one persona, that of Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau.

With sectional tensions mounting in the 1850s, the Laveaus suffered increasing harassment. The pressure apparently drove Marie Eucharist Laveau underground. During the heyday of Reconstruction, however, her reputation soared as she presided over well-publicized multiracial ceremonies on Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John. She invited "the big judges, lawyers, the police and all the firemens" as well as "white ladies what had money" (p. 144). New Orleanians from all walks of life attended the events. Voodoo's religious ethic clearly reinforced Reconstruction's promise of an interracial democracy and, though the author steers clear of linking Laveau to Reconstruction politics, her narrative strongly suggests such a connection.

With Reconstruction's collapse in 1877, city police once again resumed their attacks on Voodoo practitioners. Finally, in 1897, the City Council dealt a devastating blow. Emboldened by the Louisiana legislature's passage of the 1890 Separate Car Law and Governor Murphy J. Foster's 1894 disfranchisement campaign, the council enacted a statute prohibiting "trance artists, 'voodoos,' and similar tricksters from operating in the city" (p. 175).

In her fascinating study, Ward has dispensed with many of the distortions surrounding the Laveau legend. In doing so, she has illuminated the centrality of women's history to Louisiana's past. Just as importantly, her reconstruction of the family's genealogy offers incomparable insight into the essence of the city's rich Creole culture. Her book is a much-needed and invaluable contribution to the history and social anthropology of Creole New Orleans.

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