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MAMBOS, PRIESTESSES, AND GODDESSES: SPIRITUAL HEALING THROUGH
VODOU IN BLACK WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF HAITI AND NEW ORLEANS

by

Angela Denise Watkins

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Mary Lou Emery

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
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To my mother, Beverly Jean Watkins-Jones, who left this world 25 years ago. To my sons, Mario and Joseph, whom I try to inspire through my actions.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: REWRITING VODOU CULTURE IN HAITI AND NEW
ORLEANS

In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot contextualizes silence as “an active and transitive process” (48) in the production of historical narratives. His examination of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) reveals how silences are inevitably and oftentimes, consciously written into historical narratives; thus, changing the meaning of past events and what counts as official history. The events that transpired in what was to become the largest slave revolt in the Western Hemisphere were initially interpreted by the French government and intelligentsia as minor infractions; by eighteenth-century standards, according to Trouillot, a large-scale revolt was thought impossible for blacks to conceive.

This view, commonly held by white Europeans and Americans as well as white and mulatto plantation owners, was espoused in colonial writings. Variations of the oft-quoted statement that blacks were tranquil, obedient and incapable of rebelling filled French newspapers, pamphlets and political debates, denying the insurrection as it was happening. As Trouillot contends, “ready-made categories” of blacks as less than human and incapable of conceptualizing a life of freedom “were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution” (73). Therefore, uprisings in the Northern Province of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) were treated—at least on paper—as isolated incidents, and the gravity of the mass rebellion was silenced in historical narratives.

Another event that has been silenced in Haiti’s official history is the *Bois Caïman* ceremony, a Vodou ceremony that was also a political gathering for the leaders of the

Haitian Revolution. According to various sources, on August 22, 1791,¹ a maroon named Boukman² and a mambo (priestess) named Cécile Fatiman³ led the ceremony in a densely-wooded area during a powerful rainstorm. The gathering in the northern Morne-Rouge region attracted around two hundred rebel slaves in a show of solidarity and resistance against systematic subjugation and violence. As Boukman rallied the rebels, largely overseers, coachmen and other slaves that held prominent positions on plantations in or near the vicinity, Cécile appeared before the crowd. She brandished a knife in a solemn ritual of song and dance, and sacrificed a black pig. A bowl of blood collected from the animal was passed to each rebel and “at a signal from the priestess, they all threw themselves on their knees and swore blindly to obey the orders of Boukman, who had been proclaimed the supreme chief of the rebellion” (Geggus 81). This was the beginning of the end of French colonial rule in Haiti, and the establishment of the first black independent republic.

Yet, this is where Cécile’s story ends. Depending on the source, she was either a young, green-eyed mulatto who later became the wife of Jean-Louis Pierrot, the fifth president of Haiti (Geggus 90), or an “old African woman ‘with strange eyes and bristly

¹ August 14, 1791 is the date commonly and erroneously given. In *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, David Patrick Geggus attributes the mix-up to the proximity in which another meeting among rebel slaves took place. The meeting on August 14 was held on the Lenormand Estate, but the initial attempt to rebel was quickly quashed and some of the conspirators were arrested. While Geggus argues that the August 14 meeting was the more important of the two in planning Haiti’s infamous revolt, the Bois Caïman ceremony has become popularized in resistance narratives.

² Boukman was a Jamaican slave sold to a French plantation owner in Haiti after several attempted escapes. He was educated, possibly self-taught; and he is often identified as a Muslim although there are conflicting views about his religious faith.

³ Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Beverly Bell, David Patrick Geggus, and Laurent Dubois identify her as Cécile Fatiman, the wife of Haitian president Jean-Louis Pierrot. Claudine Michel identifies the mambo as Edaïse.

hair” (Fick 93), whose ferocity was more frightening than Boukman’s. In “Islam, Vodou, and the Making of the Afro-Atlantic,” Aisha Khan identifies Cécile as a Muslim woman because of her name⁴ and her affiliation with Boukman (32); whereas in *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith admits that little is known about Cécile as her name is omitted from most accounts about the Haitian Revolution (40). While none of the studies I reference here dispute that a Vodou priestess officiated over the ceremony that marked the beginning of what would soon be the largest and only successful slave revolt in the Americas, Cécile’s story is silenced in the official history of Haiti’s fight for freedom.

With the exception of these and a few other works that mention the presence of a Vodou priestess at the Bois Caïman ceremony, such as C.L.R. James’s play, *Toussaint L’Ouverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (2012),⁵ in which Boukman and Cécile are transformed into Dessalines and Celestine⁶; Isabel Allende’s resurrection of the mambo in the character, Tante Rose, in *Island Beneath the Sea*⁷;

⁴ Khan argues that Fatiman is a connotation of Fatima, a Muslim name. Her claim is also based on the belief that Boukman was Muslim although many of the spiritual elements of the Bois Caïman ceremony reflected West African spiritual practices subsumed under what we refer to as *Vodou*.

⁵ Another version of James’s play, titled *The Black Jacobins*, was published in 1963. *Toussaint L’Ouverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* is a reprinted version of the 1934 play.

⁶ The name of James’ heroine possibly refers to Marie Louise Amélia Célestine, the daughter of Cécile Fatiman and Jean-Louis Pierrot.

⁷ Allende’s novel, *Island Beneath the Sea*,” revisits Haiti’s colonial history and the tensions leading up to the Haitian Revolution. Zarité (Tété) is a slave and one of the central characters in the novel whose day-to-day survival is contrasted with larger threats looming in Saint-Domingue’s eighteenth-century plantation society. A historical novel that even in its reliance on well-worn formulas of the slave’s unconditional love for her mistress and later as her master’s concubine, *Island Beneath the Sea* unearths the silences hidden in dominant narratives about the Haitian Revolution. Allende resurrects Cécile as Tante Rose, a slave woman who is a well-known healer and lesser-known as a revolutionary.

Carolyn Fick's *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution From Below*; David Geggus' examination of the Bois Caïman ceremony in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*; and a footnote in Claudine Michel's essay, "From the Horses' Mouths: Women's Words/Women's Worlds," the usually unnamed woman is of little consequence in a major historical event that she helped launch. Thus, there is no way of knowing how prominent a role Cécile and other Haitian women played in the fight for freedom.

Further, in an attempt to erase the stigma created by the denigration of Vodou, some Haitian scholars have denied the prevalence of the Bois Caïman ceremony in the shaping of the Haitian Revolution. In *Haitian Fiction Revisited*, Léon-François Hoffman contends that the Vodou ceremony is pure fiction; while in a speech given in 1979, Franck Sylvain suggested that the effect upon the attendants at the gathering was a psychological response that had nothing to do with Vodou.⁸ Still, the common belief among scholars (and perhaps, the most convincing) is that the Haitian Revolution was inspired by the French Revolution, which occurred three years prior to the insurrection in Saint-Domingue.⁹ Consequently, Cécile's story is lost in these debates and in the official history that celebrates Boukman, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe and their revolutionary predecessor, the mystical Makandal, who led a slave revolt in Haiti over thirty years prior to the Haitian Revolution.¹⁰

⁸ F. Sylvain, *Le serment du Bois Caïman et la première Pentecôte* (Port-au-Prince: Deschamps, 1979), 15–21.

⁹ The *affranchis* (free Haitians) challenged the hypocrisy in which the French, who fought for democracy and an end to centralized power in France, denied Haitians the right to be independent. In turn, free people of color were considered hypocrites since, initially, in their fight for freedom from French rule, slaves were excluded.

Therefore, Myriam J. A. Chancy's *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* expands upon Trouillot's examination of silence by revealing how Haitian women are systematically excluded from historical narratives even as they actively engage in the fight for political change. Chancy further develops Trouillot's argument by demonstrating how throughout history, Haitian women have been silenced by political discourse and the fight for an all-encompassing, autonomous nationhood. Chancy argues that in the production of historical narratives, Haitian women writers redefine Haitian culture by challenging monolithic representations of Black Nationalism, and gendered violence that has become part of the political norm.

She analyzes works by Marie Vieux-Chauvet, Jan J. Dominique, Edwidge Danticat, Nadine Magloire and other Haitian women writers that interrogate the history of gender oppression often masked by racial, political and class issues. She further states that the absence of a codified history makes the recovery of Haitian women's self-definition "possible only through the evaluation of narrative forms" (6). Fiction, then, is crucial as "a conduit for a historical narrative that is elsewhere denied existence" (Chancy 6). A study of black female subjectivity in the ongoing struggle for political independence in Haiti, Chancy's work reveals the ways in which Haitian women writers use fiction as both a revolutionary tool for the underrepresented female masses, and as a platform to recover the silenced past.

¹⁰ In 1757, Makandal, an expert herbalist, was convicted for instigating a mass slave revolt in which over 6,000 whites were poisoned after consuming water from plantation wells (Bellegarde-Smith 87). He was sentenced to burn at the stake; however, according to folklore, Makandal escaped the flames and was transformed into either a firefly or a spirit. His initial stand against slavery more than three decades prior helped fuel the fight for Haiti's independence.

The recovery of the past informs my own analysis of works by black women writers that revise the shared “official” history between Haiti and New Orleans. My dissertation, titled *Mambos, Priestesses, and Goddesses: Spiritual Healing Through Vodou in Black Women’s Narratives of Haiti and New Orleans*, focuses on aspects of colonial history that have been largely silenced in historical narratives; namely, the turbulent political relationship between Haiti and the United States spanning over two centuries; the influx of Haitian émigrés, free mulattoes, and slaves into New Orleans at the height of the Haitian Revolution; the evolution of African spiritual practices in the Crescent City through Haitian Vodou; and the absence of black women’s voices, especially those who practice Vodou. Within this context, I examine Vodou as a living culture, a form of artistic expression, an important part of the transatlantic literary imaginaire, and as a symbol of female empowerment.

Zora Neale Hurston and Her Literary Legacies

A Vodou initiate and female revolutionary in her own right, Zora Neale Hurston’s writings reflect the richness of black folk culture and the complexities of African spirituality; therefore, she is central to my study. Her life and work are major influences on the writers whose fiction I discuss in this dissertation. In different ways they address her legacy. As a student of German anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University in New York, Hurston’s interest in folktales and black southern culture developed into serious ethnographic research in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Equipped with the necessary scientific methods to effectively collect and synthesize data, Hurston immersed herself in local communities in Florida, Alabama, New Orleans, Jamaica, and Haiti. Under the guidance of several Vodou practitioners in New Orleans and Haiti, Hurston

demystified centuries-old African religious practices grouped under the ambiguous term, *Vodou*; in part by drawing connections between black folk culture and the sociopolitical issues in the American South and the Caribbean.

In *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston recalls her experience collecting folk material during her return home to Eatonville, Florida, and in various sawmill camps in other parts of Florida and Alabama. In the foreword, author and biographer Arnold Rampersad praises the book for being “a genuine reconciliation between [Zora] and her past...between herself as a growing individual with literary ambitions on the one hand and the evolving African-American culture on the other” (xvi). Her time in New Orleans was perhaps the most profound as she learned about Marie Laveau, a woman of color who was also New Orleans’ renowned Vodou priestess. Purportedly, Laveau wielded great spiritual and political power. As Hurston reveals in her book, for people of color, Marie Laveau was a symbol of a recovered African identity reinforced by transatlantic connections to Haiti and West Africa; for Laveau’s devout followers, Vodou was the spiritual embodiment of resistance, reclamation and healing.

Hurston’s interest in the origins of New Orleans Vodou (or “hoodoo,”¹¹ as she often referred to it) took her to Jamaica and Haiti where she spent almost a year, between 1936 and 1937, conducting research. Her anthropological fieldwork on the social,

¹¹ In *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure*, Jeffrey E. Anderson defines “hoodoo” as “a body of magical beliefs, with little reference to deities and the trappings of religious worship” (xi). He further states that the term refers to African American supernaturalism and can be traced to the Mississippi Valley region (xi). In *Mules and Men*, Hurston likens “hoodoo” to the Christian story of creation. Using her gift of storytelling, she states: “The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made. And now, God is leaning back taking a seventh day rest” (183). Through folklore, Hurston emphasizes how African religious traditions are ingrained in African diasporic identity.

political, and cultural influences of Vodou and other forms of African spirituality in the West Indies are documented in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938). The title was inspired by the phrase, “*Parlay cheval ou*” (tell my horse), Hurston often heard during her stay in Haiti (Boyd 320). According to legend, the powerful god, *Guede*,¹² speaks these words through the person he “mounts” (possesses).

In Jamaica, Hurston spent time in St. Mary’s Parish, both an important cultural site in Erna Brodber’s novel, *Louisiana*, and Brodber’s birthplace. Later, she lived among the Maroons in Accompong, where she immersed herself in the local culture. There, she met Colonel Rowe, ruler of the Maroons, and they swapped tales about Anansi, the infamous spider in African folktales; Ti Malice, a popular figure in Haitian folklore; and Brer Rabbit, an American favorite. Immediately, Hurston realized that folklore was just as prevalent in the Caribbean as it was in Africa and the U.S. Also, during her time in Accompong, Hurston participated in the hunt for a wild boar, successfully infiltrating a male-centered space.¹³ Besides learning about gender-specific cultural practices and the chauvinism that informs such practices, Hurston learned about religious traditions in Jamaica, such as Pocomania¹⁴ (also referred to as Pukkumina), and Nine Night, a form

¹² In Haitian Vodou, Guede is the god of the cemeteries. See Chapter 4: “*Breath, Eyes, Memory: Edwidge Danticat’s Narrative of Resistance*” for a more in-depth examination of this particular Vodou lwa.

¹³ Exceptions were made for Hurston to join the hunting party. In *Tell My Horse*, she explains that women typically do not go on hog hunts, but she begged and pleaded for a hunt to be organized in her desire to taste jerked pig.

¹⁴ Hurston describes Pocomania, literally meaning, “a little crazy,” as “something out of nothing” (39). In *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*, Joseph M. Murphy gives a more detailed description of Pocomania as a revivalist tradition of Zionism; an “amusing brand of overenthusiastic Christianity” (125).

of ancestor worship in which certain steps have to be taken to ensure that the dead won't return.¹⁵

In Haiti, she delved deeper into African religious practices, expanding her research on Vodou. Hurston discovered that Haitian Vodou was much more complex than she had experienced in New Orleans. She soon became a *hounsi* (the "spouse" of a lwa) after her initiation, and had reached the first level of becoming a priestess (Boyd 321). In a letter written to then-director of the Guggenheim Foundation, Henry Allen Moe, Hurston admits that her research on Haitian Vodou has tested her own beliefs as she now understands spiritual faith in a different light. She notes: "[Vodou] is more than the sympathetic magic that is practiced by the hoodoo doctors in the United States...It is as formal as the Catholic Church anywhere" (Boyd 296). She goes on to state that she will require more time (and money) to study Haitian Vodou in order to speak authoritatively on the subject. Hurston extended her stay in Haiti by six more months. The result is a carefully crafted study that demystifies Vodou culture, and challenges its negative portrayal in earlier scientific studies and in American popular culture.

By utilizing Hurston's influential research on Vodou culture in New Orleans and the Caribbean as my framework, this dissertation analyzes contemporary works of fiction that incorporate Vodou as a healing theme in the recovery of the past. Hurston's research is the basis for literary representations of Vodou as an essential part of African diasporic identity. The selected novels by black women writers; namely Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*,

¹⁵ In Chapter 4, titled "Night Song After Death," Hurston attends the Nine Night ceremony, in which the spirit of the newly deceased is appeased lest it does the living harm. The mourners perform rituals for nine days straight to dismiss the dead and ensure that the *duppy*, the evil that lives inside all humans, will not return.

Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams*, and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, approach Hurston's works from three critical perspectives: historical, literary and analytical. They expand upon, respond to, and even challenge Hurston's writings on the Caribbean and Vodou culture. Like Hurston, Brodber, Rhodes and Danticat use folklore to convey wisdom and to shape the larger narrative in their novels. For instance, in *Louisiana*, Madam Marie (another incarnation of Marie Laveau) helps Ella to see the purpose of her anthropological research through an Anancy¹⁶ tale. The magical pot that Anancy's wife scrubs, thus washing away its ability to produce food, is similar to the recording machine that Ella "scrubs" to learn about her human subject's life. Like the empty pot, Ella has gotten all she will get from the recording machine, so she has to move on with her research.

Further, their works correspond with each other in their portrayal of female spirituality as a way to heal fragmented identities. For example, conjure is a common theme in all three novels. In *Louisiana*, Ella is sent to St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana, by the Works Progress Administration to interview Mammy (Suzie Anna), a former civil rights activist and a psychic healer. Through Mammy, Ella, a staunch believer in logic and reason, taps into her own psychic gifts to reclaim her own past, and to recover the community's history. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie is unaware of her Vodou legacy until she arrives in New Orleans and the truth about the women in her family is revealed. As the next reigning Vodou queen, she intuitively knows her devotees' life stories and in turn, the lwas teach Marie about her history. Similarly, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie's

¹⁶ Brodber's spelling is different from Hurston's and reflects variations of the tales according to region.

grandmother's keen instinct tells her what is happening around her, even miles away. When Sophie returns to Haiti for a visit, her grandmother teaches her how to listen for messages carried by the wind.

Doubling is another significant theme that shapes *Louisiana*, *Voodoo Dreams* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. When Brodber's central character, Ella, accepts her calling as a spiritual healer, she becomes Louisiana. It is a name that acknowledges both the rich black folk culture in St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana, and St. Mary, Louisiana in Jamaica; and the women that helped shape her new identity: Louise (Mammy's best friend) and Suzie Anna. In both Rhodes's and Danticat's novels, Marie and Sophie, respectively, are twinned with their mothers as they struggle to form their own identities and heal from sexual trauma. Marie tries to break free from an abusive lover and end the corruption of Vodou, while Sophie seeks spiritual healing from the traumatic memories of rape passed down from her mother. Psychologically scarred from the rape that resulted in Sophie's conception, her mother attempts to maintain Sophie's purity by subjecting her to another form of sexual violation—weekly testing to ensure that her hymen is intact. Thus, in the face of gender oppression and black female trauma, their works reveal the healing elements of Vodou.

In the following sections, I give a brief overview of the historical events that serve as the backstory in the novels I examine in the following chapters. Thematically, this is a historical mapping of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural and political exchanges between Afro-Caribbean, Creole and White communities in New Orleans and Saint-Domingue. The historical connection highlights resistance movements in terms of the Haitian Revolution and its impact on colonial Louisiana. I retrace the roots of Vodou

from West Africa to Haiti and later, to nineteenth-century New Orleans. I show how Vodou has historically been demonized, as both a form of spirituality and political resistance, through racism and the quest for political control by Western powers. I then turn to the arrival of Haitian émigrés in New Orleans during the Haitian Revolution and the implications for free and enslaved people of color. Like the changing of colonial regimes in the Crescent City, the mass migration of Haitians to New Orleans involved the constant negotiation of identity among African and European descendants, and Creoles alike.

Next, I explore the literary representations of Vodou that coincided with Marie Laveau's death in the late nineteenth century, and the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934. The writings about "voodoo"¹⁷ during the occupation are especially revealing in that they reflect the attitudes of a racially-divided America, and the promotion of imperialism. In contrast, I show how Haitian writers, such as Jacques Stephen Alexis, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, and Jacques Roumain, responded to the portrayals of Haitians by American soldiers and the U.S. government. Finally, I introduce the works of fiction that I examine in the following chapters and the significance of Vodou as a literary trope. Dismissed as a primitive pagan religion, Vodou is socially, culturally, and politically significant. My work demonstrates its important transformations from a nineteenth-century practice to a twenty-first century strategy of survival.¹⁸

¹⁷ For my project, I have chosen to use Vodou to distinguish to references to New Orleans voodoo, often spelled in lowercase and filled with negative connotations.

¹⁸ The 2010 earthquake in Haiti left survivors uncertain about the future, but many relied on spiritual faith and unyielding perseverance to continue on.

Within this context, my project builds upon notions of historical silence in Haiti and New Orleans' official history to demonstrate the literary unveiling of these historical moments by contemporary women writers of color.

Understanding Vodou

Based on racial stereotypes and blatant misrepresentations in early travelogues, scientific studies, colonial literature, adventure novels, the media and later, Hollywood's film industry, Vodou was inscribed in American popular culture as a mysterious and malevolent force. The perversion of Vodou forced fervent believers in Haiti to practice in secrecy in order to avoid religious persecution and in nineteenth-century Louisiana, legal prosecution. Rumors about the use of "voodoo" to defeat the French during the Haitian Revolution further disparaged Haitian culture and hence, Vodou culture; sparking images of orgiastic rituals, animal sacrifices and human carnage.

Such depictions were popularized in movies such as *White Zombie* (1932), *The Walking Dead* (1936), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *Voodoo Man* (1944), *Zombies on Broadway* (1945), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—a cult classic—and a host of other exploitation films, spanning the 1930s well into the twentieth century. *Angel Heart* (1987), a sexually-explicit noir film based on the detective novel, *Falling Angel* by William Hjortsberg, portrays "voodoo" in New Orleans as satanic, seductive and murderous; while *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), based on a book by ethno-

botanist Wade Davis, in which the researcher travels to Haiti and learns about a man who was turned into a “zombie,” was touted as a film based on “fact.”¹⁹

In contrast, few films have been produced in the U.S. to challenge these depictions. One exception is Kasi Lemmons’s *Eve’s Bayou* (1997), a film about a young girl trying to find her identity as a middle child in a prominent African-American family in 1963 Louisiana. Eve is the inheritor of “second sight,” both a spiritual gift and a burden passed down from her African ancestor, a slave woman for whom Eve was named. As Mary Ellison notes in her article, “Echoes of Africa in *To Sleep with Anger* and *Eve’s Bayou*,” Eve “is fulfilling the role that African women were often entrusted to fill, as guardians and re-interpreters of memory and knowledge” (215).

Mozelle, Eve’s aunt, is a spiritual advisor whose gifts fail to prevent her from experiencing trauma and loss. Although she can see other people’s futures, she can’t see her own. She teaches Eve the difference between healing and the use of psychic power to cause harm. Thus, Lemmons contrasts conventional medicine with nonconventional healing methods as Mozelle uses herbs and other curatives to treat her clients’ ailments. When Eve remarks, “You told Daddy you didn’t practice no voodoo” (Lemmons 164), referring to her physician father and Mozelle’s brother, Mozelle simultaneously downplays her spiritual gifts and dismisses the negative connotations associated with Vodou. As Eve later learns through her interactions with Elzora, a conjure woman and

¹⁹ While Davis carefully documented his findings about the poison used to turn people into “zombies” in Haiti, he appropriated Vodou culture, presenting an exoticized image similar to those found in adventure novels.

Mozelle's rival, Vodou is a means of making sense of the world; it is also a spiritual belief that has long been distorted and exploited for financial gain.

Today, Vodou is still vilified although few in the United States fully understand it. The fascination with Vodou culture rarely extends beyond zombies as demonstrated in popular television shows like *The Walking Dead* (going into its fifth season); films *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Zombieland* (2009); and the novel *Zone One* (2012) by Colson Whitehead. While the producers of *American Horror Story* focused on the practice of Vodou in their third season titled "Coven," they relied on theatrics and sensationalism found in earlier screen and stage productions. Drawing on American audiences' thirst for the dark and mysterious, the show resurrected Marie Laveau and the subject of New Orleans "voodoo."

Played by Angela Bassett, Marie is immortal after bargaining with Papa Legba, a Vodou *lwa* (god) who also doubles as a demonic figure. In one episode, Marie sells her soul to Papa Legba and in exchange for her immortality, once a year, she has to deliver to him an innocent soul (usually in the form of a newborn baby). In another episode, Marie refers to herself as a witch and she uses "black magic" to battle her sworn enemies; descendants of the infamous witches of Salem who, in turn, rely on their own dark powers to fight back. Through the use of popular myths about Marie Laveau, the conflation of Vodou and witchcraft, and the recreation of Vodou ceremonies (the obligatory drums and dancers included), *American Horror Story* elicits the same misconceptions about Vodou that have thrived for centuries.

Far from flesh-eating zombies and power-hungry women with psychic gifts, *Vodou* is the convergence of different spiritual beliefs that can be traced to West Africa;

specifically, Dahomey (present-day Benin), and practiced by the Fon, Ewe, Dagara, Yoruba and Bakongo peoples of West and Central Africa (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 4-6). Meaning deity or spirit, Vodou is a complex belief system that recognizes the psychic connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds. Contrary to popular belief, Vodou adherents do not worship lwas (lesser gods). In essence, the pantheon of lwas serves as an intermediary between humans and Bondye (God or the Supreme Being); between nature and the supernatural. During a ceremony, the mambo or houngan calls upon the lwa through songs, dances, prayers, drumming, offerings, and the drawing of *vèvès* (spiritual symbols).

The lwa then manifests in one of its devotees, usually the Vodou priestess or priest. When a lwa “mounts” an individual, it takes possession of the physical body, using it as a conduit through which the spirit communicates with the living (Hurston 158). Identified through certain behaviors, styles of dress, spiritual symbols, days of the week, food offerings, and even favorite colors, the lwa materializes, sometimes performing humanly impossible feats. The lwa also gives devotees the opportunity to make requests or ask for advice. Thus, the possessed becomes a vessel through which the lwa reveals its unique persona and cosmic knowledge (Desmangles 92-8).

However, the cultural and religious ramifications felt by native populations and imported Africans to Haiti as a result of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World made it difficult for them to practice their faith. Columbus’s invasion of the Americas in 1492 established Spanish rule and called for the erasure of languages, longstanding traditions, and religious practices among the Taino (Arawak) tribes. The

arrival of Africans on the island of Hispaniola²⁰ was a result of the decimation of the native Arawak, and the demand for able-bodied men and women to cultivate the sugarcane fields (Knight 22). By 1505, over 60,000 Arawak peoples had died.

Therefore, a compromise between the Spanish government and the governing body on Hispaniola was reached. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican priest who traveled to Spain to petition for the end of slavery of the Arawak peoples, brought about the exchange of one subjugated group for another with his suggestion to import Africans (Dubois 14-5). Like the Arawak before them, African slaves were introduced to brutal working conditions, new diseases, famine, unremitting violence and Christianity. Attempts to make of the Africans' pre-colonial existence a *tabula rasa* was reinforced by physical abuse, religious condemnation and rhetoric proclaiming the African to be inherently and racially inferior.

Over the next century, Spain's interest in Hispaniola waned and in the pursuit of more profitable colonial prospects, the Spanish government sought expansive territories in South America. By the early 1600s, many Spanish colonials had settled into the region now known as the Dominican Republic, leaving the western region of Hispaniola open to raids and pirate attacks. Named Santo Domingo by Columbus, the western side of the island soon became home to French invaders, allowing France to stake its claim. Ruled by the Spanish until 1665, Santo Domingo officially became a French colony in 1697 with the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick (Knight 15).²¹ Under a new colonial

²⁰ An original copy of *Le Code Noir ou le Calvaire de Canaan* ("The Black Code or the Ordeal of Canaan") by Louis Sala-Molins can be found in the Library of Congress's *Rare Book Collection*.

administration, Santo Domingo was renamed Saint-Domingue and new laws; specifically, the French *Code Noir*, concerning the religious instruction of slaves were sanctioned.

Under the Code Noir, slaves were required to convert to Christianity and to recognize Western religious traditions as the only “authentic” forms of religion. Article II of the Codes stipulated that “all slaves that shall be in our islands shall be baptized and instructed in the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic faith.”²² Further, slave owners were required to have “newly-arrived Negroes...instructed and baptized within a suitable amount of time” (107). Article VI required that “...all subjects, of whatever religion and social status they may be, observe Sundays and the holidays that are observed by our subjects of the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic faith” (108). The Codes also prohibited planters from forcing slaves to work on sacred days, giving the new converts time to tend to their own basic needs and to worship.

Utilized as a measure both to protect the limited rights of slaves and to regulate their behaviors, morality, mobility, etc., the Codes promoted assimilationist ideals²³ that guaranteed complete power over indigenous peoples and imported Africans through erasure of their own cultural practices (Johnson 40-1). The Codes were also enacted as a

²¹ The Treaty of Ryswick was multiple agreements established between the Grand Alliance (England, Spain, the Roman Empire and the Netherlands) and France for King Louis XIV to return all possessions seized in Europe after 1679, except for certain regions (including Hispaniola) deemed rightfully French territory (Knight 15).

²² The 1685 French version of the Code Noir and its English translations can be found on the Library of Congress website: <http://international.loc.gov/intldl/fiahtml/fiatheme2c3.html>. The 1724 *Code Noir* is based on the original laws and were applied to Louisiana, a French colony at the time.

²³ See Jerah Johnson’s essay, “Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos” published in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (1992).

way for the French monarchy to govern slave owners and other settlers in French territories. In reality, capitalist interests outweighed King Louis XIV's decree; and the articles concerning religious conversion and observance on the Sabbath, as well as humane treatment²⁴ were rarely heeded. That is not to say that slave owners did not take steps to regulate religious practices. Any slave believed to be worshipping other than the Western God was severely punished. The gathering of large groups of slaves or any signs of African religious practices were forbidden; specifically, religious relics, prayers, chants, songs, dances and music.

Initially, Catholicism was used as a veil for slaves to observe their own religious customs, especially as the threat (and execution) of severe punishment deterred enslaved blacks from openly honoring their African gods. The church, according to Leslie Desmangles, used missionaries to enforce rulings that "curtailed the movement of the slaves and controlled the use of objects that might be of use in Vodou rituals" (26). As addendums to the Code Noir, The 1758 and 1777 Police Rulings made the gathering of slaves, under the guise of a celebration or a funeral, without the presence of a Catholic priest, punishable by death (Desmangles 26). However, because the Catholic faith and Vodou share similar spiritual tenets; specifically, the use of relics to honor God/Bondye and the saints/lwas, the premise that there is only one God, the significance of the church/ounfor as a physical, spiritual "home," the symbiosis of Vodou and Catholicism allowed slaves to observe both the New World religion and African religious traditions. Thus, the merging of Vodou and Catholicism was a means of survival for African

²⁴ This simply meant that subjugation was limited to the slave owner. The notion of what was considered "humane" treatment is subjective.

cultures and the African slave himself, who was regularly reminded that his life was expendable. Ironically, even slaves that wholly accepted Western religious beliefs were treated by their owners with suspicion.

The Haiti-Louisiana Connection

The relationship between Haiti and the United States was established in the early eighteenth century through trade. However, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was the beginning of U.S. intervention in Haiti's political affairs. The colonial violence that resulted in the rebellion weakened France's political stronghold in the West Indies, and forced the Western world to reevaluate its colonial ambitions. At the same time, the overthrow of French rule by former Haitian slaves in 1804 reinforced the belief that natives of Africa and their descendants used "black magic" to gain control over their captors, and fueled fears about potential uprisings in the antebellum South. Although the United States and Spain played a significant role in the success of the Haitian Revolution by providing arms and protection for rebels as a political ploy to defeat Napoleon Bonaparte's army²⁵ (Renda 29), the U.S. government also realized that the establishment of the first independent black nation could have implications for its own plantation economy.

The government and other stakeholders in the American South immediately recognized Haiti's freedom as a threat, and it took sixty years after the successful revolt

²⁵ Although the French occupied Louisiana at the time, it was still a Spanish colony. In 1793, tensions over who were the rightful owners of the territory caused a war between France and Spain (Midlo-Hall 317). The tension between the U.S. and France was also due, in part, to the Louisiana territory. The United States was looking to expand further south to double its territory, expel the French from North America, and to have easier access to the port of New Orleans and trade on the Mississippi River (Marshall 12-16).

for the U.S. to officially recognize Haiti as an independent state.²⁶ Haiti's independence would be tested time and time again as France and other Western powers forced economic sanctions on the Caribbean country as consolation for the loss of capital with the end of slavery and colonialism. France also sought compensation for the loss of direct control over Haiti's sugar and coffee plantations. A temporary trade embargo placed upon Haiti in 1804 by the U.S. after pressure from France was also a political move to prevent the compromise of slave labor in Louisiana and other slave states.

Before the importation of slave labor, a relatively small number of free Africans resided in Louisiana. The first documented enslaved Africans to arrive in New Orleans were smuggled in from Havana in 1709. Defying a law that forbade the importation of slaves from the French West Indies, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne chartered a ship to Saint-Domingue and during a stopover in Cuba, collected supplies and several black slaves for his own use (Midlo-Hall 58). Short of human commodities themselves, settlers in Saint-Domingue often seized slave ships from Africa destined for Louisiana,²⁷ forcing the crewmen to sell their "cargo" in order to purchase much-needed food and supplies.

These documented exchanges establish an early, sometimes strained relationship between Louisiana and Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth-century, and reveal the intricate structure of the transatlantic slave trade. Considered a dangerous territory early on, Saint-

²⁶ In 1825, France recognized Haiti as an independent state under the stipulation that the Haitian government pay 150 million francs in restitution for loss of their "property" (Bellegarde-Smith 74). Payments were made through loans taken out with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and French banks, resulting in a cycle of debt that Haiti has yet to pay off.

²⁷ The importation of slaves in Louisiana did not officially begin until almost a decade later (Midlo-Hall 58).

Domingue's reputation as a treacherous region would soon take on new meaning for the island reclaimed as Haiti.²⁸ While the complexities of the Haitian Revolution require a deeper examination than my study allows, it is important to note that its leaders and the many unnamed courageous women and men that helped facilitate the defeat of the French, proved that former slaves not only had the ability to implement military strategy, but to self-govern. This revelation put colonial governments on alert and called for newer, more stringent measures to maintain colonial, hence racial, dominance in the Western hemisphere.

In the mid-1790s, at the height of the Haitian Revolution, approximately ten thousand plantation owners, free people of color, and former slaves fled Haiti to North America, Jamaica and neighboring Cuba. By the early 1800s, over thirty thousand people had deserted Haiti in search of safer lands (LaChance 104-5). Many Haitian immigrants settled in New Orleans, still a Spanish colony at the time, strengthening the African- and French-influenced culture. While a strong African presence existed long before the arrival of black and mulatto Haitians, traditions brought by the new immigrants and slaves revealed how multifaceted African religious traditions were. The influx of Haitians in New Orleans brought about the integration of Vodou elements from various African regions and the Caribbean that, at the same time, resisted homogenization. An ever-evolving amalgamation of African spiritual beliefs, Vodou remains elusive and open to misinterpretation.

²⁸ The island was originally known as *Ayiti*, meaning mountainous land, by the native Arawak.

Concerned by the arrival of Haitians in New Orleans and what they perceived as a growing threat, legislators enforced more stringent laws that regulated the practice of Vodou and other African religions. By the nineteenth century, blacks outnumbered whites in New Orleans, and the fear of insurrection compelled lawmakers to restrict any activity considered subversive. The 1806 Louisiana Black Codes, enforced after the Louisiana Purchase and the Americanization of its citizens, were more restrictive than the 1724 Code Noir. Whereas limited mobility and gatherings in the presence of a white official were previously permitted, Section XII of the Codes made those activities more difficult. The code states: “No master shall suffer on his plantation assemblies of any slaves but his own, under penalty of paying all the damage to the masters of the strange slaves, in consequence of permitting them to assemble.”²⁹ By penalizing slave owners, the code served as a deterrent against allowing slaves to gather, regardless of the reason, in large groups.

The code also applied to gatherings at Congo Square,³⁰ a cultural site in New Orleans where slaves (and sometimes, free people of color) congregated on Sundays to celebrate their own cultural traditions and to sell wares or their own labor (Evans 20). In 1837, the law was lifted and free and enslaved people of color were allowed to gather as long as the police were present (Evans 28). While the Black Codes were effective in controlling the slave population in New Orleans, they created wider racial divisions

²⁹ Retrieved from Accessible Archives, <http://www.accessible-archives.com/2011/08/the-black-code-of-louisiana-1806/>

³⁰ Once an Indian portage that delineated the city limits, Congo Square, now a historical landmark, was also utilized as a slave market and a place for executions in the early 1800s (Evans 20).

among whites and free people of color through the promotion of white superiority. Further, the Codes did not prevent the 1811 slave revolt right outside of New Orleans, documented as the largest rebellion in U.S. history (Evans 25-6).

In 1810, Charles Deslondes, a mulatto slave, plotted to take over New Orleans and free other enslaved blacks.³¹ Believed to have been inspired by the Haitian Revolution, Charles recruited other slaves to help plan and organize the rebellion. The plan was to capture several plantations in and around Destrehan, Louisiana, using the arms and ammunition stored for the Louisiana militia on the Andry Plantation (1). Soon, word spread among the slaves and a march towards New Orleans was set for January 8, 1811; a day on which the Louisiana militia was supposed to be in Florida, leaving the city of New Orleans unprotected (2). However, the cache of arms and ammunitions went with the militia. Although this was a major setback, the revolt continued on.

As they advanced towards St. Charles Parish, the number of rebel slaves increased and included maroons that lived in exile in the swamps. They burned and looted homes and plantations along the way; however, by the next day, news about the uprising had already reached the surrounding area and New Orleans. The militia, thought to be on its way to Florida, was still in Louisiana as the trip had been delayed. Therefore, the insurrection was quickly quelled. On the morning of January 12, 1811, Charles and most of the two hundred rebel slaves had been captured. Charles was killed along with sixty other slaves. Although his plan for freedom failed, Charles had proven that, like the rebel slaves in Haiti, blacks could organize and fight against oppression.

³¹ I learned about Charles during a tour of the Destrehan Plantation in 2013. My information also comes from a booklet published by the River Road Historical Society for the tourist shop onsite.

The U.S. Occupation of Haiti

From 1915-1934, the U.S. gained political and military control of Haiti, establishing a paternalistic relationship that still exists today. Through media reports and political commentary, the American government expressed the urgency of steering the people of Haiti towards “civility” and “progress.” In *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, Laurent Dubois notes that “the United States, like other colonial powers, touted its building of schools and roads, and it is still recognized...for having brought significant medical assistance” (9). However, Dubois also points out that the American government’s invasion of Haiti as a way to “improve and democratize” the country’s political institutions, exacerbated existing political tensions (9). The political atmosphere of Haiti in the early twentieth-century was marred by military coups, the overthrow of several presidents (many of whom were ousted within a short time after taking office), assassinations, and other forms of violence and intimidation. Thus, the U.S. military’s presence in Haiti was premised on bringing peace and stability to the country’s tumultuous political environment. However, it was also a ploy to protect North American interests as evidenced by the Wilson administration’s takeover of customs and the country’s financial institutions in 1915 (Danticat x).

The influx of American agricultural companies dispossessed peasant farmers of their lands and placed heavy tariffs on homegrown crops. Through cooperation from the Haitian elite (at least, initially) and the governing body put in place by President Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. military allocated fertile lands for use by the American government and various U.S. corporations while many Haitian peasants were forced to migrate in order to earn income (Dubois 9). The arrival of U.S. marines also signified

institutionalized racism similar to Jim Crow, and forced labor likened to modern-day slavery. Although many fought against the invasion, including the rebel Cacos through armed resistance, over 11,000 Haitians were killed during this period (Renda 10). In effect, the nearly twenty years of occupation by the U.S. military immobilized Haiti's local government and its citizens. These actions were buoyed by written correspondence that justified to the American public the need for military intervention in Haiti.

As on-the-ground correspondents, U.S. soldiers wrote stories about Haitians that ranged from depictions of wild natives corralled by heroic servicemen risking their lives to protect their beloved country, to childlike beings in need of guidance, effective leadership and Christianity. In *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism*, Mary A. Renda argues that "paternalist discourse was one of the primary cultural mechanisms by which the occupation conscripted men into the project of carrying out U.S. rule" (13). As the writings reveal, the marines that served in Haiti believed that the mission they were assigned was for the betterment of Haitian people and politics. A prime example is Faustin Wirkus' story of heroism and leadership; a self-congratulatory text that applauds U.S. intervention for saving the wretched Haitian people. In Conrad-like³² fashion, Wirkus, a marine from Pennsylvania, wrote about his harrowing tour of duty in Haiti and his gentle, yet firm rule that earned him the title, "White King of La Gonave" (Renda 3-6).

He would use the same title for his memoir published in 1931, two years after his story was published in William Seabrook's bestselling, sensationalist book, *The Magic*

³² Joseph Conrad's depictions of wild natives in *The Heart of Darkness*.

Island (1929). In his memoir, Wirkus recalls the eight years he spent in Haiti as a lieutenant over Haitian troops and as a ruler alongside the purported “queen” of La Gonave, Haiti, after he saved her life (186-203). The market for firsthand accounts of contact with “the natives” was booming, and writers and servicemen alike capitalized on the newly-created subgenre of horror/adventure literature. More damaging depictions of Haitians and Vodou were published and the more sensationalized, the better. Stories about human and animal sacrifices filled magazine pages, newspaper articles and books; and reports of zombies and other aberrant beings were taken as factual.

In response, Haitian writers like Jacques Stephen Alexis, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, and Jacques Roumain countered these types of images with eloquent, yet stinging political commentaries and literary narratives about the occupation. They, and countless other Haitian writers and activists, risked imprisonment, exile and death³³ in order to speak out against corruption, U.S. intervention, and political violence. A Marxist and Negritude writer, Jacques Stephen Alexis criticizes the occupation of Haiti in his third novel, *L'Espace d'un Cillement* (In the Flicker of an Eyelid). Using Haiti and Cuba as his backdrop, Alexis creates characters that are politically conscious and unapologetic in their critique of the American presence. For instance, La Niña Estrellita, a prostitute and one of the central characters, correlates the exploitation of her body by American soldiers to the exploitation of the Haitian economy by the U.S. government.

³³ After the publication of *Amour, Colère, et Folie*, Marie Vieux-Chauvet was forced into exile, and fled to New York (Danticat xx). Jacques Roumain was arrested five times throughout his political career, and was exiled twice for what was considered subversive writing in his criticism of the Haitian, U.S., Dominican Republic and French governments (Fowler). In 1961, Jacques Stephen Alexis disappeared and was likely assassinated by François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s paramilitary troops known as the Tonton Macoutes after an attempted coup against Duvalier (Munro 39). Laurent Dubois states that Alexis and his companions were tortured for several days and then publicly stoned to death (328).

In *Amour, Colère, et Folie* (*Love, Anger, Madness*) Marie Vieux-Chauvet makes a similar comparison. *Amour*, the first story in the trilogy, is in response to the U.S. occupation and its aftermath. The narrator, Claire Clamont, reveals the implications of political suppression as she, and other members of the Haitian elite, cautiously navigate through their small community under the watchful eye of the local commandant. Exiled in her own homeland by the Haitian gendarme trained and put in place by the departing American soldiers, Clare's fear of sexual violation by her countrymen bespeaks the use of sexual violence as a form of political control, previously used by American marines. In the introduction to Vieux-Chauvet's novel, Edwidge Danticat states: "What [Haitians] would rather not say, and what Claire Clamont and Marie Vieux-Chauvet are brave enough to say, is that [Haiti] has continued to fail to reach its full potential, in part because of foreign interference and domination, but also because of internal strife and political struggles" (xi). In her novel, Vieux-Chauvet implicates both the U.S. and Haitian governments in the destruction of Haiti's political and economic systems. I explore her novel further in Chapter Four: "*Breath, Eyes, Memory*: Edwidge Danticat's Narrative of Resistance."

Jacques Roumain was perhaps the most outspoken among political activists in occupied Haiti. On December 13, 1928, he was arrested and spent nine months in jail for libel after criticizing the American government, its soldiers, and its collaborators (the Haitian elite) for "arrogance, racism and cowardice."³⁴ Still, this did not deter him from speaking out against injustice and he returned to writing political commentary shortly

³⁴ Quote taken from Arnold Antonin's 2009 documentary about Roumain's life, politics and writings, titled *Jacques Roumain: La passion d'un pays* (Jacques Roumain: The Passion for a Country).

thereafter. Roumain argued that the elite's corruption by the American dollar allowed them to auction off the nation's heritage, subjecting its citizens to abject servitude and poverty. Criticized by political opponents for what they saw as his own hypocrisy as part of the Haitian elite, Roumain relinquished his inheritance,³⁵ challenging the notion that a wealthy mulatto could not be a champion for the impoverished black masses.

In addition to writing articles on the state of Haiti's political affairs, Roumain wrote poetry and fiction. In his novel, *Masters of the Dew* (1947), Manuel, the prodigal son, returns home to Haiti after years of working in the sugarcane fields of Cuba. While the peasants pray for rain to replenish their over-cultivated land, Manuel searches for the source of water he hears rumbling beneath the earth. While his discovery gives the villagers hope, resentment and envy from a man who sees Manuel as both a political and romantic rival, leads to Manuel's death. But instead of causing a deeper rift among the villagers as his murderer had hoped, Manuel's death brings about reconciliation. Thus, *Masters of the Dew* explores the complexities of Haiti's peasant class and the environmental crisis it faced (and continues to grapple with) as a result of the exploitation of natural resources and the deforestation of once tree-populated regions.

Haitian writers underscore the need to revisit and revise claims by American writers that disparage Haitian culture as a way to counteract colonial and neocolonial texts that promote imperialism. Unfortunately, Hurston is also implicated in distorting the American public's perception of Haiti in *Tell My Horse*. Nadine Pinede's short story,

³⁵ Roumain was born into a wealthy mulatto family. His father, Auguste Roumain, was a prominent landowner and respected patriarch in his community. His mother, Émilie Auguste, was the daughter of Tancredi Auguste, president of Haiti from 1912-1913. After his grandfather's death, the Roumain family inherited nine hundred acres of land planted with sugarcane, increasing their wealth and status.

titled “Departure Lounge,” challenges Hurston’s portrayal of Haitians and her oversimplification of Haitian politics. Through Fabienne, her central character, Pinede reveals the paradox between Hurston’s objectivity in her study of Vodou and her imperialist stance on Haitian politics. Published in 2010 in *Haiti Noir*, “Departure Lounge” recalls Haiti’s history of colonialism, independence, genocide, occupation and forced migration.

The story opens with Fabienne’s return to Haiti after growing up in New York. After she receives an otherworldly message from her deceased grandmother via fax, Fabienne lies about her fluency in Kreyol so that she can serve as an assistant to an American chef travelling to Haiti to experience “exotic” Caribbean cuisine to include in her cookbook and to learn about “voodoo.” Fabienne’s stay is punctuated by political tensions that have changed very little since her family’s departure, cultural clashes, class divisions, environmental issues, and violence. When she notices a copy of Hurston’s book on her employer’s lap, Fabienne cynically remarks: “That would be just like Miranda to think she can learn something real about Haiti from that book” (253). Uninformed herself, Fabienne soon realizes that she is a witness to the political and economic struggles peasant farmers grapple with as the Haitian government and American companies dispossess them of their land. She learns that the region is being used to manufacture products that the peasants and other Haitians are forced to buy at exorbitant prices. An outsider whose parents migrated from Haiti two years after her birth, Fabienne reflects on her birthplace, a foreign land fraught with sudden climactic and political changes: “Haiti’s floods are as violent as its politics, sweeping away entire villages. What used to be forest is now something more like a desert” (244). She learns

from her guides and the local farming community that deforestation, soil erosion, polluted water, toxic waste dump sites and numerous other environmental issues have, for generations, undermined Haiti's attempts at maintaining its status as an independent state.

Thus, Fabienne's disdain for Hurston is Pinede's response to Hurston's careless representation of the political and economic conditions in occupied Haiti. She exclaims, "Zora actually wrote that Haitians are all liars. When I saw that, I couldn't read anymore" (253), referring to Hurston's assertion that Haitians have bought into the myth of independence that the Haitian Revolution signified. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston unapologetically states: "That habit of lying! It is safe to say that this art, pastime, expedient or whatever one wishes to call it, is more than any other factor responsible for Haiti's tragic history" (81). She likens Haitian nationalism to willful ignorance, suggesting that only international interference would deliver Haiti from its self-made hell.

Pinede addresses Hurston's claims because she believes that the author consciously undermined an otherwise pivotal ethnography on the spiritual practices in the Caribbean to appease her American audience. While Hurston debunks myths about zombies and cannibals popular in Hollywood horror movies, adventure fiction and travel narratives, her examination of Haiti's history of political instability is rife with American arrogance and contradictions. Her study demystified the practice of Vodou, thereby discrediting both colonial writings and scientific studies of "primitive" cultures; yet, her dismissive tone and sweeping generalizations about Haitian politics supported the position on which the U.S. government justified its involvement in the country's affairs.

Hurston promotes U.S. intervention in what she considers "the beginning of peace" (72) in a time of chaos among the "natives." Under the subheading, "The Plume

Against the Sky,” in Chapter 8: Rebirth of a Nation, Hurston describes the smoke from the steamship, the U.S.S. Washington, as “a black plume with a white hope” (72), marking the arrival of U.S. troops and “salvation.” Fabienne reflects that like Hurston, Americans view so-called “Third-World” countries from a privileged, Western perspective without understanding the implications of imperialism.

Interestingly, Hurston’s political position in the book is wrought with ambiguity, suggesting that she might have, in fact, been against the occupation of Haiti. Hurston allows others to say what she cannot as an American researcher dependent on white patronage and royalties from book sales. For example, in the following exchange, Hurston challenges an interviewee’s claim that the occupation weakened an already fragile political infrastructure. While the unnamed citizen argues that the U.S. exploited Haiti by taking over its financial institutions and customs, making it impossible to benefit from the coffee trade or to earn a living, Hurston states: “But didn’t you have some sort of disturbance here, and were you not in embarrassing debt to some European nations?” (85). The man replies:

“We never owed any debts. We had plenty of gold in our bank which the Americans took away and never returned to us. They claimed we owed debts so that they could have an excuse to rob us. When they had impoverished the country they left, and now our streets are full of beggars and the whole country is very poor. But what can a weak country like Haiti do when a powerful nation like your own forces its military upon us, kills our citizens and steals our money?” (85).

The conversation is an allusion to the restitution France required of Haiti in exchange for its independence, and the Wilson administration’s depletion of gold and other currency from Haiti’s financial institutions. Hurston dismisses the discussion by reiterating that Haitians are liars, but her sentiment rings false, especially because there are other

moments in the book in which the irony of what has been stated conveniently escapes her (and the reading audience).

For example, when she asks a man from the ruling class why the Haitian peasant treats his animals cruelly, he responds: “Why should these peasants be tender with animals...No one has been tender with them” (83). Hurston mentions a similar conversation with a journal editor in which he points out that Americans are equally cruel to animals, particularly, with the boiling of live lobsters. Hurston’s response that “people who sell them would not be permitted to drag them by the legs from Massachusetts to Virginia, nor half-skin them on the way” (83) is ludicrous at best, but is undoubtedly cleverly disguised doublespeak.

Daphne Lamothe makes a similar case for Hurston. In what she refers to as “narrative dissonance,” Lamothe argues that Hurston is intentionally duplicitous in her framing of Haitian culture for her American audience. She suggests that “if we read Hurston’s critique of Jamaican and Haitian cultures as ironic, as *knowingly* (author’s emphasis) one-sided, then it may be possible to redirect her social critique back toward a society that she thought unable or unwilling to see its own flaws after they have been projected onto another” (146). This interpretation seems plausible especially in comparison to Hurston’s criticism of racial politics in America. Unfortunately, Hurston could not risk having her book shelved; therefore, she chose to write in codified language. Fabienne vacillates between annoyance and admiration when she realizes later that her grandmother called her to Haiti to reveal that she had once worked for Hurston. Perhaps this hints at Pinede’s awareness of the author’s cunning. Yet, the issue with Hurston’s portrayal of Haitians is never fully resolved. Despite Hurston’s attempt to

invert the gaze upon the colonizer, the inability to recognize one's image in another's Otherness, as evidenced in the book's popularity in the U.S. and Europe, made her study on Haitian culture the most damning.

Marie Laveau

Stories about Haitians and the occupation of Haiti sparked a renewed interest in New Orleans "voodoo" culture and soon the publishing industry was flooded with more fantastical depictions of "orgiastic" ceremonies; this time, they were set in the Crescent City. Stories of fevered dances, uninhibited sexuality, cannibalism and other forms of debauchery were replete with "eyewitness" accounts that often identified the leader of these scandalous acts as Marie Laveau. The fascination with Laveau erupted shortly after her death in 1881. Her life has been reinvented over a span of a century in magazine articles, brief news items and in academic scholarship. More notably, Marie has been resurrected in fiction. In stories that rely on history, sensationalism, or both, she is depicted as a larger-than-life mythical figure that controlled local politics, white aristocrats, the police force and anyone that came into contact with her. A woman both demonized and sainted, Marie Laveau has become an icon for Vodou culture in New Orleans.

Although contemporary studies demystify Marie's legend as a Vodou priestess, over a century after her death, myths and tall tales from the early twentieth century continue to circulate. As Carolyn Morrow Long notes in her book, *A New Orleans Vodou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*, the resurgence of the Laveau Legend coincided with the U.S. occupation of Haiti and served as a way for writers to further exploit Vodou. However, for the marginalized populations of New

Orleans, Marie Laveau was a mythic hero. Her appeal was due in part to what her legend symbolized: power that transcended race, class and gender. In the eyes of her devoted followers, Marie was a champion for the oppressed.

In a society in which blacks had little agency, Marie was the embodiment of spiritual and political power. Ina Fandrich concurs in her book, *Marie Laveau: The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*. She states: “Laveaux³⁶ served as a symbol of resistance for the various oppressed groups...against the dominant sector. She represented the African heritage defiantly surviving the hegemonic strategies of a white supremacist culture; she functioned as an assertion of female power in a patriarchal society...” (2). Marie’s fight for gender equality is documented in the Louisiana Writers Project (LWP) records and in nineteenth-century newspaper articles published in the *Louisiana Gazette*, the *Louisiana Courier* and the *Bee*. Specifically, she fought for the right for women to gather and practice a faith that combined elements of Christianity and African spirituality.

Long points to a complaint Laveau filed against the Third Municipality Guards for harassment. Long reports that on July 2, 1850, “Marie Laveau and another free woman of color, Rosine Dominique, accused one of the watchmen of harassing their coreligionists during the June 27 raid and confiscating a wooden statue to which Marie laid claim” (105). The case went to trial and was covered by the major New Orleans newspapers, who reported that Marie Laveau’s fame drew crowds of all shapes and colors. While the charges against the Third Municipality Guards were dropped, the statue was returned after a small court fee was paid.

³⁶ There are various spellings of Marie Laveau’s last name. I have chosen to use Laveau, the spelling engraved on her tomb and most commonly used.

Yet, while Marie's fight for religious freedom for women, regardless of race, set her apart from other Vodou practitioners, her life was more complex than Fandrich's study indicates. Born in 1801, Laveau entered the world as colonial rule in New Orleans changed hands from Spain to France, and as France fought a losing battle to maintain ownership of Saint-Domingue. After the death of her first husband, Jacques Paris, a Haitian mulatto, she entered into a long-term relationship with Christophe Glapion, a prominent white businessman with whom she purchased slaves (Long 51-3).

Although the ownership of slaves was a common practice among free people of color in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New Orleans, this aspect of Marie's life contradicts Fandrich's claim that Laveau "embodied outrage over the unjust distribution of power, wealth and privilege in a profoundly class stratified environment" (2). Laveau was an active participant in the social politics of her time although this fact is absent in many of the narratives written about her. Even as a woman of color navigating New Orleans after the enforcement of the Black Codes, Louisiana's more rigid adaptation of the French *Code Noir* and Spain's *Código Negro*, Laveau gained financially from the city's slave economy.

Another aspect of Marie Laveau's life that is often silenced is her vulnerability. Laveau's ability to move about New Orleans, albeit with limited freedom, was due to her "marriage" to Glapion. As a white man of means, he offered her protection from the law and from the dangers of sexual violence ever-present for black women in the antebellum South, regardless of social standing. In Chapter 3, I examine Laveau's vulnerability as a

woman of color in Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams*. Further, I will examine how Rhodes reinvents Laveau in order to reveal the implications of power.

Literary and Theatrical Representations of Vodou in the 1930s

Starting in Europe in the late nineteenth-, early twentieth century with Paul Gauguin's Tahitian-inspired art and Pablo Picasso's African-inspired artwork, primitivism was transformed into an art movement that redefined black culture (Gikandi 466-9). Popularized in the U.S. during the Harlem Renaissance, African primitivism was an acknowledgement of the black man's artistic skills by mainstream culture. However, in *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (2000), Petrine Archer-Straw argues that the burgeoning interest in black culture in the 1920s avant-garde Paris and its influence on American trends "suggests that it was white people's own ideas about blacks, rather than an accurate reading of black culture itself, that underpinned avant-garde modernity" (20-1). This is evidenced in Carl Van Vechten's novel, *Nigger Heaven* (1926), in which he exoticizes Harlem and its inhabitants. While he portrays the black elite and intellectuals as they grapple with race, class, and identity, Van Vechten undermines what were prevalent issues in the black community by emphasizing a larger struggle: the characters' difficulty in resisting their innate animalistic desires. For instance, the prim and proper Mary, who attributes her prudence to the white blood coursing through her veins, becomes enraged when she spies her suitor dancing with the vixen, Lasca Sartoris. She fights her primal instinct as she recalls an earlier incident in which two women "savagely" fought over a man during the charity ball (148).

While prominent Harlem Renaissance writers like Hurston, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson praised Van Vechten for capturing the spirit of black folks, W.E.B. DuBois considered *Nigger Heaven* “a blow in the face” (516) for its debauchery and its dismissive treatment of Harlem’s underclass. Ironically and perhaps, subconsciously, Hurston counters Van Vechten’s depiction of African Americans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Through the use of dialect, her own experience growing up in a black southern town, and a genuine understanding of socioeconomic issues that transcend race and class, Hurston captures the essence of the black working class without denigrating the beliefs, traditions, and African ancestry Van Vechten considered a novelty.

Thus, for African-American artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals, the celebration of primitivism was the recognition of African influence on American culture. The reconceptualization of the “Negro” in America, many believed, finally removed the stigma associated with blackness. In *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, Alain Locke proclaimed: “What we have thought primitive in the American Negro...are then neither characteristically African nor to be explained as an ancestral heritage. They are the result of his peculiar experience in America and the emotional upheaval of its trials and ordeals” (254-5). The perception that African Americans were naturally docile and simple-minded, Locke suggests, was in fact, a result of forced assimilation, enslavement, and the denial of an education; not an inherent trait found in Africans.

Yet, the popularity of minstrel shows, along with propaganda and laws that promoted racial difference through segregation; and scientific studies that “proved” blacks were inferior through their behaviors and cultural practices, reinforced stereotypes.

In *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939*, Clare Corbould argues that part of the difficulty in establishing an African diasporic identity “came...from the dominant image of Africa in Westerners’ minds. Most Americans...imagined a place of unrelenting savagery, where heat and disease hampered all forward movement. Whenever black Americans endeavored to connect themselves to their place of origin, these predominant images formed a large obstacle that had to be overcome” (14). Thus, racial stereotypes prevailed and misconceptions about Vodou, in particular, persisted well into the 1930s and played out in literature and on stage.

For instance, in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), William Faulkner’s rendering of “the band of strange niggers” from Haiti reifies blackness as something foreign, unintelligible and dangerous. Yet, unlike authors that relied on sensationalism to exploit Vodou, Faulkner examined the social, political and historical conditions that linked Haiti to the American South. In his novel, Thomas Sutpen’s arrival in Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, with twenty black men that spoke what the locals believed to be an indecipherable African language alludes to the influx of French-speaking Haitian exiles and their slaves in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Long notes that concessions were made for slave owners to bring their property with them. As a slaveholding state, the Louisiana government was concerned about the effects the Haitian Revolution would have on the state’s institution of slavery.

Therefore, “free nonwhite persons and slaves from the French Caribbean islands” were barred “from entering the Territory of New Orleans” unless they were accompanied by Saint-Domingue expats (Long 28-9). Undoubtedly, Faulkner was aware of the law as he had spent time in New Orleans in the 1920s; therefore, Sutpen’s cargo of Haitian

slaves seems logical because he could be considered an expat. Although the importation of slaves was illegal by that time, provisions in the law allowed for the continuation of slave trading. Thus, Faulkner use of well-worn stereotypes about the primitive African reveals the barbarism in a ruthless plantation owner and the system of slavery itself; and the inevitable end to the plantation system in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Orson Welles used a different approach, relying on beliefs about the native African and details about Henri Christophe's reign during the Haitian Revolution to recreate Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. His stage production, *Voodoo Macbeth* (1936), was lauded for its dramatization of a Shakespearian classic set in a Haitian jungle, and was deemed a brilliant portrayal of African primitivism. In Chapter 9 of *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu*, Simon Callow recalls the efforts in bringing *Voodoo Macbeth* to the stage. In his praise of Welles' adaptation, Callow also mentions moments during production that sparked racial tensions, including Welles' reference to the leader of the "voodoo" drummers, a real witch doctor, according to Callow, as Jazbo³⁷ (234).

While Welles's business partner, Jack Houseman, fought against white stage unionists to ensure racial equality for their black stagehands, he and Welles also faced opposition by black activists who argued that the play bordered on minstrelsy. Despite Welles's best intentions to bring about racial unity by staging the play at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem with an all-black cast and crew, his production failed to go beyond the stereotypes of the native African. To make matters worse, Welles performed in blackface during a run in Indianapolis after the lead actor and his understudy fell ill. Although this

³⁷ A derogatory term used in the 1920s to refer to African-Americans. The term also refers to jazz musicians (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=jazzbo>).

was a last-ditch effort to save the performance, it validated fears that Welles was more concerned with the success of the play than racial sensitivity.

In the same year, C.L.R. James produced a play based on the revolutionary leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and his predecessors. In *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, James wanted to convey a deeper understanding of the events that led to the Haitian rebellion and the desire for freedom. Ironically, his play was criticized for its political overtones and emphasis on race. Staged at the Westminster Theatre in London, James's play opened as the U.S. occupation in Haiti was coming to an end, and served as a way to contextualize the country's continued struggle for independence. Like Welles, James incorporated elements of Haitian Vodou with drumming, singing and dancing; however, James's production focused specifically on the complexities of the Haitian Revolution, and Haitian culture as a whole (King 39). Act I opened with a recreation of the Bois Caïman ceremony, underscoring the prevalence of Vodou in the fight for independence. More about Haiti's colonial past than aesthetics, *Toussaint L'Ouverture* failed to capture the imagination of its audiences. After a ten-week run, the play closed due to poor reviews and low ticket sales (King 31). Whereas Welles' inscription of primitivism onto his black actors magnified the notion of racial difference, James's play challenged slavery, colonialism and other forms of racial oppression.

Despite the images that pervaded American popular culture, African diasporic writers continued to challenge misrepresentations of Haitians and Vodou. Louisiana writer, Arna Bontemps, recreates Haitian history, spanning the Haitian Revolution to the U.S. Occupation in *Drums at Dusk* (1939). A story about violence and the racial tensions leading up to the Haitian Revolution, Bontemps's novel explores greed and the question

of rightful ownership to lands seized by foreign powers. *Drums at Dusk* also examines intra-racial issues between enslaved blacks and free mulattoes, and poor whites against wealthy whites. Through Diron Desautels, a white Creole and the central character, Bontemps challenges assumptions about race, class, and gender within the larger issues of slavery and exploitation. His novel reevaluates the historical events that shaped Haiti's current political state, and the fight for Black Nationalism.

Katherine Dunham also portrayed a different image of Vodou culture in her memoir, *Island Possessed*, based on her trip to Haiti in 1936.³⁸ A world-renowned dancer and student of anthropology, Dunham merged aestheticism with history and culture to recount her time in Haiti. Like Hurston, Dunham was a student of Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits. With a letter from Herskovits explaining the purpose of her visit, Dunham traveled to Trinidad, Martinique, Jamaica, and Haiti. She arrived in Haiti just as the marines were leaving; yet, Dunham notes the resentment and political uncertainty after their departure. While *Island Possessed* reflect a certain caution as Dunham was an outsider and a woman, the memoir reveals the uniqueness and creativeness of Haitian culture; yet, she doesn't exploit it.

Zora Neale Hurston and Contemporary Black Women Writers

In response to attempts by mainstream culture to define the Negro in America's post-slavery era, Zora Neale Hurston not only challenged exaggerated depictions of blacks and African diasporic cultures, but she effectively used an ethnographic, performative approach. Through her research, Hurston sought to reclaim her African

³⁸ Unfortunately, her book wasn't published until 1969.

roots and to erase the shame instilled in African Americans through racial stereotypes. More importantly, Hurston's examination of Vodou cultures discredited earlier anthropological claims that reduced African spirituality to a debased form of ancestor worship. Although other, more informative works have been published since the 1930s, Hurston's research still reigns as the quintessential guide to conceptualizing Vodou.

In *Mules and Men* (1935), Zora Neale Hurston aptly describes "voodoo" as a burning flame "with all the intensity of a suppressed religion" (183). Using the same level of intensity to refute scientific racism, Hurston chronicled her journeys as a Vodou initiate in New Orleans and the Caribbean respectively, adding her unique style of folkloric storytelling to reclaim Vodou as an integral part of African diasporic religious tradition.³⁹ New Orleans, then, was the foundation on which Hurston reclaimed Vodou as lived experience ingrained in local communities and cultures that could be traced to the Caribbean and across the Atlantic to West Africa.

Hurston viewed New Orleans as an important cultural and spiritual site that could only be comprehended in terms of cultural relativism, meaning that the cultural beliefs of an individual or community need to be understood on their own terms.⁴⁰ Thus, her role as both researcher and participant of Vodou practices revealed to the American public an intricate study of African spirituality. Although she applied Western methodology in documenting her findings, Hurston understood the importance of acculturation early on in

³⁹ Here, I am defining the African diaspora as the dispersion of African peoples throughout the world and on the African continent through dispossession and displacement. In the same vein, I am referring to the cultural and spiritual practices that originated in Africa and were reinvented in enslaved and colonized societies.

⁴⁰ See Franz Boas' article, "Museums of Ethnology and Their Classification" (1887).

her career. In the same vein, while her perspective is disconcertingly reductive in the treatment of Caribbean politics, her works redefined for the American public the spiritual roots that survived the transatlantic slave trade and the dispersion of African peoples in the Caribbean and the Americas.

As the spiritual foremother of the women writers whose works are the focus of my study, Hurston's works continue to challenge representations of Vodou. My intention is not to create a linear history, but to show the interconnections between Haiti's Afro-Caribbean population and African-American culture in New Orleans. Therefore, the order of my chapters reflects the ruptures in history and how identities are shaped and transformed despite these disruptions. They also reflect different engagements with Hurston's legacy. Here, I have given you an overview of important historical events that have shaped the relationship between Haiti and New Orleans. My second chapter is based on Erna Brodber's novel, *Louisiana*. Titled, "Telling Our Own Stories: Language and the Migrant Subject in Brodber's *Louisiana*," Brodber's central character, Ella Townsend, is modeled after Hurston. A graduate student of anthropology at Columbia University in the 1930s, and a writer and research fellow for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Ella is sent to Louisiana with a recording machine to capture the life of Suzie Ann Grant-King, affectionately known as Mammy.

Like Hurston, Ella is an outsider in St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana, and in order for her to penetrate the community, she has to abandon her rigid, methodological approach. While Ella believes that Mammy's death is an end to her project, the recording machine that she lugs around reveals otherwise. *Louisiana* is an otherworldly novel that forces Ella and the reading audience to decipher the symbolism deeply embedded in folk

sayings. I examine the ways in which Brodber's novel reflects Hurston's sometimes unorthodox techniques; thus, emphasizing the significance of oral history and the need to challenge "disciplinary boundaries" (Toland-Dix 191). I also examine Brodber's use of dialect as a way to rewrite dominant history.

In Chapter Three: Resistance, Reclamation and Healing: The Legacy of Marie Laveau in *Voodoo Dreams* (2003), I turn to the mythical figure that lives on in what Carolyn Morrow Long refers to as the "Laveau Legend"; and Rhodes's refashioning of the Vodou priestess as the embodiment of resistance and power against racial and patriarchal oppression in her novel. I show how Rhodes reinvents Marie Laveau as a woman whose legend as a spiritual healer often overshadowed her vulnerability as a woman of color. I also examine how both Rhodes and Hurston challenge portrayals of Laveau as either a depraved "witch" or a procuress who exploits impressionable young women and upstanding men. In turn, I show how Hurston and Rhodes contextualize New Orleans "voodoo" as a composite of a "living culture" among ordinary human beings dependent on spirituality as a basic cultural practice.

My fourth chapter, titled "*Breath, Eyes, Memory*: Edwidge Danticat's Narrative of Resistance," returns to the notion of silence in Haiti's historical narratives. A story about cultural memory and female sexual trauma, Danticat's novel breaks the collective silence among Haitian women by articulating how gendered violence has become part of the political norm. When the young protagonist is forced to leave Haiti for New York to reunite with a mother she knows only through photos and cassette tapes, Sophie learns

that her existence is a result of her mother's rape by a Tonton Macoute.⁴¹ She spends the next twelve years trying to unravel her mother's past and the inherited memories that harken back to Haiti's history of slavery and the commodification of black bodies.

Danticat's references to Hurston's work in Haiti and New Orleans are more nuanced.

Danticat corrects Hurston's portrayal of Erzulie as a female Iwa who despises women by making her central to the main characters in her novel. The man that Sophie marries is a musician from New Orleans and in a pivotal scene, he and Sophie's mother compare New Orleans culture to Haitian culture.

In the epilogue, titled, "The Literary Imagination of Haiti in Times of Disaster," I examine the ecological implications of colonialism and the impact that both manmade- and natural disasters have had on Haiti. Coined by Alfred W. Crosby, ecological imperialism refers to "the ways in which the environments of colonized societies have been physically transformed by the experience of colonial occupation."⁴² In *Haiti Noir*, edited by Edwidge Danticat, the short-story collection features the lives of a resilient people in the midst of Haiti's turbulent political history that transcends time.

The issues addressed in the short stories written by various Haitian writers and Caribbean scholars are still as relevant four years later as they were prior to the earthquake. The fictional retelling of historical events also reveals the trauma suffered by people silenced by colonialism, racial oppression, unmitigated violence and environmental disasters. As the 2010 earthquake in Haiti claimed hundreds of thousands

⁴¹ François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's paramilitary force.

⁴² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 69-70.

of lives and left survivors uncertain about the future, many relied on spiritual faith and unyielding perseverance. *Haiti Noir* confronts the over-cultivation of colonized lands, the environmental effects that leave countries like Haiti vulnerable; and the personal impact on local communities. While I am only providing a glance at this critical issue, I will show how spiritual practices are transformed when faith is tested by nature.

CHAPTER II
TELLING OUR OWN STORIES: COMMUNITY AND HEALING IN ERNA
BRODBER'S *LOUISIANA*

Ella Townsend, Erna Brodber's central character in *Louisiana* (1994), is a budding ethnographer who initially fails in her attempt at field research. When Ella sets out to record the life of Suzie Ann Grant-King, affectionately known as "Mammy," she naively believes that Mammy will be eager to talk about her life and the events that make her a living legend. What Ella fails to realize is that her rigid, scientific approach alienates her from her "subject" and the larger community of St. Mary, Louisiana. As the first Works Progress Administration (WPA) worker to receive a new-fangled, cumbersome recording machine to collect folk material, Ella is confident that the use of modern technology and her blackness will gain her automatic entry into black southern life. However, attempts to match wits with Mammy fail miserably as Mammy is unimpressed with Ella's northern sophistication and academic credentials. Instead, she is more interested in Ella's mannerisms and the lilt in her voice that, despite her New York upbringing, betray her Jamaican roots.

It is Ella's demeanor and appearance that initially confuses Mammy as she believes that her dearly departed friend, Lowly, has been reincarnated to help her transition from the physical to the spiritual world. Through mental telepathy, Mammy asks Lowly, "Who is this gal with some bits of me and some bits of you?" (17), immediately establishing a familial and spiritual kinship with Ella. Lowly's reply that "two places can make children! Two women sire another?" (17) alludes to the shaping of one's identity through multiple locations as evidenced in divergent African diasporan

cultures in the American South and the Caribbean. As Kezia Page argues in her essay, “‘Two Places Can Make Children’: Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*,” Lowly’s pronouncement calls for an examination of how “geographical locations...create an individual” (65); particularly, the hybridity of African culture.

Although they are born many years apart and in different regions, Mammy and Lowly are undeniably kindred spirits. Not only do they come from towns of the same name, but they share the same last name and possibly, the same blood as Lowly emphatically claims that all Grants are “born and grow where I come from” (16). This intimate bond--a marriage of sorts--produces Ella, a woman who arrives from New York, but hails from Jamaica and has physical features similar to Lowly. By acknowledging her as “our daughter” (26), Mammy and Lowly lay claim to Ella, rebirthed as an interpreter of African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean migrant experiences. As Page puts it, Ella becomes “the [anthropological] field itself” (61).

The concept of reconnecting with and reimagining one’s identity is prevalent in *Louisiana*. In her depiction of a young black female anthropologist with little knowledge about her own beginnings, Brodber writes across spatial and temporal borders. In the novel, each character’s history is shaped by her experience as a migrant subject. Collectively, their stories reveal the pain of displacement, dislocation and alienation both abroad and in their home countries. A Jamaican-American woman whose connection to her Caribbean roots is buried when her grandmother dies and her parents bring her “home,” Ella is doubly displaced. She can neither identify with her island country, nor with the West Indian community in which she lives in New York. Just like her hair, Ella’s Jamaican identity is “satisfactorily neutered” (26) by her parent’s assimilation.

Aware only of the fact that her parents eventually retrieve her from Jamaica, Ella unquestioningly accepts their silence.

Sensing that Ella has a story just as important as hers, the roles temporarily shift with Mammy taking the lead as researcher and Ella, the subject. Mammy gleans information about Ella's life over a game of Coon Can,⁴³ triggering repressed memories of her early childhood. Ella watches her younger self, soothed by her grandmother's touch as she plaits her hair, and later when she is gathered up in her grandmother's arms. She exclaims, "I'm flying" (25), acknowledging that she has tapped into her subconscious, another space and time. Just as quickly, she shuts out these images and the long-forgotten Jamaican landscape, afraid of reliving painful childhood memories. Yet, Ella's brief surrender confirms for the "Venerable Sisters" that she is their "horse," the spiritual intermediary through whom they will transmit their stories in the afterlife. Oblivious to the wheels set in motion for her own spiritual evolution, Ella's determination to "give something to the white people" (21) becomes instead an unraveling of her own past within the larger communal history she wishes to capture.

Ella's research and more importantly her sense of self, is disrupted not only by Mammy's death and her seemingly disastrous project, but by her psychic experience during Mammy's funeral. She is "mounted" by Mammy's spirit, speaking in tongues; her body convulsing as the funeral goes surround her. Her experience is likened to a *ring shout*, a remnant of a sacred African ritual in Myal ceremonies in which a circle was formed and "the interaction between the individual and the community was mediated by sacred spiritual forces evidenced in spirit possession" (Hazard-Donald 196).

43 A card game similar to Gin Rummy.

Through “deep grunts” and the synchronized patter of feet (45), the community lulls the writhing and shouting Ella into a deep sleep. As she begins to recover from the experience, Ella discovers that the tape reel is full of important data although her talks with Mammy wielded little more than a few sparse sentences. Propelled into a new field of study, what she jokingly refers to as “celestial ethnography” and the “anthropology of the dead” (61), Ella is awakened to a new way of knowing.

Her transcendence, then, is a communal crossing over, a transformative spiritual performance in which the folk community of St. Mary, Louisiana and her spiritual foremothers, Mammy and Lowly, are necessarily involved in helping her “get over.” Although she doesn’t completely abandon her anthropological background, Ella’s break with formal academic research is complete when Reuben, her future husband, concludes that “there are different yet logical systems of knowledge” (46) that the Western academy discredits. Forced to accept that traditional knowledge, or what Toni Morrison refers to as “discredited knowledge,” now informs her research, Ella spends the next eighteen years decoding Mammy’s and Lowly’s histories and that of St. Mary’s Parish (Louisiana and Jamaica, respectively).

Thus, Ella’s transformation from staunch academic scholar to spiritual medium reveals an intricate web of black folk life that challenges Western-centered, socio-scientific methodology in transcribing the historical narratives of marginalized communities. Brodber’s use of spirit possession as a literary trope allows for an examination of alternative epistemologies that, in turn, redefine the approach to ethnographic fieldwork by challenging Western hegemonic discourses.

Ella's allusion to herself as a "hoodoo" woman twice in the text implies both her initial resistance to another form of "knowing" and finally, her acceptance of the way in which she is perceived in her new role as a seer. Brodber's use of the term *hoodoo* instead of Vodou (or the corrupted, *voodoo*) is with deference to Zora Neale Hurston and her fieldwork in New Orleans. In "Hoodoo in America,"⁴⁴ Hurston examines the complexities of black folk life in the American South; notably, the folk tales, songs, spiritual practices and belief systems that helped shape African-American culture. Hoodoo connotes the belief in supernatural powers and is a term largely used in the Mississippi Valley region (Anderson xi). Used interchangeably with *conjure*, hoodoo is distinct from Vodou in that it is not a religion, according to Jeffrey E. Anderson, but "a body of magical beliefs" (xi) integral to African-American folklore. The conflation of hoodoo and conjure seems problematic in that it limits hoodoo to simply *causing* things to happen. It is understandable, then, that Ella resists the label.

Shirley Toland-Dix makes a distinction between Ella's "divine" powers and conjuration, arguing that Ella is not a conjurer "because she does not allow herself to manipulate events" (204). She states that "Brodber...establishes a moral paradigm for the use of psychic powers, creating a biblically based parable to differentiate Ella's practice from conjure or hoodoo" "(204). However, the biblical tale of Elijah/Elisha mentioned in the novel and on which Toland-Dix bases her claim, is compared to the story about the witch of Endor. Ella concludes that Elisha waits for God to grant him spiritual power, while the witch of Endor is persecuted for using her God-given powers (100-1). Thus,

44 An article published in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1931, and later revised and published as *Mules and Men* (1935).

Ella's hesitation to use her gift is based on the fear of being ostracized, not divine intervention.

Further, a conjurer is someone who not only has the ability to make things happen, but someone who uses traditional healing methods to cure physical and social ills. Hurston notes that hoodoo doctors were often referred to as "two-headed doctors" for their use of folk medicine; "most of the prescriptions [having] to do with birth and social diseases" (320). Ella's burgeoning psychic abilities allow her to "read" people; to learn about their personal journeys and to help them confront the past. For example, when Ella meets Ben, she senses his pain and in time, he comes to her for healing. He gives her the name of a young woman, and Ella takes it from there. She learns of Ben's affair with his student, and his inaction when he learns about her pregnancy. Ella hands Ben his story, even reenacting Lilieth's botched abortion that subsequently leads to her death. By reliving the experience, Ella leads Ben on the difficult path towards healing. Hence, Ella is a conjurer; she uses her second sight to bring forth the past, forcing the afflicted to deal with and heal from their pain.

The emphasis on African spirituality is based more on a return to cultural roots than faith. Pukkumina,⁴⁵ or "what they call getting the power" (20), is mentioned only once in the novel and rarely in literary analyses; however, it is part of the larger revivalist tradition popular in Jamaica. Mammy's incredulity over Ella's ignorance about her home country becomes a history lesson about Jamaica and the rebellious spirit of its "racemen" (20). As the novel progresses, the Black Nationalist movement that spanned across the

45 The term, *pocomania*, is thought to be a corruption of Pukkumina. Defined as "little madness," Joseph Murphy notes that pocomania is considered an "immoral, debased" form of Christianity often associated with Obeah (125).

U.S. and the Caribbean in the early twentieth-century comes into focus; and Marcus Garvey, Jamaica's champion of racial solidarity, becomes a transcultural symbol of Afrocentrism.

The overlapping of the political realm with the spiritual world is, according to June Roberts, "a sign that Brodber has taken another step in the development of a creative and syncretic anthropology of afrocentric religious phenomena across the diaspora" (218). Indeed, Ella's psychic communication with the deceased Mammy, Lowly and eventually, Silas, is a revisionist history. Ella's psychic transformation is a release from racial inferiority ingrained in the colonized mind, and the return to African-centered spirituality, folk knowledge and cultural values.

In *Louisiana*, traditional knowledge, or "high science," then, is the syncretization of Pukkumina, Vodou, "hoodoo," Myalism and other expressions of African diasporan traditions, including the black church that empower and heal black communities. In this context, Brodber reconfigures the spirit world as an ancestral space that recovers a forgotten African past in the face of slavery and colonization. In an attempt to reclaim the histories of African diasporic peoples, disrupted and distorted by systemic oppression, and maintained by cultural divisiveness, Brodber states that her purpose for writing *Louisiana* was "to make the point that we have a long history of cooperating to produce a diaspora culture and it would suit us politically in the contemporary period to find our way back to each other and together to face problems that are so similar."⁴⁶

In reclaiming black folk history, Ella renames herself Louisiana, a combination of Mammy's given name, Suzie Anna, and Lowly, whose real name is Louise. Ella's

46 Qtd in "Me and My Head-Hurting Fiction" (122).

renaming is the reclamation of her Afro-Caribbean identity, strengthened through her spiritual ties to the Venerable Sisters and to St. Mary, Louisiana; New Orleans and St. Mary, Louisiana, Jamaica. In discovering Mammy's and Lowly's stories, and the stories of the men she provides spiritual counseling to, Ella's research culminates into a living document of an as-of-yet untold diasporic history.

Similarly, the seamen Ella houses and counsels in New Orleans bring with them variations of folktales, songs and dances that, regardless of origin, speak of shared experiences. Thus, Ella's transformation is not only spiritual but equally influenced by cultural memory. In the process, she pieces together her own family history while helping others to confront their past. Further, by establishing herself as Louisiana, Ella epitomizes one of the United States' most important cultural sites that, in turn, emphasizes her own subjectivity as a black woman with transatlantic ties.

The transatlantic connection Brodber makes is what Carole Boyce Davies refers to as "writing home." She argues that "these migrations between identities, or the articulations of a variety of identities, are central to our understandings of the ways in which...[Black women] writers express notions of home in their works" (116). Patricia Joan Saunders argues that the emphasis on language allows Brodber to "mak[e] explicit the process and significations through which the subject participates in its Be(come)ing" (115). In other words, it is not so much the articulation of words as it is the system of knowledge in which Brodber's central character contextualizes her sense of being.

The reclamation of an African-centered identity is demonstrated through the process of transcription in *Louisiana*, highlighting the transcultural significance of certain words and phrases. Like the titles of each chapter: *I heard a voice from Heaven say, First*

the goat must be killed, Out of Eden, I got over, Louisiana, Den ah who seh Sammy dead, the vernacular used throughout the novel is the recovery of oral tradition; here, it is the refrain of a Jamaican folk song. It is also the articulation of a revised historiography. As Ella's transcript reveals, Mammy's history is the community's history.

As Ella begins her transition to the spiritual world, she concludes: "Mammy would not tell the president nor his men her tale for it was not hers; she was no hero. It was a tale of cooperative action; it was a community tale. We made it happen" (161). To tell it the way the WPA intended is to distort history because it would make Mammy a subject of a larger, whitewashed narrative instead of a woman who joined countless others to change history. Brodber examines the complexities of identity by challenging historical constructs of African diasporan peoples; specifically, black women. Through Ella, Mammy and Lowly, Brodber revises the notion of being for the black female, migratory subject.

Brodber: Political Activist and Spiritual Medium

A self-professed "intellectual worker," Brodber uses fiction as a means to examine the implications of displacement and dispossession within Afro-Caribbean communities. Steeped in history, sociology, African spirituality and activism, Brodber's literary works function as creatively conceptualized case studies of the fragmented human psyche as a result of systematized social and economic underdevelopment. The search for knowledge, self-affirmation, agency and advancement, then, is a common thread running through Brodber's novels and short stories. The return to traditional or folk knowledge and spirituality, Brodber's works suggest, counteracts discursive systems of colonial oppression and is the key to the retrieval of a repressed history.

Brodber's literary works demonstrate how the past informs the current state of affairs in former colonies by examining the ways in which colonialism has historically and systematically stunted the growth of people of color across the African diaspora. Using her home country of Jamaica as her model, Brodber examines the crippling effects of colonialism; i.e. the invasion of European powers, political uncertainty in the postcolonial era; neocolonialism in the guise of globalization, etc., in her novels. Her focus on the socioeconomic crises in modern-day Jamaica reflects the gross underdevelopment of Caribbean countries politically and financially bound to the imperial West through exploitation, subjugation and erasure.

For instance, in Brodber's futuristic fourth novel, *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007), the sudden disappearance of Mister Charlie,⁴⁷ the "father" of the inhabitants on an unnamed island, leads to social paralysis as his "children" blindly await his return. With no knowledge of their real origins or their full potential as autonomous beings, the ambiguous Caribbean community remains physically and mentally affixed to the past as demonstrated through their inability to age, reproduce or think beyond their basic needs. The subsequent freedom from an implied system of slavery (it is never named and the island inhabitants don't recognize it as servitude) destabilizes the people's sense of normalcy. Unable or unwilling to provide answers about Mr. Charlie's mysterious departure and its ramifications, the elders leave it to the younger generation to find its own way in the world.

47 "Mister Charlie" is a term, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, used to refer to white men. Significantly, it refers to the unequal distribution of power through systematic forms of racial oppression.

The social retardation of the community in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* is what Brodber refers to as *spirit thievery*; loosely defined here as the condition in which the mind, body and spirit are stolen through the machinations of Empire. Spirit thievery is also allegorized in *Myal* when Mass Levi's impotence results in his use of Obeah to steal fifteen year-old Anita's sexual essence. Through Anita, Brodber examines how colonial domination separates the soul from living flesh, a process similar to zombification: "Anita was studying. The kind that splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration" (28). In this moment of vulnerability, Mass Levi takes hold of Anita, manipulating her in order to restore his vitality.

Mass Levi's attempt to possess spiritually from Anita what he cannot otherwise attain echoes Helen Tiffin's observation that his misappropriation of Obeah "to revivify his old age again conjures the 'sick heart' psychology of Empire—the attempt by the 'old world' nations to enliven their cultures (and narratives) by 'thieving' the spirits and bodies...of their colonised subjects" (917). Shalini Puri makes a similar argument, defining spirit thievery as the cultural theft of colonized peoples that, in turn, manifests in multiple ways (102). To regain his reputation as an infallible, respected and feared figure in the community, Mass Levi goes on a campaign of terror, first, by commanding a torrent of stones upon Anita's house leaving the community and Anita clueless as to the reason or the source; and second, by using a doll in Anita's likeness to sexually assault her.

However, as we see in *Louisiana* and *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* as well as in *Myal*, spirit possession also signifies colonial resistance, the reclamation of African spirituality, and both psychic and physical healing of the fragmented self. Anita

is released from Mass Levi's hold when a Myal ceremony lead by Miss Gatha, a traditional healer, is performed. It takes the community's efforts to re-possess Anita's body and spirit in order to make her whole once again. Defined by Joseph M. Murphy, as "a force of social integration bent on the exposure of Obeah, and defusing it with the power of communal values expressed in public ceremonies" (120), the community's participation in the ceremony counteracts the threat of social disruption. Similar to Ella's embodiment of Lilieth's spirit in *Louisiana*, Miss Gatha becomes Anita and vice versa, as she wrestles Anita back from the dark forces that consume her.

Brodber parallels Anita's story with Ella O'Grady's to reveal the workings of Empire upon the female body in the local community and abroad. As the novel opens, Ella is under the care of Mass Cyrus, a respected spiritualist who recognizes that spiritual healing is more complex than the physical healing of the body. Tiffin notes that Brodber's introduction of Ella in the opening pages "encapsulates the healing process of Myalism which will take Ella from the dis/ease of Anglo-interpellation, recitation/reproduction, to the health of resistance and recuperation" (916). An outcast in Grove Town because of her mixed heritage, Ella's burden as a "half black, half white child" (6) also becomes the community's burden as it grapples with her presence in a sea of black faces. The conflict with her two selves reaches a breaking point when Ella naively believes she has found love and acceptance after she migrates to America and marries an up-and-coming film producer from a prominent white family.

Here, Brodber juxtaposes Western medicine with folk medicine as it is revealed that Selwyn, Ella's husband, comes from a line of chemists; their family empire built on pharmaceuticals. Ella's choice of drug is her husband's desire for her: "It was Selwyn

who explained to her in simple terms that she was coloured, mulatto and what that meant, taking her innocence with her hymen in return for guidance through the confusing fair that was America. Ella was hooked and she liked the drug” (43). She soaks up Selwyn’s passion and attentiveness, misinterpreting his actions as a sign of his relentless devotion to her. In turn, he exoticizes Ella and her culture, contorting them in ways that make them unrecognizable to her.

Believing that Selwyn’s fascination with her stories of the people “back home” demonstrates a genuine interest in her life in Jamaica, she generously feeds him tales that he, in turn, capitalizes from. He appropriates her characterizations of Jamaican people and culture in the form of a minstrel show, causing an abdominal malignancy in Ella that mimics the signs of pregnancy and simultaneously materializes in the form of a mental breakdown; both conditions untreatable by Western medicine. Spiritually corrupted by her husband’s cunning and manipulation, Ella is forced to confront her own complicity in her undoing when he sends her back home. Under the care of Mass Cyrus, Ella is physically healed; her spiritual healing comes in the form of a teaching job--the community’s solution to her return and the beginning of Ella’s understanding of Empire.

Ella’s transition from social outcast to socially-aware educator is a journey of ostracism, self-denial and finally, self-acceptance and resistance against colonial domination. When Ella recognizes the danger in teaching “Mr. Joe’s Farm,” a colonialist text, to her black pupils, Reverend Simpson remarks: “Has she not seen two things in one? The first two principles of spirit thievery--let them feel that there is nowhere for them to grow to. Stunt them...Let them see their brightest ones as the dumbest ever. Alienate them” (98), acknowledging both Ella’s newfound understanding of Empire and

her recovery of mind, body and spirit. In *Myal*, the repetitive refrain that “the half has not been told” alludes to the suppression of “ancestral beliefs, oral traditions, religions, and healing practices” (Puri 101) through colonialism and imperialism.

Thus, Ella’s apprehension of “Mr. Joe’s Farm” as a colonialist text and the danger it poses for young, impressionable minds speaks back to her younger, fragmented self that unquestioningly and elegantly recites Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” at a school assembly. “The colonialist book,” Puri notes, “comes complete with a denial of African worldviews, a contorted history, a British literary canon that serves colonialism, and a brand of literature concocted specially for consumption in the colonies” (100). Disguised as a children’s fable, “Mr. Joe’s Farm” is a cautionary tale about what happens when misguided beings try to exist outside of colonial rule.

In the story, the wayward animals are bored with Mr. Joe’s routine and venture off on their own. Initially, they enjoy the newfound freedom; yet, they soon realize that they cannot survive by their own devices. Soon, the animals return to Mr. Joe’s farm where, once again, their lives are regulated. Ella’s awareness that “Mr. Joe’s Farm” needs revising forces her to recognize her own zombification, and motivates her to counterbalance the story’s intended message with an alternative ending. Thus, her return home signifies resistance against colonial domination through the healing of mind and body.

A similar disorder affects Nellie in Brodber’s first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980). Disillusioned by Western intellectualism and ideology, the stagnated Black Nationalist movement, and traumatized by the death of her lover, Nellie tries to come to terms with her deteriorated mental state through disjointed memories of

her immediate family, her ancestry, her community and her entry into womanhood. Like Brodber's own disenchantment with the nationalist leaders who claimed to represent the marginalized masses as they remained socially divided, accompanied by government sanctioned violence to stamp out neo-colonial resistance in 1960s and 1970s Jamaica, Nellie's breakdown is the result of her disconnect with the folk community and her own voicelessness in the fight for social equality. The narrative itself mimics the symptoms of dissociative personality disorder,⁴⁸ hence, the difficult task of piecing together Nellie's story. Brodber admits that this was a deliberate, yet necessary tactic to help her readers interact with the text.

In "Me and My Head-Hurting Fiction," Brodber explains that the unusual way in which she writes is "in the hope that people would ask why and in the process pay attention and get to my meaning" (121). The meaning Brodber hopes to convey is that getting to the heart of the social and political ills she addresses in her works requires the redirection of intellectual energy in order to understand how alienation impacts not only an individual or community, but a nation. In Brodber's hands, Cock Robin,⁴⁹ from the English nursery rhyme "Who Killed Cock Robin?" becomes an allegory about the dangers of political alienation. In the section titled "Miniatures," Nellie applauds her lover's political aspirations and his fight for social change:

48 The lack of case studies on psychological disorders among indigenous peoples motivated Brodber to create her own for her students in the social work classes she taught at the University of the West Indies-Mona (Roberts 21).

49 In *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*, June Roberts notes that the Cock Robin character in *Jane and Louisa* represents Walter Rodney, a Guyanese historian and neo-Marxist who was refused entry upon his return to Kingston, Jamaica and to his teaching post in 1968 because of his "revolutionary" politics. In 1984, he was assassinated by the CIA during political unrest in Guyana. (See pp. 13-19).

“My young man’s got the spirit. He’s turned over a new leaf. He’s even changed his profession. He is going to get more learning so that he can better minister his people. My young man loves his people. He gives half of his salary to his people. My young man talks in an unknown tongue...words like ‘underdevelopment,’ ‘Marx,’ ‘cultural pluralism.’ I love my young man. He’s got the black spirit and it’s riding him hard. Lead on Robin. Lead on” (46).

Embedded in the feeling of national pride the scene evokes is a cautionary tale. Cock Robin dies a fiery death, “burnt to ash” (52) in a freak accident. His self-immolation, Brodber asserts, symbolizes the self-destructiveness of Black Nationalist leadership built on Europeanized revolutionary ideals instead of Afrocentric radicalism. Cock Robin’s death is a turning point for Nellie in that it forces her to reevaluate her own dysfunction as both an outsider in her community and in the male-dominated political group in which she belongs. Nellie is determined to carry on even as her sense of reality unravels. Baba, a childhood friend and Rastafarian, forces Nellie to confront her illness when he hands her a doll that crumbles in her lap. Seeing herself as “a cracked up doll” (61), Nellie reluctantly allows Baba to guide her through the healing process.

Through Nellie, Brodber echoes Patricia Saunders’ claim that in terms of imperialism and nationalism, “black female subjectivity is appropriated” in both instances albeit for different means (113). In *Jane and Louisa*, Nellie is reduced to a mere physical presence that serves as a recorder of, as opposed to a participant in, nationalist discourse through her role as minute taker for her male intellectual contemporaries. Although she is Western-educated and a trained physician, she is silenced by both masculinist discourse and the lack of a common language that will allow her to communicate with the people of her rural Jamaican community. Writing, then, enables Afro-Caribbean women writers like Brodber to enter discussions that have historically

used marginalized women to advance political agendas (even Western feminism) by presenting a united front that, in practice, never existed.

In *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*, Gay Wilentz examines Brodber's literary method through the concept of constructed knowledge.⁵⁰ Defined as a way "to allow self back into the process of knowing, to confront the pieces of the self that may be experienced as fragmented and contradictory" (4-5), constructed knowledge, Wilentz contends, breaks down binarisms that reinforce rigid social constructs. Brodber deconstructs binaristic modes of thinking by examining the mind and body as one. The workings of colonialism destabilizes the mind and body, Brodber contends, leading to a fragmented self that can only be cured by reestablishing a cultural identity.

The fragmented self, or doubling, is an undercurrent in all of Brodber's novels. Similar to W.E.B. Dubois' theory of double consciousness, doubling refers to the halving of the self—the perception of oneself in contrast to the way she is perceived by others, and the essence of self or a "truer self" (Dubois 8). In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home, Myal and Louisiana*, Brodber's use of doubling as a trope underscores the need to reconcile the fragmented, colonized self. Similarly, in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, Queenie, the leader of the "soon-to-be-pickney" gang, intuitively knows that a part of herself, her people's cultural identity, has yet to be revealed. Like Ella in *Louisiana*, Queenie comes equipped with a tape recorder; a self-made ethnographer determined to unveil and document her people's history. Hence, doubling connotes an identity crisis

50 Wilentz borrows this term from Mary Field Belenky's *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986).

prevalent in African diasporic cultures, as well as the reconciliation of the self through the decolonization of the mind.

Channeling Zora Neale Hurston

In her examination of spirituality and psychic healing, Brodber cleverly resurrects Zora Neale Hurston through Ella's character by incorporating significant aspects of Hurston's life and her study of African diasporic cultures in the United States and the Caribbean in *Louisiana*. Brodber begins by retracing Hurston's research trips to the American South; specifically, New Orleans in the late 1920s, and the documentation of her findings in the 1930s. While *Louisiana* is largely set in St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana and New Orleans, respectively, Ella's initial failings in the field echo Hurston's first research trip to Florida. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston reflects on her naïveté when attempting to apply the anthropological tools she'd learned at Barnard to the southern communities she'd set out to study:

“My first six months were disappointing. I found out later that it was not because I had no talents for research, but because I did not have the right approach. The glamor of Barnard College was still upon me...I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, ‘Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?’ The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads. No, they had never heard of anything like that around there” (182-3).

Hurston returned to New York discouraged. However, after meeting with her mentor, famed anthropologist Franz Boas, she was determined to make her second research trip a success. In the introduction to *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston admits that “folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds”; that “the best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They

are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by.”⁵¹ Being African American wasn’t enough; the success of Hurston’s project required tact and the ability to earn the community’s trust.

Unlike the fictional Ella who is a stranger to southern black culture when she arrives in Louisiana, Hurston’s southern upbringing evoked an intimate connection to the lore and the people on which her anthropological research was based. Yet, even as she boasted that “the map of Dixie [was] on her tongue” (*Dust Tracks* 143), Hurston’s methods were initially perceived by her subjects as pretentious and exploitative. She realized that in order to gain the trust of the people, she had to become one of them; meaning, she had to return to her roots. Her new approach paid off when she returned to the South in 1928, a year after her first time in the field, stopping first in Mobile, Alabama, and later moving into various sawmill camps throughout Florida; collecting folk material and learning about survival in places whose cultural richness was often overshadowed by violence. However, Hurston’s most profound experience as a researcher would take place in New Orleans.

As a participant-observer, Hurston not only studied the practice of Vodou, but she became a believer. The result is a carefully crafted body of research that challenges what Hurston saw as reprehensible misrepresentations of Vodou popularized in film and onstage, but most damningly presented as ethnographic research by her scholarly peers. In *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (2003), Valerie Boyd notes Hurston’s vexation with writers like Newbell Niles Puckett who admits to pretending to be a hoodoo doctor so that he could expose the secrets of Vodou. In *Folk Beliefs of the*

51 *Mules and Men* (2).

Southern Negro (1926), he dismisses the practice as a scam. In a conversation with Langston Hughes, Hurston exclaimed: “It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it...my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us” (Boyd 177). This sentiment was directed at folklore collectors Howard Odum and Guy Johnson as well. In a letter to Boas, Hurston contends that in their analysis of black folk culture, Odum and Johnson are “in error constantly” (Hemenway 124).

Hurston’s chance to correct these misrepresentations came when she expanded her research of black folk culture to include the study of *hoodoo*. While she had managed to meet with a few hoodoo doctors in Florida, the bulk of her material came from New Orleans, the “hoodoo capital of America.” In part two of *Mules and Men*, aptly titled “Hoodoo,” Hurston provides a historical overview of Vodou in the Crescent City and its significance as a sacred, legitimate religion (Boyd 175). Upon her arrival, Hurston settled in Algiers, originally a port town on the west bank of the Mississippi River, nicknamed “Hoodoo Town” because of the large number of Vodou adherents among the slave population in the 1800s. Algiers,⁵² to Hurston’s disappointment, wielded little information. She found a wealth of material once she crossed over to the other side of the river to the *Vieux Carré*, the French Quarter. There, she learned about the infamous Marie Laveau, who Hurston touts as the “Queen of Conjure” (191) in her work. She also learned that Vodou was outlawed in New Orleans, so it was with great discernment that Hurston approached spiritual practitioners and other believers.

⁵² In her book, Valerie Boyd notes that Hurston left Algiers a few months into her stay after a police crackdown led to the arrest of two well-known two-headed doctors (178).

During her time in New Orleans, Hurston served as an apprentice to several hoodoo doctors. She “had to prove her sincerity and worthiness as a seeker by submitting to a rigorous process of initiation” (Boyd 178). This included lying naked and in meditation for several days at a time; catching and boiling a black cat in order to collect one of its bones for protection; learning about the potency of certain plants and herbs; dancing in a death ceremony and partaking in other rites of passage. Towards the end of her time in New Orleans, Hurston had become a psychic adviser, actively counseling clients seeking retribution, reparations or healing. More importantly, as a Vodou initiate who immersed herself in the secret religion, Hurston turned the field of anthropology on its head by challenging the ways in which fieldwork was conducted and presented in publications.

In *Louisiana*, Brodber also questions the prescribed methodology of anthropological research. The novel, she contends, “deals with social science methodology--the problem I have seen of the native anthropologist who cannot, as anthropology likes to advise its students, separate him- or herself from the field, for they are the field and cannot return to middle America or to Europe with data to be made into a thesis.”⁵³ However, Brodber departs from Hurston’s view of the field in a significant way. Whereas Hurston notes that the “spy-glass of Anthropology” (*Mules and Men* 1) enabled her to examine black folklore objectively, the fictional Ella has to suspend belief in logic and reason in order to decipher the coded language ingrained in Mammy’s and Lowly’s histories.

53 Qtd in “Me and My Head-Hurting Fiction,” p. 123.

The research skills Ella acquires at Columbia are used to assemble, not to cull, the data she receives from her conversations with the dead. In fact, the only way for Ella to “infiltrate” St. Mary’s Parish’s folk community is to build a common language, which she fails to do even after she is possessed. While her presence in town is clear; she is the channel through which Mammy’s spirit lives on, Ella is still alienated from the people who sees her as “one of theirs gone North and everybody and his wife had people ‘up there’” (49). In other words, the townspeople are more interested in what lies beneath her Northernness, something that has to be teased out by the Venerable Sisters and the new community Ella builds when she arrives in New Orleans. As Brodber demonstrates through Ella’s transformation, folk knowledge has to be cultivated and nurtured, something that Ella learns over time.

Brodber manipulates history, reincarnating Marie Laveau as Madam Marie, Ella’s (living) spiritual guide, and the woman Ella and Reuben board with when they relocate. Based on Hurston’s description of the infamous “Voodoo Queen” in *Mules and Men*, Brodber envisions Madam Marie as a storyteller and psychic healer; a woman who, like Ella, gives people their histories. In *Louisiana*, she is described as a brown woman, who is “short, fat and round” (77); a contrast to descriptions of Marie Laveau as a fair-skinned mulatto of extraordinary beauty.⁵⁴

Ironically, Ella’s description of how her own physical appearance has changed over time aligns with the characterizations commonly attributed to the legendary Marie

54 In the *Cabildo*, part of the Louisiana State Museum consortium, hangs a portrait by painter, Frank Schneider (the original painting, by George Catlin in 1835, was lost). Although Carolyn Morrow Long’s research revealed that Marie never posed for a portrait, or allowed her picture to be taken, to this day, the woman in the painting is erroneously identified as Marie Laveau.

Laveau: “I am...very observable in the streets...with my headdress and my long dress, I know I present a dignity rather like [Madam Marie] and an aura which turns heads” (99). The deflection from Madam Marie’s appearance to her spiritual gifts is Brodber’s way of emphasizing the significance of black female spiritual leaders as respected figures in their communities. In *Louisiana*, Madam Marie takes in boarders from the Caribbean--West Indian men; many, sailors that have traveled the world, finding in Madam’s front parlor a place to swap stories and songs, and to reconnect with their homelands through collective memory.

The reach of Madam’s power extends beyond her reputation as a spiritual healer. Her gift of storytelling is a testament to the predominance of oral tradition. When Madam recalls the story of Anancy and the magic pot, Ella realizes that the story’s origin is less important than what the tale signifies. When Anancy’s wife learns that he has hidden a magic pot that provides food for him with the words, “Cook mek mi see,” she chides his selfishness and is determined to use the pot to feed their eleven children. Mrs. Anancy discovers Anancy’s hiding place and repeats the phrase, “Cook mek mi see,” just as she’d seen her husband do. Sure enough, she has plenty of food to feed her family and to store for later. The story ends when Mrs. Anancy mistakenly washes the pot, rinsing away its powers to provide sustenance (78-9).

While the tale is one of many Madam shares with the lively group, the message is intended for Ella. Like the pot, Ella has scrubbed the tape reel for all that it will wield. It was now time for her to redirect her energy toward another source. Through storytelling, Madam bridges the gap between various Afro-Caribbean and African-American cultures.

More importantly, she imparts life lessons that are characteristic of many of the tales both Brodber and Hurston examine in their works.

A short yet dense novel, *Louisiana* has many hidden gems that easily go unnoticed. One way to understand the novel is to turn to Hurston's writings and literature written about Hurston. Brodber includes minute and seemingly insignificant details about Hurston and her research in celebration of her anthropological and literary genius. Brodber's nod to Hurston as a pioneer in the social sciences and the literary field is found even in the naming of her characters: the names Ella,⁵⁵ Silas (Mammy's husband); and Grant (Mammy's and Lowly's last name) are all borrowed from *Mules and Men*. The mention of duppies and nine night refers to Hurston's study of funeral rites in Jamaica in *Tell My Horse* (1938). Even Ella's style of dress when she arrives in St. Mary's Parish is similar to Hurston's.

To Mammy, Ella is a strange sight to behold as she wonders if her friend Lowly has indeed materialized in the flesh: "...them fine long legs and this knife seamed slacks, what's that about Lowly girl? Been crossing the sexes up there Lowly girl or managed to merge man into woman?" (11). In Hurston's biography, Robert Hemenway acknowledges Hurston's love of hats tilted to the side, with a pair of pants and boots to match. At a time when wearing pants was unpopular among women, Hurston's unconventional style truly made her a woman before her time. By no means a literal translation of Hurston's life, Brodber uses creative license in refashioning Hurston as an important historical figure.

⁵⁵ The "Ella" in Hurston's *Mules and Men* is Ella Wall, a woman so well known for her "loose" reputation that a song, known throughout South Florida, is written about her (149-50).

The inspiration for Mammy's character seems to have come from Hurston's essay, "Mother Catherine," in *The Sanctified Church* (1981). Hurston meets Mother Catherine as part of her fieldwork in New Orleans. Her chapel is decorated with flags, banners and embroideries; and Mother Catherine is equally bedecked in a white robe and red cape (23-4). The decor for Lowly's, Mammy's and later, Ella's funerals are similar to the description in Hurston's essay. The members of various lodges and social clubs pay their respect to the dearly departed, bearing flags and banners that, like their uniforms, are embossed in vibrant colors.

When Hurston meets Mother Catherine, it is with great humility. She kneels before the spiritual leader with her head bowed. When Mother Catherine asks Hurston the purpose of her visit, she meekly replies: "Mother, I come seeking knowledge" (24). In *Louisiana*, Ella and Mammy's relationship is built upon a similar dynamic. Although in the beginning, Ella complains that Mammy doesn't see her as a researcher, but like a daughter that she orders around, she realizes that Mammy is the maternal figure she lost when her grandmother died. The knowledge Ella seeks is revealed when she, like Hurston, humbles herself.

A discourse on race and gender within the exploration of African spirituality, it is significant that Brodber nicknames Suzie Ann Grant King "Mammy." It is an indirect reference to her work as a maid in a boarding house in Chicago. This characterization stems from Hurston's short-lived employment as a maid in 1950. With little money and no new publishing deals, further complicated by a court case that was a damaging blow to her character, Hurston took a job cleaning the home of a wealthy woman in Miami. Her hopes of staying low-key until she was able to regroup were dashed when her employer

discovered in an article by the *Saturday Evening Post* that Hurston was a renowned writer.

In *Louisiana*, Suzie Ann's protestations to the nickname early in the text underscores Ella's (as well as the WPA's) misunderstanding of her (and figuratively, Hurston's) historical relevance: "Mammy, Mammy, Mammy. This Mammy business. Lowly this ain't you. No how you would be into this 'Mammy-Mammy' for so long" (17). Mammy's occupation as a domestic worker is less important than her reason for being in Chicago. Forced to flee the South because of her political activities, Mammy meets Louise (Lowly) and Silas, the two people that will reignite her fight for racial and economic equality in Louisiana. Since she is a leader in the strike against the sugar plantations, Mammy's family fears for her life, having already lost other family members including Mammy's mother, to similar circumstances. Thus, Brodber's interrogation of historical narratives written for colonized peoples is also an examination of the plantation economy replicated in the American South as part of an expansion of the plantation system in the Caribbean.

Within this context, Brodber uses the term *mammy* to deconstruct the stereotype of the black matriarch popular in the 1930s. In a description provided by Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum, it states that the Mammy caricature was born out of an attempt to desexualize black women and to deny their sexual exploitation during slavery by their white owners. While the stereotype is based on the role enslaved women played in the household, the Jim Crow Museum offers an explanation for its popularity in the post-slavery era:

"...one of the many brutal aspects of slavery was that slave owners sexually exploited their female slaves, especially light-skinned ones who approximated the mainstream definition of female sexual attractiveness.

The mammy caricature was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness. Mammy was portrayed as dark-skinned, often pitch black, in a society that regarded black skin as ugly, tainted. She was obese, sometimes morbidly overweight...she was often portrayed as old, or at least middle-aged...The implicit assumption was this: No reasonable white man would choose a fat, elderly black woman instead of the idealized white woman. The black mammy was portrayed as lacking all sexual and sensual qualities. The de-eroticism of mammy meant that the white wife -- and by extension, the white family, was safe.”

Although Ella describes Mammy as “a sort of matriarch” (60), the clues that she pieces together suggest much more than that. This is further emphasized by the absence of children (although Ella deduces that Mammy and Silas possibly had two), and Mammy’s refusal to be objectified in capturing the “history of the struggle of the lower class negro [sic]” (21).

The task of decoding an unfamiliar language, explicitly stated and implied, reflects the art of signifyin’ in African diasporic cultures and reveals the complexity of Brodber’s novel. For example, Brodber borrows the term “Coon Can” from *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, dissecting it to expose its racial connotations. In *Mules*, Hurston recalls hearing a woman sing a peculiar song about Coon Can, the only thing that disrupts the din of a local jook joint, as she plays a card game of the same name:

“Give mah man mah money, tuh play Coon Can
He lost all mah money but he played his hand...
Befo’ Ah’ll lose mah rider’s change
Ah’ll spread short deuces and tab de game” (176).

Although Hurston doesn’t explain the significance of the song, it is most likely a response to a song titled “Coon Can Shorty,”⁵⁶ in which a card shark bluffs his way through the game but ultimately, loses the money his woman gives him. The message is

56 The original date of the song is unknown; however, it was recorded for the album, Peetie Wheatstraw, vol. 3, 1935-36.

that no matter how well he plays, he never seems to get ahead, but he is hopeful that one day his luck will change.

Coon Can is mentioned again in *Dust Tracks*. This time, Hurston watches as Big Sweet, her confidant and female protector at a sawmill camp in Polk County, plays Coon Can (198) at the local jook joint while waiting for Zora's sworn enemy to appear. Early on, Hurston notes that the woman, Lucy, targets her because of her friendship with Big Sweet and Lucy's old boyfriend. Also, Hurston has what Lucy lacks: store-bought clothes, a shiny car and lighter skin. The unwarranted hostility, something Hurston doesn't elaborate on, speaks to larger issues of intra-racial tensions; in this instance, the implications of racial and gender oppression.

Hence, the recurrence of Coon Can throughout *Louisiana* signifies more than the name of a card game or a few folk songs popular in the 1920s and 1930s. The repetition of the term is an interrogation of racial inferiority and self-hatred inscribed upon the black body:

“Coon, coon, coon
 I wish my colour would fade
 Coon, coon, coon
 To be a different shade
 Coon, coon, coon
 Morning noon and night
 I'd rather be a whiteman
 'Stead of coon, coon, coon” (145).

Silas uses the self-degrading message in the song as a teaching moment. As Lowly shares with Ella in one of their otherworldly communications, Silas once lectured Lowly on how to take the power out of such derogatory terms as “coon,” by replying in the affirmative, “the coon can” (145). Brodber reiterates the message of racial empowerment in the epilogue also titled “Coon Can.” Written after Ella's death, Reuben talks about his plans

for the future. Having gotten all he can in New Orleans, he considers returning to the Congo, his birthplace, to continue the fight to end racial oppression.

Thus, Brodber's play on words engages Hurston's examination of black folk culture, taking it one step further by exposing the scars of racism and colorism. In doing so, Brodber disputes the claim that Hurston deliberately sidestepped issues of race to appease her largely white audience. Through her unique interpretation of Hurston's works, Brodber deciphers the coded language Hurston utilizes, forcing the reader to look beyond the surface. The same is true of Brodber's focus on Black Nationalism in the novel. The discussion of "race men" in *Louisiana* is, in part, a response to Hurston's biting criticism of black leadership. In "Art and Such," Hurston censures the black leader as the self-appointed mouthpiece for all African-Americans; specifically, W.E.B. DuBois and his "Talented Tenth" ideology. She argues that "in spite of the thousands and thousands of Negro graduates of good colleges, in spite of hundreds of graduates of New England and Western colleges, there are gray-haired graduates of New England colleges still clutching at the vapors of uniqueness" (23).

In "The Emperor Effaces Himself," she attacks DuBois' nemesis, Marcus Garvey, with the same vigor but with more venom: "Eight modest, unassuming brass bands blared away down Lenox Avenue...and the Emperor Marcus Garvey was sneaking down the Avenue in terrible dread lest he attract attention to himself. He succeeded nobly, for scarcely fifty thousand persons saw his parade file past trying to hide itself behind numerous banners of red, black and green."⁵⁷ Hurston's politics often clashed with the

⁵⁷ The excerpt is from Tony Martin's *Literary Garveyism: Garvey, Black Arts and the Harlem Renaissance* (1983). Hurston's unpublished essay is housed in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale's Beinecke Library.

promoters of racial uplift, not so much for their desire to end racial violence and for African Americans to be recognized for their achievements, but for what she believed to be empty rhetoric without action. Thus, Brodber intersects the spiritual realm with the political realm in order to reconcile Hurston's sometimes unpopular and perhaps, misinformed, political views. Marcus Garvey is one of many Jamaican race men Mammy tells Ella about earlier in the text, a "feisty fighting lot" (20) whose transatlantic connection is deeper than cultural similarities.

Brodber argues that the fight for racial equality wasn't lost in Garvey's affectation. As Ella notes upon learning that Mammy, Lowly and Silas were political activists inspired by Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), his organization "gave them a framework within which to do concrete work" (153). While Lowly returns to Jamaica to work as a nurse and to continue in the fight for political equality abroad, Mammy serves her community by combining her political work with her psychic work (153). Through Lowly's return home, Brodber reveals the competing ideologies between Hurston and black (male) leadership, and Garvey and DuBois.

Although not a literal interpretation of Hurston's life or politics, the narrative does symbolize Hurston's fade into obscurity after her death and the reemergence of her works over a decade later. In *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*, Roberts argues that Brodber's characterization of Hurston through Ella is her attempt to "recuperate and refurbish the image of Zora Neale Hurston with a corrective allegory that represents the archetype of diasporan literary foremothers...as both spiritually in tune and politically viable" (218). She goes on to assert that Ella's story underscores the "wrong choice" Hurston made by choosing a writing career over

academia and hoodoo (221), leaving her destitute in the final years of her life. Roberts assumes that Brodber is rewriting Hurston's life story when, in fact, she is more concerned with African spirituality and the ways in which it translates across African diasporic cultures. This is evidenced in the fact that, like Hurston, the fictional Ella dies in obscurity despite her wealth.

The timing of Ella's manuscript for publication is a reference to the eventual release of Hurston's "Art and Such" manuscript written for the Federal Writers Project's (FWP) *The Florida Negro* volume. Shelved for over sixty years, the piece was considered too risqué for a project that celebrated African-American culture. In the fictional "Editor's Note" that precedes the narrative in *Louisiana*, the publishing of Ella's manuscript forty years after her "descent into the unknown" (3), and over twenty years after her death, is premised on the belief that "the intellectual world [now] understands that there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses" (4).

Besides the similar timing, it draws a striking resemblance to Hurston's omitted piece and to Stetson Kennedy's "Postscript: The Mark of Zora." Kennedy admits that the world wasn't ready for Hurston's ways of knowing:

"By the time I was promoted from Junior Interviewer to a State Editor in the spring of 1937, the editorial staff had gone through this wealth of material, and come up with a 167-page white-written version of *The Florida Negro*, consisting in the main of chapters on such subjects as Hoodoo, Superstitions, Spirituals, Diversions, Bolita, Unusual Communities, and the like. It contained not a word, of course, about segregation, discrimination, illiteracy, infant mortality, substandard housing, disenfranchisement, chain gangs, sweat-boxes, lynching, or the Ku Klux, Klan" (28-9).

After reading *Mules and Men* in the 1970s, Alice Walker felt the world was ready for, and in fact needed, Hurston to speak again. Pretending to be Hurston's niece,

Walker met up with another researcher, Charlotte Hunt, after her arrival in Eatonville and began to reconstruct what little she knew about her “aunt.”

What she discovered was that Hurston’s vibrant spirit was like a magnet; people couldn’t help but to be drawn to her. Accounts from the few remaining people in or near Eatonville who knew her attest to that fact. Dr. Benton, a friend of Hurston’s who looked after her until she was placed in a welfare home, remembers her as an “incredible woman” who “was a well-read, well-traveled woman and always had her own ideas about what was going on...” (Walker 110). Walker also learned that the community came together, along with others⁵⁸ to give her a proper burial. Yet, the overgrown, snake-ridden, neglected cemetery in which Hurston was buried reflected her fading legend. In honor of her memory, Walker bought a headstone to mark her grave because as she sums up: “*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away* (Walker’s emphasis). And if they are thrown away, it is our duty...to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone” (92).

Like Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, Bernice McFadden, Tina McElroy Ansa and other black women writers, Brodber collects Hurston, bone by bone, as proof that her spirit still lives on. Far from a corrective allegory, as Roberts suggests, *Louisiana* pays homage to Hurston for redefining the field of anthropology and ethnographic studies, and for paving the way for other women of color to express their literary and socio-scientific genius.

58 Donations from two publishing houses, Lippincott and Scribner’s, along with contributions from Fannie Hurst, Carl Van Vechten, school teachers from Lincoln Park Academy and some of Hurston’s former students helped defray the cost of Hurston’s funeral (Boyd 432).

CHAPTER III
RESISTANCE, RECLAMATION, AND HEALING IN JEWELL PARKER RHODES'S
VOODOO DREAMS

The examination of Vodou in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* (1995) represents the evolution of African spirituality in the New World. Rhodes incorporates black folklore and antebellum history to illustrate the prevalence of religion among free and enslaved people of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Based on the myths and mysticism surrounding Marie Laveau, *Voodoo Dreams* is a coming-of-age tale about the implications of power, self-sacrifice and self-discovery. Like the real Marie Laveau, the fictional Marie⁵⁹ symbolizes the search for identity through the syncretism of Vodou and Catholicism in the New World. Rhodes explores the integration of the two religions as a means for survival for newly-arrived Africans in the Americas, and as a reinterpretation of African cultural traditions in the forging of new identities. The interrelation of African and Western belief systems allows her to examine Vodou as the spiritual embodiment of resistance against racial and gender oppression, reclamation of traditional religious practices, and healing of a fractured African identity. Emphasizing female sexuality and sexual trauma, Rhodes's reinvention of Marie Laveau reveals the significance of the Vodou serpent, Damballah, as the gateway to knowledge and healing.

Voodoo Dreams traces the life of a young girl who comes from a line of women that are spiritual healers. Yet, ignorance about her heritage leads Marie down a path of pain and self-destruction. Hidden away in a Louisiana bayou, Marie spends her carefree

⁵⁹ From this point on, I refer to Marie Laveau by her full name, or simply by her last name, to distinguish between the actual person and the fictional character. When referring to the fictional Marie Laveau, I will simply use "Marie."

days learning the secrets of nature and reveling in her grandmother's wisdom and welcoming arms. However, her tenth birthday marks a turning point in her life when she meets the man who will drastically change the way she understands the world. Through John, a man who seduces and subjugates her, Marie discovers her family's connection to Vodou, and this newfound knowledge signals an end to childhood innocence. In her search for her long-lost mother and her identity, Marie's life is marred by violence, sexual objectification, and exploitation.

Rhodes punctuates this loss with allusions to the Adam and Eve parable. Teché, the "bayou of snakes," where Marie and Grandmère reside, symbolizes the Garden of Eden. The tree of knowledge and the serpent are transposed into a tree stump and a snake's skin curled at the base "as if it were alive" (18). She is awakened to the ugliness of the world not with the bite of an apple, but through the haunting presence of the man who will one day dominate her. The paradisiacal feel of Teché suddenly changes and Marie knows that once she leaves, she can never return. Her initiation into womanhood is performed by John, who appears as if in a dream, and in a disturbingly seductive scene, he "deflowers" young Marie: "He cupped the valley between her thighs, rubbing her in slow, even movements. She sighed; a sticky dampness blended with her bloomers. He laughed, and without knowing why, she felt ashamed" (19-20). When she opens her eyes, Marie questions if what she experienced was real. Nevertheless, she feels naked and exposed.

In Rhodes's inverted biblical tale, the serpent signifies knowledge. As Marie exclaims years later during a Vodou ceremony, "Dahomeyans praised the serpent. For Eve came into the world blind. A snake gave her—a snake gave me sight" (11). It is

John, the reinscribed Adam, who tempts Marie and leads her astray. He convinces her that he is godlike; an omniscient and omnipresent force that created her and in effect, can destroy her. The secret to John's power is an herbal concoction he uses to keep him young, and the knowledge about Marie's family too painful for her grandmother to reveal; namely, Grandmère's reign as a once-powerful Vodou priestess in New Orleans, Marie's mother's horrific death, and Grandmère's subsequent turn to Catholicism after the Vodou *lwas* (gods) fail to save her daughter's life.

The details of Marie's journey are recorded by Louis DeLavier, a northern journalist enamored with Marie's beauty and charm since the first day he laid eyes on her. Louis's journal entries allow Marie to dispel the rumors about her invincibility by recounting years of abuse at the hands of her lover. Despite her gift of second sight, Marie is powerless compared to John. His ability to manipulate her through physical violence and emotional abuse leaves Marie a broken and bitter woman. Narrated from three perspectives; namely Marie's, Louis's and an omniscient voice, the multi-vocality of *Voodoo Dreams* reveals an intricate story spanning over ten years and recalled by Marie sixty years later on her deathbed.

Starting from what Rhodes labels "The Middle," when Marie murders her child's father, the events that lead to that fateful day and the consequences she suffers as a result of her choices are unveiled. In shaping Marie's character, Rhodes states in the Author's Note that "gradually, Laveau's quest for rediscovery of self became a metaphor for a larger process of rediscovery of lost tradition and lost vision" (436). Rhodes explores the complexities of Vodou and Catholicism through Marie's strained relationship with her grandmother, now a devout Catholic who shuns the Vodou gods; the religious hypocrisy

of the Vodouisants and Christians that witness Marie's performances; and through Marie's observance of both Catholic and Vodou rites.

The Cultural, Religious, and Philosophical Dynamics of Vodou

In Vodou, the merging of lwas and Catholic saints reflects the reinvention of African traditions; a necessary modification to religious practices deemed primitive in Western cultures. The substitution of saints for lwas also reflects shared religious principles between two seemingly dissimilar faiths. Leslie Desmangles notes that the use of ritual objects, the veneration of both saints and lwas, and the incorporation of Catholic liturgy in Vodou ceremonies reflect a symbiosis between the two religions. Yet, he emphasizes that "such correspondences were not based upon the life of the saints, but upon certain symbolic accoutrements associated with them which corresponded to those found in the myths about the African deities."⁶⁰ For example, Damballah, the snake deity, is associated with St. Patrick because according to Catholic hagiology, he is said to have driven all of the snakes out of Ireland (130).⁶¹ Damballah is also associated with Moses, whose staff transformed into a snake when he threw it down before the Pharaoh.⁶² Ezili, the goddess of love, is associated with the Virgin Mary as a symbol of motherhood, beauty, femininity and spiritual transcendence (Desmangles 138). In *Voodoo Dreams*, Rhodes explores the differences between the two religions and the

⁶⁰ See Leslie Desmangles's essay, "African Interpretations of Christian Vodou Cross," p. 41, in *Invisible Powers: Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, ed. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde Smith (2006). All other references to Desmangles are based on his book, *Faces of the Gods*.

⁶¹ According to myth, St Patrick chased all the snakes in Ireland into the sea after he was attacked during a 40-day Fast (Robinson, William Erigena. New Haven Hibernian Provident Society. *St. Patrick and the Irish: An Oration, Before the Hibernian Provident Society, of New Haven, March 17, 1842*, 2012).

⁶² Exodus 4.3.

integration of certain spiritual elements as a way to reconcile those differences. Marie's altar is decorated with drawings of Damballah and Ezili, and plaster figurines of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. In this way, she honors her grandmother's New World religion and her African ancestors' Vodou faith.

The novel constantly explores the tensions involved in the creolizing of religions. For example, when Marie is chided by Grandmère's priest, Father Christophe, for engaging in "darkness" and "evil," Marie retorts: "How can darkness be evil if your God made the universe? Didn't He make darkness too?" (109). Similarly, Louis and Marie's husband, Jacques, associate Vodou with evil to which Marie responds by questioning their right to condemn her, considering their own shortcomings. Louis is a self-described atheist who cannot escape his Puritan upbringing, while Jacques's claim that he has given up religion doesn't prevent him from making the sign of the cross whenever "voodoo" is mentioned. In "Hoodoo Ladies and High Conjurers: New Directions for an Old Archetype," Kameelah Martin Samuel asserts that by "arguing that Catholicism strips its flock of agency and fails to let human nature take precedence over improbable expectations of perfection, Marie articulates the very ways that Catholicism works as another patriarchal vehicle to constrict the spiritual actualization of the people of New Orleans, if not the world" (n.p.). I disagree that Rhodes uses Marie's character to make a statement about Catholicism on a global level or that she is suggesting that Western religion prevents people (particularly, people of color) from recognizing how spirituality informs their identity; Marie's challenges to Catholicism and the other characters' reactions to Vodou allow the examination of the tension between Western and non-

Western religious practices and the underlying religious hypocrisy through abuse of power.

When Grandmère turns to Father Christophe after her daughter's death, the priest tells her that through her confession, *he* becomes "Christ—the white male God" (41). Maman's horrific death at the hands of an angry mob for performing a Vodou ceremony in Cathedral Square,⁶³ a place considered sacred Christian ground, bespeaks religious intolerance and the drastic steps taken to quell the practice of non-Western religious beliefs. Grandmère becomes a Catholic because "black gods, like black people, didn't have any power" (41). Tara Tuttle argues that "the association of Christianity with white power and male power is expressed through the fears of Grandmère, whose beliefs and reactions to white society establish a tension between the two faiths in the novel, a tension that Marie struggles to resolve" (n.p.). It is fear that causes Grandmère to seek solace in Father Christophe's teachings about Christianity; a fear that prevents her from reclaiming her spiritual inheritance and passing it down to her granddaughter. It also causes Grandmère to misinterpret signs in nature that once guided and protected her.

Within this context, Rhodes demonstrates how superstition is shaped by both Western and non-Western belief systems; and is based on a philosophical way of understanding the divine force of creation. The emphasis on numbers recurs throughout Rhodes's novel, and what Marie initially dismisses as Grandmère's silly belief in old wives' tales are omens that come to fruition. When Marie takes four pieces of candy as

⁶³ The square that houses the Cabildo, the Louisiana State Museum and St. Louis Cathedral. Also known as the *Place d'Armes*, the square was renamed Jackson Square in 1815 after Andrew Jackson's defeat of the British during the Battle of New Orleans.

her birthday treat, Grandmère takes one away, explaining that Marie must only take three because “heartache comes with four” (21). With each generation of Maries, the gift of second sight binds them to a life of pain and loss, and Grandmère foresees Marie’s role in her demise. However, her decision to tempt fate by keeping Marie in the dark about her mother and her heritage propels Marie towards her destiny as a Vodou priestess. Unable to protect herself or her granddaughter from the inevitable, Grandmère sets out to find someone who she mistakenly believes will look after Marie. From the sighting of a three-legged cat, to the Guédé⁶⁴ laughing like “three raucous boys” (48) when Grandmère calls upon them to prevent the death of Marie’s future husband by a brutal aristocrat, the repetition of three signifies the life cycle (birth, life, and death; past, present, and future).

In Christian doctrine, the number three alludes to the Holy Trinity. The Trinity—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—represents three entities that exist as one: God as the creator of the universe, Christ as God’s only begotten son and man’s salvation, and the Holy Spirit as the source of power for God’s works. In the Vodou faith, the Trinity has similar connotations. In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren⁶⁵ defines the Divine Trinity as “the dynamic, the energy, the eternal catalyst which first gave meaning and life to the separate elements of the first chaos” (41). *Les Morts* (ancestors or the dead), *Les Mysteres* (lwas), and *La Marassa* (divine twins) are three

⁶⁴ Guédé are the gods of the dead, and are characterized as vulgar and lewd. As Baron Samedi, the lwa is typically depicted wearing a top-hat and tails, and dark spectacles. Also known as Baron Cimetière and Baron La Croix, Guédé are the masters of the cemeteries, and they represent the end of time (Desmangles 114-5).

⁶⁵ Although Deren’s book is considered a colonialist text, her examination of the Divine Trinity reflects a clear definition of the concept in Haitian Vodou. In my attempt to find other analyses of the Divine Trinity in works by leading Haiti scholars, including Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Claudine Michel, Karen McCarthy Brown, Leslie Desmangles and Myriam Chancy, I found that they all reference Deren’s study.

spiritual forces that act as a whole in the creation and sustenance of mankind (Deren 41-2). Similarly, in Zora Neale Hurston's description, over a decade earlier, of an initiation ceremony for a new *houngan* (priest) in *Tell My Horse*, she emphasizes the reverence given to the Divine Trinity. The presiding *houngan* salutes the ancestors, the *lwas* and the divine twins at the beginning of the initiation: "This Grand Master, that is Lord of Lords, who passes before us, all the saints, the dead, the twins, African gods, that which they do, they are able to undo" (176). The veneration of the life force (the trinity) is acknowledgement of the spiritual power that guides Vodou adherents.

Rhodes contextualizes trinitarianism in both Vodou and Christianity through Marie's connection to the metaphysical world; the people she is bound to, both physically and psychically; and the symbiosis of the two religions. Thus, in *Voodoo Dreams*, the number three is the key to understanding how the physical and metaphysical worlds intersect. As a spiritual conduit, or horse, Marie is ridden by various Vodou *lwas* and through her psychic experiences, she learns the difference between John's corruption of Vodou and the sacred belief system that her African ancestors brought with them to the New World. When John purchases a snake meant to antagonize Marie,⁶⁶ she develops a bond with it, using it to communicate with Damballah, the *lwa* that the snake symbolizes.

⁶⁶ This scene is strikingly similar to Hurston's short story, "Sweat," in which a washerwoman is subjected to verbal and physical abuse by her shiftless husband, Sykes. Initially, Delia is afraid of the rattlesnake Sykes brings home to torment her. After finding the snake in her clothes basket, Delia is startled and accidentally releases it onto their bed. While Delia escapes to the hayloft in the barn, she contemplates on her life with Sykes, gaining clarity as each hour passes. The tables are turned when, the next morning, Sykes returns home and instinctively jumps on top of the bed when he hears rattling, hoping to avoid the snake. As he writhes in pain from the snake bite, Delia waits for the poison to rid her of Sykes for good.

Marie names it *li Grand Zombi*, Rhodes's reference to another serpent deity purportedly connected to Congolese spirituality.⁶⁷

The constant presence of the dead among the living alludes to *Les Morts*, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming the past in order to be spiritually whole. Grandmère's refusal to reclaim the Vodou gods leaves her vulnerable to John's use of "black magic." She is haunted by ghosts that claw at her skin and she has visions of her own death. Later, when Grandmère dies, her spirit is a constant presence in Marie's life, warning and guiding her just as she did when she was alive. The first time Marie makes love to John, her soul is twinned with her mother's and she struggles to regain control of her body. Marie is possessed by her mother who longs to live again, and she cannot separate her feelings from Maman's as each competes for John's touch. When the possession is over, Marie realizes that not only is her mother dead, but it was her mother's spirit John was making love to. Although Marie replaces Maman in John's bed, when her mother's spirit flees, John's passion abates. Young and naïve, Marie wonders, "*which Marie had he called?*" (125).

The divine twins are represented in Marie and Maman and by Brigitte and Antoine, aristocrat twins orphaned by the time they reach adolescence and whose intimate bond develops into an incestuous relationship. Like Edwidge Danticat's

⁶⁷ While various websites, including the Voodoo Museum, make the connection between Damballah and *li Grand Zombi*, none of my references on Congolese spirituality mention such a deity. In *The New Orleans Voodoo Handbook*, Kenaz Filan has a chapter on *li Grand Zombi*; however, with the exception of Milo Rigaud, his sources are questionable.

character named Brigitte in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the Brigitte character in *Voodoo Dreams* symbolizes death. When Marie visits Brigitte's home in the guise of a hairdresser's apprentice, she sees the Guédé sadly waving at her; a sign that someone is about to die (229). A putrid odor that only Marie can smell taints the flower garden and Brigitte's house; it gets stronger as Marie enters Brigitte's bedroom. Her bed linens are tainted with what Marie describes as a "yellow" smell, betraying the forbidden relationship between siblings. Antoine precedes Brigitte in death when he sexually assaults Marie and in defense of hers and Louis's life, she bludgeons Antoine to death. Pregnant with twins conceived by her brother but passed off as her husband's, Brigitte seeks penitence through death. She dies in childbirth, along with her twins, choosing judgment in the afterlife, as opposed to life without her brother and the twins' presence as a constant reminder of her sins.

The number three, then, "brings things to a finish, to completion, to perfection."⁶⁸ In both Christianity and Vodou, the story of origin is an anecdote in which human beings understand their existence and more importantly, their purpose in life. Marie's search for her mother is, in essence, a search for her own identity. Even after she learns of her mother's death, Marie continues to search for answers to her connection to Vodou and hence, her existence. A vision of the four Maries that Grandmère tries to prevent reveals to Marie that come heartache and pain, life is about continuation and renewal.

⁶⁸ See Kevin Orlin Johnson's *Why Do Catholics Do That?* p. 261 (1995).

Rhodes's Dialogue with Hurston

In a 1995 interview, Rhodes aligns her novel with Hurston's ethnographic studies on Vodou. She asserts that her novel, like Hurston's works, portrays "part of the folklore tradition" (594); a literary text that captures the African-American religious experience in the American South. Like Hurston, Rhodes identifies New Orleans as an important cultural site in the U.S. as demonstrated through the preservation of African religious traditions and the prevalence of Marie Laveau as a legendary spiritual leader over a century after her death. However, Rhodes adopts a different approach to black folklore and Vodou by addressing the underlying racism in New Orleans' celebrated multiculturalism.

In "Hearing, Writing, and Reading Voodoo: Cultural Memory in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* and *Voodoo Season*," Tatia Jacobson Jordan notes that "one of the major criticisms Hurston faced as she penned *Mules and Men* (1935) was this charge by many of her peers of an apparent lack of awareness 'of the period's racial politics.' In her celebration of African American culture, little mention of racial inequalities exists" (n.p.). The erasure of racial inequities can also be applied to the social constructs of New Orleans itself. In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Joseph Roach echoes Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's⁶⁹ claim that "a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level" (39) allows for the myth of cultural homogeneity and racial cohesion. He is

⁶⁹ See *The Politics and the Poetics of Transgression* (1986).

referring to the simultaneity in the celebration of African-American culture and the marginalization of the African-American population in New Orleans.⁷⁰

By reimagining Marie Laveau's life, Rhodes examines the social conditions in nineteenth-century New Orleans that influenced the hierarchization of race and gender, and the resulting intra-racial tensions within the black community. Further, while Hurston focused on Marie Laveau as one aspect of the larger folklore tradition, Rhodes emphasizes the significance of black folklore and oral history by presenting Laveau as a historical figure who redefined New Orleans' hybrid culture. Rhodes studied the history of Vodou practices in West Africa and in the Crescent City, and used her research to reinvent the myths about Marie Laveau. She looked specifically at Vodou in Dahomean cultures, tracing it across the Atlantic to South America, the Caribbean and the United States. Rhodes discovered what she refers to as a "kinship" between New Orleans "voodoo," Santeria, Haitian Vodou, Candomble in Brazil, and the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica (Rhodes and Ramsey 595).

Yet, Hurston's research laid the groundwork for contemporary studies, including Rhodes's, on the reclamation of African religious traditions. In "The Haiti-New Orleans Vodou Connection: Zora Neale Hurston as Initiate-Observer," Richard Brent Turner aptly notes that Hurston was "ahead of her time in her exploration of the enduring connections between American religions and African-diasporic traditions, and her analysis of the power and richness of urban folk religions and creolized synthetic-religious identities that stand on their own ground" (118). Hurston's analysis of African

⁷⁰ While African-Americans make up fifty-nine percent of the population in New Orleans, the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that approximately thirty-two percent live below the poverty level.

and African-American religious traditions revealed the survival of cultural practices thought to be erased through forced assimilation. An ethnographer and Vodou initiate, Hurston studied under several Vodou practitioners in New Orleans, including two men who claimed to be descendants of Marie Laveau, and learned the sacred rites largely hidden from the public. During her initiation, Hurston learned firsthand the power of certain spells and herbs, and she counseled clients who wanted to get rid of a hex or an individual who caused them trouble. She then documented her findings in *Mules and Men*,⁷¹ dispelling many myths about Vodou and according to Arnold Rampersad, revealed the evolution of African-American culture (xvi).

Shortly thereafter, Hurston traveled to Jamaica and Haiti in the 1930s to study Vodou and folklore as important aspects of Caribbean culture. During her visit, she discovered that folktales were just as prevalent in the Caribbean as they were in the American South. She also realized that despite the importance of women as spiritual leaders to the practice of Vodou, they were marginalized socially, politically and economically. She published her observations in *Tell My Horse* (1938), a culmination of folklore, socio-scientific observation and political commentary. In both *Mules and Tell My Horse*, Hurston reconceptualized the way in which Vodou was perceived in American popular culture in the early twentieth century.

Further, through her examination of Caribbean cultures, Hurston exposed the underlying political tensions that informed social hierarchies and ultimately, were used to justify the U.S. occupation of Haiti. Although Hurston's portrayal of Haitians and Haitian

⁷¹ Hurston's research was originally published in an essay titled "Hoodoo in America," in 1931.

politics reveals a narrow view in her thinking that outside intervention was necessary in order save the country, her study of Vodou demonstrates the sanctity and intricacies of African spiritual practices. Rhodes augments Hurston's research by revealing the integration of various African religions grouped under the ambiguous term, *Vodou*. She also challenges longstanding myths about Marie Laveau that, in turn, allows her to examine the ways in which free women of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans sought autonomy in a society that systematically disempowered them.

Reinventing Marie Laveau

Tales about Marie Laveau's power over politicians, the police force, her devoted followers, southern gentlemen and impressionable young women are what Carolyn Morrow Long refers to as the *Laveau Legend*, folklore accepted as fact that has become part of New Orleans' oral history. In *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*, Long attributes Laveau's popularity to the various newspaper articles and obituaries announcing her death on June 15, 1881. While she was occasionally mentioned in print during her lifetime, the fascination with Laveau increased after her death. News items ranged from praises for her charitable work tending to the sick and the imprisoned, to condemnatory commentaries portraying her as "the prime mover and soul of indecent orgies of the ignoble Voudous" (Long xxvi).

Her popularity spread beyond the Crescent City and even *The New York Times* found her life and death newsworthy. On June 23, 1881, the newspaper paid homage to "one of the most wonderful women who ever lived...and as she could neither read nor write, not a scrap is left to chronicle the events of her exciting life" (Long xxvii). The article further states that Marie Laveau "was interred in her family tomb...and with her is

buried the most thrilling portion of the unwritten records of Louisiana.”⁷² Laveau’s sudden notoriety became a media debate over whether or not she was a saint, sinner or a combination of both. Soon, the stories became more sensationalized and outlandish, and Laveau was transformed into a caricature, manipulated and refashioned according to the writer’s whims. Inevitably, the reification of these myths silenced the socio-political factors that forced people of color like Laveau to practice Vodou in secrecy. Further, they denied Laveau’s precarious position as a free woman of color in a slave society.

A number of writers contributed to the myths about Marie Laveau. Foremost among them was Robert Tallant but he relied on a number of others who, with one exception, sensationalized and distorted Laveau’s life and significance in the history of New Orleans. Although his books are still considered the most “authoritative” studies on Laveau, Tallant relied on secondary sources (many of which he failed to cite) and an overactive imagination in his portrayal of New Orleans’ “voodoo queen.” In the introduction to his bestselling, sensationalistic novel, *The Voodoo Queen* (1956), Tallant refers to Marie Laveau as a “witch”⁷³ who used blackmail⁷⁴ to instill fear in her clients,

⁷² A copy of the original *New York Times* article can be found on *The Times-Picayune’s* website: http://www.nola.com/haunted/cities/?content/nytimes_laveau.html

⁷³ In Houston Baker’s essay, “Workings of the Spirit: Conjure and the Space of Black Women’s Creativity,” he notes that the etymology of the French *vaudois*, meaning “witch,” is considered to be an extension of the word *voodoo* (80). Baker notes that this is a misconception and that voodoo, or Vodou, is a derivation of Vodun, a Yoruba deity (Baker 80).

⁷⁴ The rumor that Marie Laveau was once a hairdresser who used information she obtained while styling wealthy white women’s hair to blackmail them persists. In one afternoon, I heard the story repeated several times by different tour guides at her gravesite. Carolyn Morrow Long found no evidence that Laveau was ever a hairdresser. The origin of the story comes from Henry Castellano’s article, “The Voudous: Their History, Mysteries and Practices,” cited in this chapter. Castellano got the idea that Laveau was a hairdresser from George Washington Cable’s novel, *The Grandissimes*, in which one of the main characters is fashioned after Laveau (Long xxx).

and he reduces Vodou to “snake worship” (5).⁷⁵ He goes on to describe her as “the last great American witch” (3), but clarifies that Marie is unlike the witches of Salem. In fact, the blurb on the back cover suggests that Marie Laveau is an enigma that defies categorization: “*Witch? Sorceress? Daughter of Satan? Murderer? Thief? Saint? Which label best fits Marie Laveau? Queen of the voodoos, she is considered to have been the most important voodooienne ever to have reigned on this continent.*”

In the novel, Tallant further denigrates Marie Laveau by depicting her as a woman forced to choose between good (Christianity) and evil (Vodou). Initially, Marie reluctantly accepts the role she was destined for when an elderly Vodou priestess calls upon her to take her place; in her later years, Marie jealously guards her position as “voodoo queen,” even challenging her own daughter, the next in line. A melodramatic tale that plays on Western ideologies about “primitive” religions and borrows heavily from popular myths about Laveau, *The Voodoo Queen* treats Vodou and witchcraft as interchangeable and equally sinister.

In *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946), Tallant underscores Laveau’s popularity as evidenced in the enthralled racially- and politically-mixed audiences that come to see her perform. In his description, Tallant also speaks of her far-reaching power and her wickedness: “Marie invited the press, the police, the sporting world and any thrill-seekers ready to donate a fee for admission. There were other hidden orgies to which white men with a liking for colored girls were welcome” (56). In his description of Laveau’s alleged

⁷⁵ In her review of Tallant’s book for the *Journal of American Folklore*, Hurston discredits Tallant’s claim that snake worship is popular in West African religious practices. She states: “...no scientist has ever found snake-worship predominant in West Africa, an area of ancestor-worship. In the few tribes where it is found, the snake is the symbol of fertility” (436-7).

Vodou performances in Congo Square is the insinuation that she also corrupted young women by selling their bodies to white gentlemen willing to pay. Here, Tallant attempts to distinguish between the plaçage system⁷⁶ popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans, and Laveau's alleged exploitation (prostitution) of naïve girls and "upstanding" men. The former was accepted as part of the social norm, as civil arrangements that benefitted both parties; while the latter, albeit unfounded, was "proof" of Laveau's depravity.⁷⁷

Published ten years before *The Voodoo Queen*, *Voodoo in New Orleans* was promoted as a collection of scholarly research and personal interviews Tallant conducted during his time with the Louisiana division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). However, in *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature*, Violet Harrington Bryan states that Tallant repeatedly used source material from Marcus Christian's research on Marie Laveau without acknowledgement (103). In Chapter Eleven of *The Negro of Louisiana*, titled "Voodooism and Mumbo-Jumbo," Christian provides an overview of Laveau's life, opening with his definition of Vodou. He states that Vodou "evolved in Africa from primitive forms of chemistry and psychology, and its general beliefs and ceremonies are very similar to the types of folk-beliefs found throughout Europe" (1).

⁷⁶ In "Plaçage and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*: How Race and Sex Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color," Joan M. Martin defines the plaçage system as "the practice...whereby women of color—the option of legal marriage denied them—entered into long-standing, formalized relationships with white European men" (58-9).

⁷⁷ Long's research shows that a Vodou priestess named Betsy Toledano was accused of feigning supernatural powers in order to lure unsuspecting women into prostitution. The *True Delta*, a local newspaper, originally ran the story and it was later picked up by the *Daily Crescent*. Long believes that the original article was the source of Tallant's portrayal of Laveau.

Although he reduces Vodou and witchcraft to superstition, Christian points out that the accounts given by writers of strange occurrences are largely unfounded. He traces Vodou to Dahomey, and he examines its evolution in the Caribbean and the American South.

Interestingly, Laveau does not figure prominently in Christian's study of Vodou in New Orleans. He identifies numerous practitioners, including Laveau; many that were women (some that were white) and also referred to as "voodoo queens." He attributes the fascination with Vodou to news outlets looking for attention-grabbing stories:

"It is highly probable that a generation, accustomed to the exciting adventures of war, found the local reports on carpetbag legislators and legislation tasteless and insipid, and naturally turned to the 'mysteries of voodoo.' The newspapers proceeded to change its open hostility to the followers of the cult, and began to treat their gatherings as something strange, exotic, and typically Negroid. Every year, following St. John's Eve, much newspaper space was devoted to their meetings on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain—its traditional meeting place" (23).

While he states that various newspapers such as *The Republican* and *The New Orleans Times* reported receiving invitations to Laveau's Vodou ceremonies on Lake Pontchartrain, the reporters admitted that the performances were not as exotic as described and Marie Laveau was never actually present. Christian also inadvertently debunks the claim that Laveau was wealthy by explaining the way in which people referred to her. Additionally, although it is common knowledge that her surname was her father's last name, Christian explains the mysticism surrounding Laveau in the time in which she lived:

"It is possible that she was called in the manner that most *poor* (my emphasis) free people of color and slaves were known—that is, by her first name, or her first name and 'saint name' together. As her first name was Marie, the people who knew of her strange calling in 'things of the spirit,' applied to her the name of 'Marie La Vaud,' a shortening of the word vaudaux...Thus, she became, literally, 'Marie, the sorcerer,' or 'Marie, the witch'" (31).

Thus, Christian's was a more careful study of how Vodou became so popular in New Orleans, and the legal ramifications that ensued. While Christian clearly distances

himself from what he considers “primitive” religious practices, he also explains how Vodou was both demonized and exoticized by thrill-seekers, law enforcement and writers.

In addition to having access to WPA files to glean information about Laveau, Tallant’s stories were undoubtedly influenced by earlier writers. George Washington Cable is credited with popularizing the myths about Marie Laveau in his works of fiction and in his historical narratives. A prominent writer in the 1880s, Cable wrote about the uniqueness of New Orleans culture, providing a sometimes funny and often critical view of his hometown. Many of his works condemned the multicultural city for its racism; yet, he was equally critical of Vodou. In an article titled “Creole Slave Songs,” Cable refers to “Vaudaux” as “the name of an imaginary being of vast supernatural powers residing in the form of a harmless snake” (816). He goes on to describe Vodou as a form of “worship...as dark and horrid as bestialized savagery could make the adoration of serpents” (816).

Throughout the article, Cable reduces Vodou to nothing more than superstition brought from Africa. His assessment of Vodou contradicts his fight for racial equality and in the end, Cable makes the same bigoted judgments about Africans and other people of color that he criticized others for in his writings.⁷⁸ Oddly enough, he pays deference to Marie Laveau, who he had met months before her death. He ascribes her daughter’s

⁷⁸ Cable’s controversial article, “The Freedmen’s Case in Equity,” argued for the establishment of civil and political rights for African Americans, an unpopular stance in nineteenth-century Louisiana. In his novel, *The Grandissimes*, Cable examines what Lawrence N. Powell refers to as “legalized barbarism” in the *Code Noir*, French slavery laws (Powell 7). His short story collection, *Old Creole Days*, was met with consternation by white Creoles as Cable questioned the categorization of race among the racially-mixed group.

beauty to Laveau, stating, “one had but to look on her, [to] impute her brilliancies...to her mother, and remember what New Orleans was long ago, to understand how the name of Marie Laveau should have driven itself inextricably into the traditions of the town and the times” (818). Whether or not this was Cable’s attempt to distinguish Marie Laveau from other, “corrupted” Vodou practitioners is unclear. However, in general, his views on Vodou were condemnatory and based on misconceptions about African spirituality.

Henry Castellanos was far less impartial in his opinion about Laveau. In “The Voudous: Their History, Mysteries and Practices,” Castellanos not only condemns the practice of Vodou, but Laveau as well. He refers to her as “an essentially bad woman who vulgarize[d] voodooism in New Orleans” (97-8) by integrating elements of Catholicism, and allegedly inviting the press and men in power to the ceremonies. In his diatribe, Castellanos calls for the extermination of “the tribe of Voudous” in order to restore “civilized” society. In *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld* (1936), Herbert Asbury correlates Vodou with slave rebellion. Asbury’s chapter, titled “Voodoo,” alludes to the Haitian Revolution and the refusal by the New Orleans Municipal Council to accept a slave cargo from Santo Domingo in 1803. This decision was based on an earlier law⁷⁹ that forbade the importation of Haitian slaves for fear that they might encourage Louisiana slaves to rebel⁸⁰ (254). Although the embargo was later lifted, as evidenced with the mass arrival of Haitian émigrés, free

⁷⁹ Louisiana governor (1792-1797) Francisco Luis Hector, Barón de Carondelet, enacted a slave code that prevented the importation of Haitian slaves in order to avoid uprisings among slaves in Louisiana. The code also called for better treatment of slaves so as to discourage rebellion (Asbury 254).

⁸⁰ In the introductory chapter, I give an overview of the 1811 slave revolt on the Destrehan Plantation in Destrehan, Louisiana, led by a mulatto slave named Charles.

mulattoes, and slaves at the height of the Haitian Revolution and afterward, concerns about uprisings led to harsher laws for slaves and people of color.

Asbury embellishes stories about Marie Laveau, such as the tale about Laveau receiving a large sum of money and a little cottage⁸¹ in exchange for helping to exonerate a wealthy merchant's son accused of murder. According to Asbury, Laveau was visited by the father after several failed attempts to prove his son's innocence. Allegedly, on the day of the trial, Marie placed three guinea peppers⁸² in her mouth, prayed for about an hour at St. Louis Cathedral, and then gained access to the courtroom while it was empty, and placed the peppers beneath the judge's bench (267). Asbury states that although the evidence against the young man was overwhelming, thanks to Laveau, he was acquitted. Lifted verbatim from an article written by G. William Nott⁸³ in 1922, titled "Marie Laveau, Long High Priestess of Voudouism: Some Hitherto Unpublished Stories of the Voudou Queen," (Long 60), Asbury curiously omits Nott in his acknowledgement of other writers and secondary sources.

Despite the story that presented "proof" of her supernatural powers, Asbury labeled Laveau an opportunist who circumvented the law by "popularizing the worship of the Voodoo god," lessening "the likelihood of police interference by inviting politicians,

⁸¹ Long dispels the myth about Laveau and the little cottage on St. Ann Street through documents proving that Laveau was born in the home that was originally built for her grandmother, Catherine Henry, a former slave who purchased the lot in 1798 (see pages 60-3).

⁸² Under "Paraphernalia of Conjure" in *Mules and Men*, Hurston states that guinea pepper is used to "feed" saints (278). It is also used "for breaking up homes or protecting one from conjure" (Hurston 278).

⁸³ Even the credibility of Nott's article is questionable considering that it did not include original sources. Long attributes the lack of sources to the likelihood that Nott created the stories he had "heard" about Laveau (xxxii).

police officials, sporting men and newspaper reporters to attend the annual festivals on St. John's Eve" (268). Similarly, in a chapter titled "Marie Laveau" in *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928), Lyle Saxon relies on myths about Laveau that were often unsubstantiated and always fantastical. He misidentifies Laveau's daughter as the second Marie Laveau; referring to the myth that two Maries existed and practiced Vodou⁸⁴; and he reprints Nott's article in its entirety at the end of the chapter.

In *The Voodoo Queen*, Tallant retells the same story of how Laveau aided in the young man's acquittal, providing more elaborate details but otherwise, restating Nott's account. He includes a disclaimer that his novel is a work of fiction; however, he states that his book, unlike other works about Laveau, "come[s] close to the truth" (4). In *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Tallant repeats the story about a second Marie, to which Hurston responds in her review of his book:

"It would have been infinitely more valuable to the work had the author spent less time trying to establish the well-known Marie Leveau (sp) as a procurer and a gambler, and more upon the aspect of her work as a Hoodooist. The length, too, that he dwelt upon the spurious Marie Leveau II is both worthless and wasted, for numerous women sprang up after Marie Leveau to attempt to profit by her reputation. The New Orleans area is crowded with both men and women to this day who claim to be descended from Leveau in one way or another, and to be following her routines" (437).

In her review, Hurston identifies one of Tallant's sources as William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929), a first-person account of Vodou practices in Haiti.⁸⁵ Yet, Tallant doesn't acknowledge Nott or Seabrook (he does give credit to Cable, Castellanos, and

⁸⁴ Long's study shows that at the time of Marie Laveau's death in 1881, she had one surviving daughter named Marie Philomene Glapion, who reportedly was a devout Catholic who shunned Vodou (see Long's chapter, titled "The Second Marie Laveau, pp. 190-205).

⁸⁵ Haitian authors such as Jacques-Stephen Alexis, Jacques Roumain, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, and René Depestre countered colonialist texts like Seabrook's that portrayed Haitians as barbaric and sexually uninhibited.

Saxon) as his sources although it is clear that some of the details in his books are similar to theirs.

Published the same year as Tallant's *The Voodoo Queen* and received with far less fervor, Raymond J. Martinez's *Mysterious Marie Laveau: Voodoo Queen and Folk Tales Along the Mississippi* (1956) claims to present the "unvarnished" truth about Laveau. Instead, he falls back on Tallant, Seabrook, and other inaccurate portrayals of Vodou and Laveau's alleged psychic powers. The slender volume is replete with folktales and oddly, references to psychological studies that "bolster" Martinez's claim that his is an authoritative text. With the exception of Cable, none of these writers provided credible sources in their examination of Marie Laveau, nor did they give an analysis of the institution of slavery. Further, they failed to realize that Laveau's power, real or imagined, was a symbol of racial empowerment for disempowered people.

Although Laveau's popularity waned shortly after Tallant's last novel, she reemerged two decades later. In 1974, Ishmael Reed published *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, a novel that combines myth, mystery and satire to comment on 1960s racial politics. Papa LaBas,⁸⁶ a central character in Reed's prolific novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), is a "hoodoo" detective hot on the trail of Louisiana Red, who murders a prominent businessman before he can share his cure for heroin addiction. Louisiana Red, described as a "red-eyed monster" who manifests in Minnie the Moocher,⁸⁷ wreaks

⁸⁶ An allusion to Papa Legba, a Vodou lwa known as the gate keeper of the crossroads between life and death.

⁸⁷ Reed's nod to Cab Calloway's jazz song about an immoral woman.

havoc in Berkeley, California, by creating social discord within the black community. Largely a novel that critiques sociopolitical hypocrisy, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* also explores gender politics. Although she is a minor character in the novel, Marie Laveau's appearance rehashes banal stories about the Vodou queen; specifically, the rumored rivalry between Laveau and Doctor John,⁸⁸ another prominent Vodou practitioner in nineteenth-century New Orleans.

Jacobson Jordan argues that Reed's use of the alleged tension between Laveau and Doctor John "create[s] a contemporary statement about the rejection of African American men by African American women, specifically feminists" (120). While not quite a villain in the story, Laveau's character is painted in a negative light through her corruption of Vodou when she merges it with Catholicism, and through the feminist, anti-male inclinations she inspires in Minnie. The power struggle between Laveau and Doctor John escalates when he impregnates her daughter and she kills him for tainting her family with his black blood. The implication is that Laveau's power is based on her status as a fair-skinned, mulatto woman who uses color and gender to her advantage: "Marie was yellow, and the Americans loved yellow women. A yellow woman brought more money than a black, brown, or even a yellow man" (Reed 137). In his desire to reclaim African spirituality and in turn, promote unity in the black community, Reed, like other writers before him, castigates Laveau without interrogating the rumors and myths that both celebrated and demonized her.

⁸⁸ Doctor John was one of the few well-known male Vodou practitioners in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Although he is often portrayed as Marie Laveau's rival, there is no archival evidence to support this claim (see Carolyn Morrow Long's *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*, Chapter 8).

In her appropriation of Vodou and African spirituality, Francine Prose sought to recover Marie Laveau from a patriarchal and often misogynist, discourse. Touted as a feminist text that promotes women's empowerment, Prose's mythical novel, titled *Marie Laveau* (1977), portrays Laveau as a sensuous, seductive woman who is chosen by Doctor John as "Queen of the Voudous," after he discovers her spiritual gifts. After she learns everything she needs to know from him, Marie seizes power, first, by stealing all of Doctor John's clients and then, by defeating him in what Long describes as "a phantasmagoric duel between master magicians" (143). The snake that appears in most tales about Marie Laveau when she performs Vodou ceremonies takes the form of a cobra with a ruby encrusted in the center of its head in Prose's novel. Not only is the cobra named Mojo Hand, her prized pet, it is also Marie's advisor. Based more on fantasy than spirituality, Prose portrays Laveau as a cunning, crafty woman who uses second sight and blackmail to attain power and status. Ultimately, Prose relies on the same conventions and myths used in earlier works, creating a character who stops at nothing to get what she wants.

Like the other aforementioned writers, both Hurston and Rhodes relied on secondhand accounts to reinvent Marie Laveau. In an interview, Rhodes credits various news articles about Laveau in the *Daily Picayune* and Robert Tallant's *The Voodoo Queen* with having a huge influence on her own novel. Yet, despite their reliance on works written mainly by white male writers like Tallant, whose main purpose was to scandalize Laveau and Vodou, what sets Hurston's and Rhodes's works apart is the reimagining of the infamous priestess as a folk hero. In Hurston's *Mules and Men*, Laveau is described as a god when she answers the spiritual needs of her devotees.

During Hurston's first meeting with Luke Turner, a two-headed doctor⁸⁹ who claimed to be Marie Laveau's nephew, he recalls an event he supposedly witnessed on St. John's Eve that emphasizes Laveau's significance to New Orleans' marginalized, black population: "When the great crowd of people at the feast call upon her, she would rise out of the waters of the lake with a great communion candle burning upon her head and another in each one of her hands. She walked upon the waters to the shore" (193).

Through Turner's account, Hurston reveals a reverence for Marie Laveau that, to her devotees, makes her godlike. As a symbol of power, Laveau signified not only spiritual transcendence, but the shattering of class, gender and racial barriers. This is evidenced in the diversity of race and class among her adherents, and in Laveau's courage in taking a stand against local law enforcement for harassment. Long discovered a report filed by the Third Municipality Guards in which a group of women were arrested June 27, 1850, "for being in contravention of the law, being slaves, free colored persons, and white persons assembled and dancing Voudou all together in St. Bernard Street..." (103). Although Long states that Marie Laveau was present, she wasn't arrested. As I previously mentioned in the introductory chapter, court documents show that on July 2, 1850, Laveau and another woman named Rosine Dominique, filed a complaint of harassment and theft against one of the guards for the same incident. Long reports that the case went to trial the following August and after paying \$8.50 plus court fees, the confiscated item, a wooden statue, was returned to Laveau (105-6). There was at least one other case in which Laveau filed a civil suit against the police force.

⁸⁹ A conjurer and seer.

In *Voodoo Dreams*, the reader is introduced to a young girl who has no knowledge about Vodou prior to being coerced into performing ceremonies and whose performances, despite being treated as public spectacles, teach her about her African ancestry through spirit possession. For Rhodes, fiction is an avenue to give voice to a historical figure like Marie Laveau, who is, despite declarations of her immense power, silenced in dominant historical narratives. As Myriam Chancy argues in *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, “writings by women of color in the United States as well as in the Third World reveal that the creation of identity in the face of imperialist and colonial oppression begins with the transmutation of the personal into the creative, into modes of self-empowerment that in and of themselves create a theory of self-definition” (6).

In Rhode’s novel, political conflict and racial tensions serve as the backdrop for Marie’s personal journey. Although Rhodes does not directly address the historical events that shaped the city’s politics and laws, she acknowledges the presence of Haitians in New Orleans in the early 1800s through two minor characters: Jacques, Marie’s mulatto husband from Santo Domingo, and Nattie, a Haitian woman that takes Grandmère and Maman in after they escape from slavery. The time period in which the novel is set coincides with the influx of refugees during and in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution. As mentioned earlier, the uprisings in Haiti, prefaced by smaller acts of rebellion in parts of Louisiana, and the subsequent migration of Haitian refugees in the late eighteenth-, early nineteenth centuries were cause for concern in the American South. The *Code Noir*, laws that regulated religion in French colonies and that influenced the more stringent Louisiana *Black Codes* after slavery ended, is mentioned in *Voodoo*

Dreams: “To prevent Voodoo outbreaks in New Orleans, all blacks, especially Dahomeyans and Haitians, must be baptized and taught the Catholic faith” (221). By presenting societal tensions from the standpoint of the colonized, Rhodes personalizes the lived reality for women of color in a historical and religious context.

Female Sexuality and Sexual Trauma

Conspicuously absent from scholarship about Marie Laveau is her vulnerability as a woman of color. In Carolyn Morrow Long’s critical study, *A New Orleans Vodou Priestess*, she demystifies Laveau’s life by presenting careful archival research that unravels the history of a woman whose complexity was more the makings of people’s imaginations than fact. In Ina Fandrich’s *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau: A Study of Powerful Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, she portrays Laveau as an influential woman who, despite the changing and often tense racial climate in New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase, managed to circumvent the law and practice the Vodou faith. Both Long’s and Fandrich’s research is integral to debunking the rumors, misconceptions, and falsehoods that have long been accepted as fact. Besides Marcus Christian’s critical examination of Marie Laveau’s life for the Louisiana Writers Project (LWP) in the 1930s,⁹⁰ their respective works are the only book-length studies that challenge exaggerated depictions of New Orleans’ infamous Vodou queen as all-powerful and above the law. Their works debunk the myths that have thrived in New

⁹⁰ The Marcus Christian papers, housed in the University of New Orleans’ library, is a collection of manuscripts and other writings on the African American in Louisiana. Included in this collection is a text titled *The Negro in Louisiana*, with a chapter about Marie Laveau and New Orleans Vodou titled “Voodooism and Mumbo Jumbo.” (Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, http://www.library.uno.edu/specialcollections/lacol_index.cfm).

Orleans for well over a century with little scrutiny. Yet, neither scholar portrays Laveau's subjectivity. Hence, the importance of Rhodes's novel in shattering the myth that New Orleans signified agency for free women of color.

In "Mining Magic, Mining Dreams: A Conversation with Jewell Parker Rhodes," Rhodes states that in her novel, "part of the mythos [about Marie Laveau] is the vulnerability that we recognize as human" (Quashie 432). In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie's confession that "at times I had the greatest gift. I was a woman with power" (153) is what Rhodes sees as Marie's acknowledgement of her limitations. She is a young woman coming to terms with her spiritual gifts and the burdens that come with them. Rhodes states that that one moment of glory "might be the best that any of us ever get, and it also removes the onus then of always being a stereotypical kind of figure, of being the most powerful woman all the time" (432). By presenting a young woman subjected to physical and sexual abuse, and the governing laws that became more restrictive as free people of color progressed socially and economically, Rhodes's narrative emphasizes the caution Marie Laveau and other women of color used to navigate a society in which white male privilege reigned.

For Laveau and the *gens de couleur libre*⁹¹ population in New Orleans, freedom was not guaranteed. As Lisa Ze Winters notes in "More Desultory and Unconnected Than Any Other: Geography, Desire, and Freedom in Eliza Potter's *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*," "although the city's free people of color enjoyed relative and often exceptional liberties, including freedom of movement...and 'relatively high status,'

⁹¹ Free people of color.

they nonetheless endured daily threats to their liberty” (33). Potter, a hairdresser and free woman of color from New York, chronicled her travels throughout the American South in the mid-1800s and among other things, shed light on New Orleans’ sexual economy within the slave trade. Providing services to wealthy women made her privy to the intimate lives of the elite, and her travels throughout various slave states gave Potter a firsthand look at the normality of racial and gender oppression.

In one telling story, Potter recounts her passage on a riverboat destined for New Orleans and her observation of one particular girl who stood out among the other chattel. She describes her as “a good-looking, well-formed girl” (15) who is part of the human cargo but unlike the others, is unchained and assigned a cabin. In Potter’s estimation, the reason for the special treatment is “because the trader doomed her to *ignominy*. He knew he would be paid for his trouble and expense. She had beauty enough to arouse the base lust of some southern buyer” (15). Inscribed as racially and biologically licentious, the black female body, then, is commodified and doubly oppressed. Taking into consideration her own vulnerability as a “free” woman of color traveling alone and unprotected throughout the South, Potter destabilizes romantic notions of the loyal servant/slave mistress’s willing union with her master/lover by describing the method in which the girl was to be prepped and sold to the highest bidder. In another chapter, Potter describes the equally-debased process of being groomed to become a *plaçée*:

These young girls are brought up as particularly as any children in the world; they have the very best education that can be given them, are taught music, dancing and every branch of education necessary to the accomplishment of a lady...When they are marriageable, they are courted by the gentlemen the same as any other ladies, till it comes to the ceremony, then there is a large party assembled, and the young girl is given away by her father or mother, or both...this is called *plaçayed*; it is the same in their eyes as marriage, but no license is required. Sometimes they live together till they raise generations, then again, others are like some of the license marriages, they stay till they get tired, and then go, some one way, some another” (190).

Through these and other examples, Potter exposes the systemization of sexual exploitation in the antebellum South. Her critique of the *plaçage* system is, in Winter's words, "the critique of race, geography, and desire" that "confronts the commodities of sex and fantasy in the libidinal economy of slavery" (462). In Potter's account, New Orleans is reconfigured as a site to purchase the right to rape women that are racially marked as black, and whose whiteness⁹² satisfies white men's desire for black bodies.

In this context, Fandrich's study is problematic in that it silences sexual trauma and the objectification of women of color. While she prefaces her examination of Marie Laveau's life by mapping Louisiana's colonial history and the complexities of race, class and gender, Fandrich creates an idealistic image of Laveau and other free women of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans that denies their sexualization and commodification. For example, she states that the *plaçage* system represented "a fascinating fusion of European racialized social hierarchies and African mother-centered cultural patterns" (ch. 3), attributing such unions largely to the low number of white women and free black men. She argues that the issue of marriage for women of color is resolved through the age-old African tradition of polygamy.

Fandrich contends that "to be a second 'wife' to a wealthy man who will provide for her economically and will help her to establish a household of her own is not unusual or in any way immoral in West and Central Africa where polygamous marriages prevail"

⁹² Here, I am referring to quadroons and octoroons who, despite their fair skin and European features, were categorized as black, according the one-drop rule. Their appearance fed white men's fantasies of being with beautiful "white women" whose "tainted, black" blood inscribed them as sexually uninhibited. That is not to say that all *plaçées* had fair skin. In general, the skin color of *plaçées* varied from light to dark; some women having no European ancestry at all.

(ch. 3). While Fandrich acknowledges the stratification of class and race in a society that promoted white superiority, she presents these unions as equal partnerships in which each party, or their representatives, establishes his/her terms beforehand. Thus, in her focus on Marie Laveau as a powerful woman, Fandrich fails to examine the lack of agency for women of color and instead, romanticizes Laveau's life and nineteenth-century interracial relationships by presenting these unions as a matter of choice.

As Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef contend in *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence through Caribbean Discourse*, "whatever the hierarchical social system, whether based on institutional dominance, urban rural dichotomies, race, class or colour, it is women who occupy the base of every hierarchy, and aggressive sexual relations, often culminating in rape, remain a favoured mode of establishing, adjusting and inscribing hierarchies" (190). In other words, these relationships had less to do with the lack of available partners and the integration of traditional African values with European cultural standards, and more to do with the commodification of race and gender as part of New Orleans' slave economy. Even as free women of color enjoyed social privileges denied enslaved blacks, they had no more rights to their bodies or their sexuality than a slave.

That is not to say that all interracial relationships in New Orleans were not willingly established. As Long's study reveals, Marie Laveau's relationship with Christophe Glapion,⁹³ a white aristocrat, lasted over thirty years until his death.

Although their union was not recognized by law, they lived together as man and wife. However, the ban on interracial marriage,⁹⁴ on marriage between free women of color and male slaves, and the shortage of available free men of color worked to the advantage of the dominant culture and left black women with few options. That, coupled with the notion that women with even a trace of African blood were “impure” and naturally promiscuous (Martin 63-4), made them vulnerable to the ever-present threat of sexual violation.⁹⁵ As Joan M. Martin asserts, “the free woman had to accept the fact that with her choice of mate taken out of her hands, she was at the mercy of any man, white or black, who chose to do her harm” (64). Therefore, the *plaçage* system or in general terms, concubinage, was the lesser of two evils.

After the death of her first husband, Jacques Paris, a Haitian mulatto, Laveau entered into a long-term relationship with Glapion, who was twelve years her senior. This union guaranteed financial security for Marie and her offspring, and physical protection in New Orleans’ patriarchal society. Yet, after Glapion’s death, Laveau found herself in a

⁹³ Carolyn Morrow Long distinguishes between concubinage and Laveau’s relationship with Glapion. Unlike the *plaçage* system in which the man often maintained two families, one with his wife and another with his mistress, Glapion lived with and remained with Laveau until his death in 1855. He fathered the children she bore after her first marriage and the baptismal records Long found shows that he acknowledged his paternity (51-84). Glapion is often described as one of Laveau’s many lovers; hence, another myth that part of Laveau’s power was her sexuality. Unfortunately, even Rhodes bought into this myth. In the same 1995 interview mentioned earlier, Rhodes states that “the real Marie apparently married and had sixteen kids...she had many, many different lovers” (598) although Carolyn Morrow Long’s research shows that Laveau was in two committed relationships in her lifetime.

⁹⁴ Although anti-miscegenation laws were on the books, rarely were they observed or enforced in Louisiana, especially New Orleans.

⁹⁵ see Martin’s essay, “Plaçage and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*: How Race and Sex Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color” in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*, edited by Sybil Kein (2000).

situation typical for black women in interracial relationships—his family came forward to claim any remaining wealth or property due them as Glapion’s rightful heirs. Friends of Laveau’s and Glapion’s, who were prominent men of color, helped settle his debt,⁹⁶ allowing Laveau and her children to remain in the home she and Glapion shared during their time as a couple. Still, she struggled to make ends meet, and sought ways to support her family, challenging the myth that she used “voodoo” to keep her home and to build her wealth.

In rewriting Marie’s relationships, Rhodes conceptualizes her as a woman who relies on her faith in Vodou to overcome oppression and exploitation. By replacing her long-term committed relationship with an exploitative one, Rhodes reveals Marie’s sexual vulnerability. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Rhodes erases Glapion and replaces him with John, an abusive man who gains notoriety by objectifying the woman who holds the key to his empowerment. Marie’s union with John is preceded by her marriage to Jacques, a man emasculated in both his failure to hold onto his wife and to protect her from John. Marie leaves Jacques shortly after they consummate their marriage because her *fa* (fate) makes her connection to John inevitable. Visions of her wedding day reveal that Jacques is merely a gateway to John. In the visions, Jacques’ “yellow face” that appears in a mirror is replaced by “black skin, scars and a grin” (30); Marie’s white dress turns blood red and Christ falls from the crucifix. John taunts Marie as the mirror shatters, the glass mixing with her menstrual blood.

⁹⁶ A combination of bad investments and large debts from personal loans left Glapion without money or property to leave Laveau and their children. After his family claimed what little was left, Laveau was allowed to keep some old clothing and a few personal effects that belonged to Glapion (Long 63).

The emphasis on blood connotes birth and life; it also symbolizes contamination and defilement. Marie's blood is bound to John through the child their union will produce. Blood also symbolizes the mixing of races and the legacy of slavery marked upon the commodified body. Marie descends from African, Native American and French blood; the history of her matrilineal line courses through her veins. More importantly, blood is connected with Eve, who because of her desire for knowledge, is cast out of Eden and damned to suffer through childbirth as punishment for her sin. Marie mirrors Eve in both her search for the truth about her existence and in the loss of innocence when the truth is revealed.

Voodoo Dreams opens with Marie performing a Vodou ceremony to kill her lover and tormentor, John. Fashioned after Doctor John, the fictional character uses Marie, as he did her mother, to exploit Vodou and to achieve prominence as the son of an African king denied him once he was captured and enslaved. Fearing John's plans to eventually corrupt their baby daughter, the fourth in a line of Maries, Marie decides to end his rule over her. As she embraces her trusted python, she challenges John to take the snake, li Grand Zombi, and to trust again in the faith he had forsaken when betrayed by another African tribe and sold to slave traders. Marie's coaxing is her way of challenging John's authority; a thinly veiled threat that she will destroy him as he destroyed her and everyone she loved. His fate is sealed when he purchases the snake, first to taunt Marie and later, as a prop for her Vodou ceremonies. The snake evokes memories of a death John witnessed as a child, that of a man being strangled by a python. But John's pride is more powerful than his fear of the snake, and thus, he inadvertently causes his own death.

As the snake drains the life from John's body, Marie feels the weight of her sin; yet, she knows that his death is a necessary evil to free her and her daughter from his control.

Rhodes underscores gendered violence with graphic images of physical and sexual abuse. John's assertions that he is "father, husband, son" to Marie are reinforced with threats and violence in order to control her. John is convinced that Marie feigns her possessions in order to upstage him, and he brutalizes her for surpassing his popularity. The use of trickery and useless potions fails to garner the following John desires in his quest to become the "king" to Marie's queen. Emasculated as a slave, John reclaims his manhood first, by escaping slavery and forging papers to prove his freedom and second, by dominating Marie, the young woman he himself deems all-powerful. He tells her "everything you are, you owe to me. Everything you do, you do for me" (158) as he repeatedly rapes and sodomizes her. He uses her psychic abilities to draw crowds of believers, skeptics and others willing to pay, and he uses her body as another way to objectify her. As Wayde Compton contends, "To John, Voodoo is 'a business' just as pimping and slaving are businesses" (506). A misogynist who resents Marie and women in general, John uses sexual violence as a form of punishment and control.

Examined in terms of power, Morgan and Youssef argue that sexual assault is "the product of a system of gender and power relations, inherited historical background, kinship rules and practices...sexuality is a particularly appropriate slate on which to signify power relations" (171). From this standpoint, John, who is otherwise disempowered as a black man in a slave society, uses sexual violence to establish agency. John's resentment towards Damballah for favoring women "because they could do what men couldn't...birth themselves—woman to woman—in a chain as old as creation" (146)

is another reminder of his social impotence. Because his identity is fragmented, John seeks validation of his masculinity through penetration. Recognizing Marie's weaknesses and naivety, John is able to manipulate her and use her indiscriminately. In turn, Marie confuses carnal desire with love, and pleasure and pain become indistinguishable. Her sense of self is erased; her body a mere receptacle for John to enter as he pleases.

The second chapter shifts to Marie's life before John and the events that eventually lead her to him. Rhodes's narrative is nonlinear in its revelation of how Marie's harrowing journey leads her to spiritual healing. Marie is a ten year-old girl surrounded by a lush forest and an overprotective grandmother. Unbeknownst to Marie, her mother has been dead for years and the death of her daughter is what prompts Grandmère to return to the place where she was once enslaved. Through dreams, premonitions and possession, Marie experiences a psychic transformation in which nature and the supernatural converge. When she wishes for something magical to happen on her tenth birthday, Marie has a vision of a mother she has never known, her grandmother, herself as a young woman and the baby girl she will one day bear. Yet, the vision in which the spiritual power of the women in her matrilineal line is revealed, is subverted by Marie's loss of innocence.

Marie's initial encounter with John is nuanced with incestuous overtones as the narrative suggests the possibility of John being her father. In the final draft of the novel, Rhodes omitted this scenario; however, the sexual taboo is implicit. John's inappropriate touching of a young Marie progresses into a sexual relationship six years later. For John, Marie is the reincarnation of her mother although she is still young and in his assessment, a poor imitation. Thus, the perversion of their relationship is directed at Marie for loving

the same man her mother once loved. Shame is deflected from John onto Marie who is scolded by Nattie for “rutting for the same man...sharing the same cock” (130) as her mother.

Rhodes resolves the issue of incest when it is revealed that Marie’s real father was a white aristocrat who Maman had an affair with after John’s repeated infidelities. Yet, she revisits the incest trope through John’s affection for the baby girl he and Marie share. Marie is forced to relive her childhood trauma when she espies John fondling their daughter: “She was ten again in the bayou, waking from a deep, dream-ridden sleep to John’s caressing hand. Marie moaned softly, feeling her own body squirm and stir restlessly with the memory. Just as she could feel John again as he’d teased her immature nipples. Just as she could see John now drawing circles with his fingers on her baby’s chest” (420). In the same scene, John tickles the baby, now completely nude, between her thighs as semen “rains” into his pants. In John’s twisted rationale, the molestation of his daughter is, in Morgan and Youssef’s words, part of his “paternal right of ownership” (189).

The “new” Marie not only replaces her mother, but she is an extension of John; bound by blood. He will use her as he uses Marie and her mother before her. Unable to defend herself from John, Marie is determined to protect her daughter by putting an end to the cycle of abuse that started with her mother. John is responsible for both the corruption of Vodou and the exploitation of the Maries. Unable to overcome the trauma of slavery, John rebukes the Vodou gods, using trickery, blackmail, and violence to induce fear. It is only when she understands her connection to the spiritual world that Marie learns how to defeat John. Through Damballah’s guidance, Marie realizes that her

spiritual transcendence is a means of counterbalancing John's abuse of power. The narrative comes full circle as Rhodes ends the novel where it began—with John's death.

Reclamation and Healing

In Haitian Vodou, Damballah is an ancient, benevolent father who helped Bondye (God) create the universe, reinforcing it by entwining himself around the four pillars that support it (Desmangles 125). As the patron of the waters and the heavens, Damballah arches his body over the ocean alongside Ayida, his female counterpart who forms the rainbow (McCarthy Brown 274). With one "foot" in the ocean and the other planted firmly in the earth, Damballah "moves between the opposites of land and water...uniting them in his coiling, uroboric⁹⁷ movements, generating life" (McCarthy Brown 274). He is the life force that ensures the flow of motion of the earth and the ocean, and the cycle of life and death. According to McCarthy Brown, Damballah "is a persistent, unquenchable life force that unites past and present and turns both into a future that is and is not different from the past" (275). Damballah, himself, is unchanged by time as he recreates himself through the shedding of his skin. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie becomes Damballah, embodying the wisdom of ages in the evolution of a new identity:

"Marie slithered down from her chair. She moved through forests, crawled, and felt the earth tremble beneath her belly...she had lived...always. Hundreds of millions of years. She saw humans born. She would watch them die. Damballah survived, hoarding secrets...seeing beyond futures. She was the center of the natural universe" (121).

As a symbol of birth and rebirth, Damballah is the veneration of life. Here, Marie and Damballah exist as one as their spirits merge. Marie becomes godlike, transcending time

⁹⁷ Here, McCarthy Brown is referring to the serpent spirit as a symbol of the life cycle. Images found in Haiti and Benin of Damballah swallowing his own tail reflect the continuity of life.

and space. Despite her ignorance about the magnitude of her gift, when possessed, Marie is omnipotent.

Following in the tradition of other writers that seek to reclaim and redefine African religious practices as an integral part of black culture, Rhodes uses the archetype of the conjure woman in her novel. Historically portrayed as a backward, stereotypical “mammy” caricature in American literature, the conjure woman in contemporary African diasporic literature; specifically works by black women writers, defies Western ideals of knowledge, beauty and autonomy. In works such as Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Goretta Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting* and Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*, the conjure woman is revered as a matriarch and a healer. She commands respect in her community, and is regarded as powerful and wise. As Samuel asserts, in contemporary fiction, “conjure women emerge as a staple quickly moving from debased, remnants of ‘heathen’ Africa to the regal, vessels of divinity they had once been” (n.p.).

Like her contemporaries, Rhodes challenges stereotypical depictions of the conjure woman by creating a multidimensional character who overcomes adversity through spiritual guidance. Tuttle notes that “the sincerity of [Marie’s] conjure empowers her to do what her mother could not: to become a truly divine leader of the faith, and to restore integrity to a religion previously exploited for material gain. Through her authentic practice as a conjure woman, Marie also assembles the pieces of her past and restores herself” (n.p.). In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie’s powers are grounded in African spirituality rather than magic spells, voodoo dolls and *gris gris* typically and erroneously associated with “black magic.” Although John hawks his useless wares to those who

believe in the power of charms, it is Marie who draws crowds of believers and skeptics, slaves and free people of color, and aristocrats and the white working class. Chants of *Maman Marie* when she is mounted by a deity are declarations of Marie's power and for her black followers, affirmation that their gods have not abandoned them in the New World.

But rather than reify her as an indomitable figure who ruled New Orleans, Rhodes revises some of the more popular myths about Marie Laveau as moments of spiritual awakening and historical enlightenment. Rhodes recreates the legend about her rising out of Lake Pontchartrain and walking on water into a journey of selfhood. Typically, this tale, recounted by Hurston and others familiar with the legend, is a testament to Laveau's supernatural powers and her position as Vodou queen. However, in *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie's submersion and resurrection is about reclamation and healing. What begins as a dance orchestrated by John to attract more paying customers wanting to see a voodoo performance becomes, for Marie, a personal journey in which she meets her ancestors and learn about the history of slavery. Marie's performance goes from being a public spectacle to an intimate experience as she is removed from the spectators' gaze. Damballah "mounts" her, meaning he possesses her, and leads her away from the makeshift stage toward the lake. With little hesitation, she dives in.

In this scene, Rhodes uses vivid imagery and folklore elements to create a landscape in which Marie is physically and psychically dissociated from the material world. She is necessarily removed from the eyes of the audience because they can neither understand Marie's journey nor can they articulate it without defiling it. Damballah leads her to the bottom of the lake where Marie can freely enjoy the wonders of nature. In an

African tongue, Damballah tells her, “you belong to me” (306), affirming her spiritual and ancestral connection to Africa and to Vodou. Marie boards a vessel destined for Guinea pulled by Agwé, the sea god. She is greeted by Grandmère, Maman, her daughter and Membe, her great-grandmother and the woman that gave birth to the line of Maries. Her family embraces her, followed by countless others returning home to Guinea, forming circles upon circles around Marie, who is at the center; the heart of her newfound community. As Damballah, Marie represents spiritual empowerment, rebirth, renewal and continuity. Thus, her mythic return to the motherland is the reclamation of her African identity: “Agwé, on his broad back, carried passengers ashore. Africa. Off the ship, everyone became a wondering, awestruck child again. Marie cried. Africa was Teché magnified. Every particle of her being felt reborn” (Rhodes 306).

Marie’s subsequent return to land is also part of her transformation. When Damballah tells Marie that it is time for her to leave, he provides her with the knowledge she had been seeking all along:

“The landscape and the people became spirit. And through her eyes, the spirits flew into her soul, and she cried out at having so much history inside her. ‘This is who you are.’ At first, Marie thought it was Grandmère singing; then she realized it was her own voice crooning. ‘This is who I am.’ Up she flew, through ageless and ancient waters, bursting into the air...Then her body lowered to the wet surface...She walked on the surface of the water as if it were earth” (307).

Marie’s renewed faith in Vodou puts her on the path to redemption. Strengthening her spiritual foundation gives her the courage to face what awaits her when she returns to life as she knows it. Subjected to more of John’s violent reactions to her spiritual gifts, Marie resolves to end his terror. Her reconciliation with Grandmère after her mythical experience is the first step, further changing the dynamics of her relationship with John.

Through Grandmère, Marie begins to piece together the events that led to John's stronghold on the Maries and the desecration of Vodou.

On her deathbed, Grandmère relates the story of Membe, her mother and Marie's great-grandmother, who was chosen by Damballah to be taken as a slave to America. Damballah seeks her out, imploring her to take the difficult transatlantic journey in order to remind his "lost children" of their spiritual faith. He assures her that one day she will return to her homeland, telling her, "I promise your soul will split in two. When you die, part of you will return to live with me in Guinea. Part of you will live forever in a line of daughters" (Rhodes 331). In *Voodoo Dreams*, part of Membe's spirit is reborn with each generation as evidenced in the passing down of second sight. Membe lives on through the Maries so that they never forget their ancestral past.

Yet, Membe, christened Marie by her master, is broken by long days in the fields and longer nights as the master's concubine that results in several stillborn births. Her master, Monsieur Laveau,⁹⁸ allows her to preside over Vodou ceremonies in exchange for the use of her body at his discretion. The weight of responsibility bestowed upon Membe by both Damballah and her owner eventually takes its toll and soon Grandmère takes over the Vodou rites. It is only a matter of time before Monsieur Laveau comes after Grandmère, his own daughter, after learning that she has taken a lover. When he attempts to rape Grandmère, Monsieur Laveau and Membe fight to the death. Swollen with her own child and afraid of the consequences she'll suffer for her master's death,

⁹⁸ Rhodes reinvents Charles Laveau, a free man of color and Marie Laveau's father, as a white slave owner and Membe's master.

Grandmère runs away and lives among the Native Americans until she feels safe enough to flee with her daughter to New Orleans.

In telling Membe's story, Grandmère reveals her own. She relives the pain of losing the only man she had ever loved, a Muskogean beaten and drowned by her jealous master once he learns of their relationship. She also relives her mother's death and the horror of watching her daughter die as John flees to save himself. Initially indebted to John for obtaining free papers for her, and for providing protection for her and her daughter, Grandmère realizes that John's hunger for power is Maman's undoing. Immediately, John sets his sights on Maman, by then a precocious eight year-old. Although John is twelve years older, Grandmère encourages their affection toward each other, hoping that marriage will be in their future. By the time Maman turns sixteen, John has already seduced her and made her one of his many lovers.

They both profit from her gift of sight, and believing themselves to be invincible, Maman accepts John's challenge to perform in Cathedral Square. Despite of Grandmère's protestations, John's hold on Maman proves stronger and Grandmère watches helplessly as her only daughter self-destructs. Fearing a similar fate will befall her granddaughter, Grandmère returns with Marie to Teché where she can protect her. Too young to remember New Orleans or her mother, Marie finds comfort in her grandmother's company. That is, until John makes his presence known on her tenth birthday. As Marie learns, earlier refusals to tell her about her heritage was Grandmère's attempt to spare Marie the burden of carrying her family's legacy in a world that misunderstood and denounced Vodou. Yet, in denying Marie this knowledge, Grandmère inadvertently

makes Marie a target for violence and exploitation. Paralyzed by fear and uncertainty, Grandmère fails to honor Membe's legacy.

Grandmère's deathbed confession does not completely absolve Marie's transgressions although it is a step towards healing. Her complicity in John's exploitation of Vodou stems from generational sexual trauma that began with Membe. Marie reflects: "Following John's lead, she'd made Vodoo a religion of lies and horror" (9). The dynamics of their relationship reflect Marie's tacit acceptance of John's abuse. She lacks the will to resist him and admittedly, a combination of fear, desire and love keeps her there. Rhodes's emphasis on domestic abuse also reflects the social structures of nineteenth-century New Orleans that systematically denied female autonomy and the means to resist patriarchal violence. The paradigm between gender and power is examined through the community's perception of Marie's power and the actual power John wields over her. With her growing notoriety, John tightens his grip until it seems that Marie has completely surrendered. Thus, the shift in power is subtle; the more Marie learns about Vodou and her matrilineal line, the more she is empowered to defeat John.

After Marie kills John, she is visited by Membe. She is described as a handsome woman whose "skin was the purest black" (425), referring to her African blood. Membe's presence affirms for Marie her path in life as a Voodooienne, the one chosen to restore the faith. Though Marie believes she has betrayed her family for the choices she has made, Membe reminds her that life is shaped by experience and that Vodou is not about judgment. Membe tells her that the Vodou faith is unlike Christianity in that sin does not exist. Her presence is Marie's spiritual cleansing, a moment of redemption. By honoring Damballah and the Vodou faith, Marie honors her African ancestors.

As a writer, Rhodes takes artistic license in recreating Marie Laveau. Using the tales sensationalized by Tallant and others, Rhodes reconciles both the vilification and the deification of the infamous Vodou priestess. Expanding upon Hurston's ethnographic studies, the author reminds us that Marie Laveau's popularity lies not only in the spiritual powers she was believed to possess, but in her importance to New Orleans culture; specifically, black folklore. In turn, Rhodes contextualizes New Orleans "voodoo" as a composite of a living culture among ordinary human beings dependent on spirituality as a basic cultural practice.

CHAPTER IV
*BREATH, EYES, MEMORY: EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S NARRATIVE OF
 RESISTANCE*

In this chapter, I examine Edwidge Danticat's revision of Haiti's history through her novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and the collective shame among Haitian women that silences them. I begin with an overview of Marie Vieux-Chauvet's controversial novel, *Amour, Colère, et Folie (Love, Anger, Madness)*⁹⁹ to demonstrate how earlier works by Haitian women writers inform Danticat's novel. I also look at Beverly Bell's *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*, a collection of interviews that capture Haitian women's stories in their own words. Danticat draws upon tales of rape, torture, and other forms of gendered violence, using fiction to articulate women's lived experiences in Haiti. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, folklore is part of the larger narrative, used to covertly speak about sexual trauma. Danticat's characters tell folktales in order to say what cannot be explicitly stated for fear of retribution. The prevalence of folklore in her novel also reflects the influence of Zora Neale Hurston's writing in reclaiming a rich, African diasporic culture. Danticat expands upon and even revises Hurston's earlier writings about the Caribbean and Vodou; thus creating narratives of resistance and healing to recover a more accurate Haitian history.

In 1968, Marie Vieux-Chauvet's trilogy, *Amour, Colère, et Folie* was published in Paris, France. Controversial for its critique of the U.S. occupation of Haiti, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's dictatorship, the mulatto elite's prejudice against the larger,

⁹⁹ In 2009, the English translation, *Love, Anger, Madness*, was published by Modern Library Publishers, an imprint of Random House. Maisonneuve and Larose is the French publisher.

marginalized black population, and the torture-rape of women, the release of the three novellas made Chauvet a political target. The first novella, *Amour*, is set in 1939, five years after the occupation ended. The protagonist, Claire Clamont, reveals how her life has been restricted by a rigid social edict and a Haitian commandant who, by orders from a nameless dictator, terrorizes the town. Yet, she questions the right to be outraged when the elite's treatment of its servants and the poor is just as cruel as the methods the commandant uses to punish "enemies of the state."

In *Colère*, the "men in black" are code for the *Tonton Macoutes*, the paramilitary force that systematically brutalized Haitian citizens in Duvalier's quest for total domination. In the story, the Normil family negotiates for the return of their land through the objectification and rape of their daughter by a local leader known as "the Gorilla." Emasculated by the power the local militia wields, the father turns a blind eye to the violence inflicted upon his daughter, Rose, and the disintegration of his family. In the last novella, *Folie*, René and his poet friends are haunted by "devils" that lurk in the dark. They take refuge in René's shack, consumed by the real threat of violence by soldiers patrolling the town and their own mental deterioration born from constant fear and near starvation. Harassed by the local gendarme for what they consider subversive writings, René confesses: "In the trunk there are a few poems, unpublished, as are all of my poems...Enough of them there to get me pumped full of lead without anyone hesitating" (290). When Cécile, René's neighbor, attempts to defend him after he and his friends inadvertently capture the attention of the soldiers, she is imprisoned and raped for speaking out.

Folie (Madness) echoes Chauvet's predicament as a writer under heavy censorship in Haiti. In the introduction to the English translation, Edwidge Danticat notes that Chauvet was a member of *Les Araignées du soir* (Spiders of the Night), a small group of writers of the Haitian elite that met regularly to discuss literature. Like Chauvet, many of the members were exiled, imprisoned or never seen again. Artists, writers, and intellectuals alike were persecuted for their ideals during the Duvalier era and anything construed as collusion against the state meant torture, imprisonment, forced migration, or death (ix). Chauvet was especially vulnerable to a misogynist regime in a country where women, regardless of class, had few, if any, rights.¹⁰⁰

Unfortunately, attempts to disguise dates and details in her book failed to protect Chauvet and her family from retribution. Aware that she would suffer the same fate as friends and family members who were victims of state-executed violence, Chauvet was forced into exile. Rose-Myriam Réjouis notes that after seeing an advance copy of the book, Haiti's Ambassador to France¹⁰¹ cautioned Chauvet that its very existence put her in danger (xx). Distribution of *Amour, Colère, et Folie* was halted by the publisher, and Chauvet's husband bought and destroyed every copy in Haiti he could find. Yet, despite her expulsion, Chauvet continued to write about the implications of U.S. intervention, Duvalier's brutal autocracy that spared no one, and the use of sexual assault as a military tactic from her newly adopted homeland.

¹⁰⁰ Until 1979, married women were classified as minors. In 1950, upper-class women were granted voting rights; however, they could exercise those rights only when it served the interests of the ruling party (Bell 21).

¹⁰¹ Réjouis omits his name but various websites identify Haiti's Ambassador to France during François Duvalier's administration as Gen. Pierre Merceron.

As Chauvet, her predecessors, and writers such as Edwidge Danticat have proven, female revolutionaries come in many forms. Chauvet's audacious novels, published in her time and posthumously, have set the tone for contemporary Haitian women writers at home and abroad who understand the need to examine black female subjectivity within a larger political discourse. As Myriam Chancy contends, "the experience of the Haitian woman is defined by exile within her own country, for she is alienated from the means to assert at once feminine and feminist identities at the same time that she undergoes the same colonial experiences of her male counterparts" (13). Fiction, then, provides a platform for Haitian women writers to present counternarratives to nationalist discourse, paternalism and imperialism. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat continues in the tradition of resistance narratives by exposing the systematic erasure of black women's lived experiences during the Duvalier era. Set in the midst of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's inherited dictatorship and several years before Haiti's first democratic election, Danticat's novel exposes the emotional and physical scars left by gendered violence. Like Chauvet, Danticat contextualizes black female trauma as personal, generational, and political.

The day-to-day existence for women in a changing political climate in Haiti informs *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Set in the 1980s, the grandmother's mention of a "black priest, the one they call Lavalas" (231) is in reference to Jean-Bertrand Aristide's growing popularity and the subsequent end to the Duvalier era. However, the reign of terror that Chauvet wrote about more than two decades prior to Danticat's novel still exists in Haiti. Incidents of rape increased with the growing political activism among women, who were major proponents of Aristide's. Violence and sexual assault were used

by opposing political parties funded by the elite to suppress Aristide supporters and to protect its wealth (Morgan and Youssef 105). Yet, despite the coordinated attacks to silence them in the years following Aristide's election, overthrow, and eventual reinstatement to the presidency, women continued to lead grassroots movements for political change (105). Thus, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* encompasses the struggle for a pro-democratic Haiti and underscores the politicization of rape. Further, by portraying the psychological implications of sexual trauma, Danticat transforms writing into a living testimony of the atrocities Haitian women have suffered at the hands of those in power.

Beverly Bell takes up this issue in *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*. Between 1991 and 1994, Bell interviewed thirty-eight Haitian women, most of whom live in impoverished communities, and recorded their *istwa* (meaning both story and history). Many traveled great distances, even by foot, to share their personal struggles in a time of political uncertainty. The author notes that during this time, "women's bodies became domains for the regime to assert its power and authority, with rape regularly used as a weapon of war" (21). While the U.S. Embassy downplayed the rise in sexual assaults, suggesting that the numbers were exaggerated by pro-Aristide activists, investigations conducted by several human rights organizations found that the majority of the women surveyed experienced sexual abuse or knew someone who had. In turn, the regular occurrence of rape was compounded by the high incidence of domestic violence (21), normalizing sexual and physical abuse against Haitian women.

In order to understand gendered violence in Haiti, it is necessary to view it in terms of political control and patriarchy. In "Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti: The Duvalierist State, Transnationalism, and the Emergence of a New Feminism (1980-

1990),” Carolle Charles argues that ironically, the designation of women as dependents once protected them from political violence. She states that before the Duvalier era, “women, children, and old people were defined as political innocents...Under the Duvalierist state, however, systematic repressive policies undermined the prevailing conception of women as passive political actors, devoted mothers, and political innocents” (139). Although instrumental in political change throughout the country’s history, Haitian women have been systematically silenced in the fight for gender equality. Thus, the shift in the state’s focus on Haitian women coincided with the increase in feminist organizations and in general, women’s political mobility. In his attempt to depoliticize Haitian women,¹⁰² François Duvalier took drastic measures to silence them, including torture, exile, disappearance, and more commonly, rape.

In domestic cases, gendered violence signifies political and economic disempowerment; and/or the appropriation of “traditional” male roles, i.e. the head of the household. In *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence Through Caribbean Discourse*, Morgan and Youssef argue that “poverty, unemployment and political oppression undermine and emasculate the male, who is constrained to work out his struggle for power at the personal level if he is powerless in the wider society” (106). The lack of job opportunities and adequate housing, along with the fear of reprisal for challenging the government, the rise in food costs, and the political and economic sanctions that keep Haiti in a state of dependency, all factor into the alarming percentage of domestic abuse.

¹⁰² Historically, Haitian women have been excluded from politics even as they have been active participants. Charles notes that prior to the Haitian Revolution, women fought for fair wages as the country began to transition from a slave state.

Bell confirms this claim with case studies that document the high frequency in which Haitian women suffer physical abuse at the hands of their male partners. In a study conducted by the Haitian Center for Research and Action for the Advancement of Women, seventy percent of the women interviewed were subjected to domestic abuse on a regular basis. In the Port-au-Prince neighborhood of Cite Soleil, another study found that the number of abused women was overwhelmingly one hundred percent. The home place, then, doubles as a site of political and domestic violence; a place where men exert their authority, regardless of their relationship to the woman, upon the female body.

Many of the women Bell interviewed spoke of their experiences with political and domestic violence and how, through small acts of resistance, they chose survival over victimization. As the primary breadwinners (many women earn a living selling goods in local markets; some resort to prostitution when other means of earning money are unavailable), Haitian women empower themselves even as they wield little power. For example, Roselie Jean-Juste saw her husband's departure from the household one day as an opportunity to put an end to years of verbal and physical abuse. She went into hiding with their four children and filed a complaint against him in court. While Roselie still lived in fear at the time of her interview, she refused to be subjected to her husband's cruelty any longer. Hence, even outside of political activism, Haitian women fight back; oftentimes, in subtle yet meaningful ways. As Bell discovered, telling their stories is one way in which Haitian women are empowered.

Another woman named Yolande Mevs recounts the day she was beaten, raped and robbed by five masked men. She remarks that "rape is like experiencing death" (36); yet, despite the traumatic experience and her daily struggles to survive, Yolande relies on

spiritual faith to face another day. Alina “Tibebe” Cajuste recalls the horrors of being a *restavèk*, a child slave, and learning that she was conceived when her mother was raped by her employers’ son. She found strength and support through a local women’s organization, finally realizing that despite being unwanted and abused as a child, her life had meaning. In contrast, Haitian journalist Lelenne Gilles speaks for those who can’t speak for themselves. Since the beginning of her career in the 1980s when “Baby Doc” was still the president of Haiti, Gilles has refused to be silenced by political intimidation. Throughout the years, she put her life and her family members’ lives at risk in order to inform and educate the people of Haiti about political corruption. When she was forced into hiding, Gilles continued to be the voice of the people by receiving and passing along news from fellow journalists via an underground network. She states: “If I didn’t have a microphone to speak with or people to listen to me, I would stand in front of a chicken and talk. I’ll die with the words on my lips” (72).

Sanba (singer) Marceline Yrelien, speaks out against injustice and the mistreatment of women, especially for those like her that make up Haiti’s peasant class. A functioning illiterate, Yrelien creates songs to let women “know just how long we’ve been struggling to get out from under our oppression, so the women’s struggle for rights and equality can continue on, go farther” (74). Alerte Belance’s story begins with “They killed me that night in Titanyen” (Bell 104). She recalls the day that several soldiers came to her home looking for her husband, an Aristide organizer, and took her away instead. They took her to Titanyen, “the valley of death,” and hacked into her body with machetes. She states: “They sliced me into pieces with machete strokes. They cut my face open, my temple and cheek totally open. They cut my eye open. They cut my ear open.

They cut my body, my whole shoulder and neck and back slashed with machete blows. They cut off my right arm. They slashed my left arm totally and cut off the ends of all the fingers of my left hand. Also, they slashed my whole head up with machete blows” (Bell 105).

She told her story first to Edwidge Danticat and a documentary film crew that traveled to Newark, New Jersey, where Alerte now lives with her husband and children; and later, to social activist Beverly Bell. While some of the details vary in each retelling,¹⁰³ the graphic description of the attack and her message are the same: she, like the other women who gave their testimonies, survived in order to tell her story. Thus, each individual story captured by Bell and Danticat articulates the fight for autonomy, an end to gender oppression, and hope for a better future. Identifying the women by name personalizes their stories, making them more than one among millions suffering in another developing country. The pictures that accompany their narratives put a face on human suffering; yet, unlike exploitative images that encapsulate their subjects in a state of hopelessness and victimhood, the women in Bell’s photographs are defiant and

¹⁰³ Because Alerte’s account is more detailed in Bell’s book, I have chosen to quote from *Walking on Fire* instead of Danticat’s essay. Danticat gives her perspective of Alerte’s harrowing story, even describing her own reaction to hearing it, whereas in Bell’s book, Alerte’s retelling of events is central. However, Danticat fills in the gaps either unknown or irrelevant to Bell in recounting Haitian women’s survival stories. Danticat describes Alerte’s family, their difficulty in accepting how drastically the attack changed her physical appearance, Alerte’s struggle with depression, and her role as an activist who speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves. After the interview, Alerte was a guest on Phil Donahue’s talk show, she won a lawsuit against FRAPH, and she played a minor character in the film adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Although far from the Hollywood stories of triumph in the face of difficulty—more than likely, she will never see the settlement money and she is almost solely dependent on her husband to take care of her most basic needs, like bathing and dressing herself—Alerte is living proof that Haitian women have a voice.

resilient. The personal accounts that resound in a loud, collective voice reflect the daily acts of survival and resistance carried out by Haitian women.

These are the type of narratives Danticat draws upon in shaping her fictional characters. The women in her novel persevere despite their circumstances. When Martine Caco is brutally raped at the age of sixteen, she flees Haiti in hopes of putting the experience behind her. While in the end her only release is death, Martine resolves to free herself from psychological torment. Her sister, Atie, is illiterate for most of her life although Sophie, the niece she is raising, tries to teach her how to read and write. Atie is ashamed of the poverty that did not afford her the chance to attend school when she was younger, and it is only when she befriends a local market woman that the desire to become educated is fueled. Seemingly resigned to rural life, Atie performs small acts of resistance by keeping a notebook filled with her writing against her mother's wishes, and by refusing to allow political tensions to determine her mobility. Interpreted as an act of defiance by her mother, Atie's assertive attitude reflects the refusal by Haitian women to concede to political intimidation.

Their mother, Ifé, is from a generation influenced by traditions and beliefs based heavily on patriarchal values. When her daughters reach puberty, she routinely "tests" them by inserting a finger into their vaginas to ensure that their hymens are intact. The invasive process confirms their virginity and is meant to preserve their virtue so as to make them suitable for marriage. A tradition passed down from one generation to the next, testing, like female circumcision, denies women's sexual pleasure by inflicting psychological and physical trauma upon the body. In "Desiring Diaspora: 'Testing' the Boundaries of National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," Clare

Counihan argues that “the logic of testing provides a fiction in which women exert a degree of sexual agency: by remaining within the boundaries of sexual propriety testing defines, women can (supposedly) forestall imminent rape” (40).

The fiction becomes evident when Atie loses her virginity to a man who chooses to marry a woman from his own social class, and Martine is raped. Ironically, Martine’s description of Atie’s screams of protest when their mother tests her underscores Martine’s inability to verbalize her own anguish when she is violated first, by her mother and later, by her attacker. She confesses to Sophie, “the one good thing about my being raped was that it made the *testing* (author’s emphasis) stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day” (170). Thus, Danticat parallels the process of testing to rape in her portrayal of sexual violation.

Sophie is a young woman trying to come to terms with her sexuality and the tradition of testing. The inheritor of her mother’s traumatic memories as a witness to Martine’s frequent nightmares and through her own subjection to testing, Sophie’s failed attempt to reconcile the past is expressed through an eating disorder and her inability to enjoy sexual intimacy. Later, when she gives birth to her own daughter, Sophie returns to Haiti to reconnect with the women in her family, and to better understand how their experiences shaped their broken relationships with each other. Although Simone A. James Alexander argues that the women in the novel “unwittingly adopt certain stereotypical roles” (373) in their complicity in maintaining patriarchal norms even as they try to resist them, I contend that Danticat’s rendering of the Caco women reveals the struggle with identity at a time in which Haitian womanhood was constantly (and continues to be) undermined by a larger political agenda.

Like the Caco bird, whose wings resemble flames (Danticat 235), the Caco women symbolize the Haitian men and women who died in the flames as they destroyed the very physical and political structures that oppressed them. A direct reference to the armed resistance led by the militant Cacos against U.S. occupiers in the early twentieth century, the surname Danticat gives her female characters is an acknowledgement of women's role in the fight for political and economic independence.¹⁰⁴ Often lost in historical narratives that celebrate Haiti's male champions of freedom, the voices of Haitian women resound loudly and distinctly in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Donette A. Francis concurs that "Danticat centers poor, peasant, migrant, laboring women to inscribe 'unofficial' memories into the historical narrative of the Haitian nation-state" (76). Because the quality of life and their livelihoods are determined by international intervention, the imbalance of socio-economic power and the whims of the state, Haitian women are forced to navigate (and oftentimes, resign themselves to) a complex system of oppression. By establishing a means of resistance that is female-centered, Haitian women and Haitian women writers, such as Chauvet and Danticat, fight for autonomy on their own terms.

Confronting the Bogeyman: Cultural Memory and Trauma

In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Joseph Roach defines amnesia or more succinctly, selective memory, as "a process that depends crucially on forgetting" (2). He argues that selective memory allows for the concealment or denial of ruptures that otherwise demystify significant moments in history. Roach explores the

¹⁰⁴ The last name she gives the women is also in remembrance of her grandfather, who was a Caco.

evolution of modern cultures in the circum-Atlantic rim, namely, Africa and the Americas; and the underlying violent (and often, genocidal) histories that led to the symbiosis of cultural practices in London and New Orleans. From burial rites to Mardi Gras, the two seemingly disparate cities reflect the syncretism and interdependence of African, European, and Native American cultures. Forgetting, then, is enacted in order to reinvent and legitimize historical narratives (3), while at the same time, denying the violence out of which such narratives were created. Hence, the concept of culture is shaped by myths and silences incorporated into dominant narratives, and accepted as official history.

The act of forgetting, Danticat asserts, is what writers fear. To forget is to give an incomplete history; it results in the inability to confront the past, however painful the memories are, and to move forward. In “Daughters of Memory,” Danticat argues that collective amnesia is what enables Haitians to celebrate their country’s coveted title as the first black independent republic in the Western Hemisphere while overlooking the history of invasion, the decimation of its indigenous population, slavery, political dissention and economic disparity. The dark moments in Haiti’s history, exacerbated by “foreign interference...internal strife and cruelty” (67) is what Danticat states is too difficult to acknowledge. She contextualizes the implications of silence and the act of forgetting as follows:

“We [Haitians] have a collective agreement to remember our triumphs and gloss over our failures...In order to shield our shattered collective psyche from a long history of setbacks and disillusionment, our constant roller-coaster ride between saviors and dictators, homespun oppression and foreign tyranny, we cultivate communal and historical amnesia, continually repeating cycles that we never see coming until we are reliving similar horrors” (63-4).

Jan J. Dominique explores this issue in *Memoir of an Amnesiac* (2004). Whereas selective memory and collective forgetting are tools of survival under Duvalierism, Dominique's novel portrays the lasting effects of political suppression in the forming of selfhood. A novel with autobiographical elements, *Memoir* is a nonlinear account of a turbulent political era given by a young girl whose evolution into womanhood involves the recovery of oral tradition and female solidarity made possible only through exile. Given the name Paul at birth (either because her parents wanted a boy or because the "e" was accidentally left off the end of her name, depending on the adults' recollection) but referred to as Lili, the protagonist struggles with identity and freedom of expression.

Her sense of self is diminished when she is forced to mask her thoughts and feelings in order to save her life. When she dares to look a Tonton Macoute in the eye, Lili is reprimanded by her father. The slap she receives is to teach her that anything perceived as brazenness—a look, a facial expression or a misspoken word—can get her killed. From that moment on, she keeps her eyes lowered to the ground and her thoughts to herself lest her words and deeds be misinterpreted. Although she encounters different obstacles when, as a young woman, she moves to Montreal, Canada, Lili is finally liberated from censorship and fear. Through writing, she begins to recreate childhood memories, piecing together fragments of her life in Haiti while grappling with the pain that compels her to remember.

Likewise, Danticat invokes memory and, in turn, rewrites Haiti's historical narratives by deconstructing the romanticization of nationhood touted by the senior Duvalier and transformed into an inhumane political system passed down to his son. The conspicuously named "men in black" in *Amour, Colère, et Folie* are explicitly identified

as the Tonton Macoutes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In Haitian culture, the myth of the Tonton Macoute,¹⁰⁵ the “scarecrow with human flesh” who kidnaps, dismembers, and eats naughty children “as snacks” (138) is reconfigured into the men and women who unquestioningly carry out the Duvaliers’ orders. Derived from the Kreyol word meaning “bogeyman,” the Tonton Macoutes that haunt children’s dreams materialize into a living nightmare that terrorizes an entire country.

Metaphorically, Francois Duvalier is forever ingrained in Haiti’s history as both the incarnate of the bogeyman and as someone far more frightening. During his presidency, Duvalier appropriated the Vodou religion and used it as another form of control by fashioning himself after Baron Samedi, the god of death.¹⁰⁶ A Vodou devotee himself, Duvalier often dressed as the deity, donning dark glasses, a top hat and a dark suit as he determined the fate of the Haitian people. In *Fault Lines: Views Across Haiti’s Divide*, Beverly Bell chides “those of us from the United States [who] might...do well to never forget that the U.S. government gave the Duvaliers almost unbroken financial and political support throughout their reign” (199).¹⁰⁷ With financial and military backing

¹⁰⁵ Here, the lack of an “s” on the end of “macoute” distinguishes between the singular Tonton Macoute in folktales and the army of Macoutes that carried out Duvalier’s terror campaign.

¹⁰⁶ As the main *lwa* of the cemeteries, Baron Samedi is respected and feared.

from the U.S., along with his own ruthless death squads, the senior Duvalier's claim that he wielded omnipotent powers appeared to be true. Passed down to Jean-Claude, the figurative bogeyman sans the costume, the legacy of violence and terror continued after Papa Doc's death and even after the U.S. government yielded to pressure from the international community and expelled Baby Doc. The social and political implications of Francois Duvalier's rule worsened under his son's leadership. Drug trafficking, the harvesting of body parts for trade on the black market, exorbitant personal spending equaling the costs for Haiti's education and healthcare systems, and other crimes against humanity reflected Baby Doc's time in office.

In "Uprisings, Insurrections, and Political Movements: Contemporary Haiti and the Teachings of History, 1957-2010," Patrick Bellegarde-Smith maps the political events in that paved the way for Duvalierism. The struggle for political power between the upper- and middle classes inadvertently provided another opportunity for the American government to intervene post-Occupation and thus, protect its own commercial interests in the country. He notes that even after the U.S. military's departure from Haiti in 1934,

¹⁰⁷ In 1957, the United States government declared Duvalier the winner of the presidential election. Favored by the U.S. for his middle-class status and his professional ties to American organizations, Duvalier used his newly-acquired political position to his advantage. His acquiescence with U.S. foreign policy guaranteed the flow of economic aid and continued military support. Although the Kennedy administration temporarily suspended aid in response to human rights violations by Duvalier, the need for the Haitian government's vote at the Organization of American States (OAS) meeting to expel Cuba from the organization and at the United Nation's meeting in support of the 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic led to the reinstatement of financial assistance. Over the next thirty years, Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, who became president following his father's death, ruled Haiti under a brutal dictatorship that, despite opposition from some U.S. officials, provided a labor market that proved to be profitable for the U.S. and other international corporations. During the Duvalier era, foreign investors were drawn to Haiti through the production of copper and other natural resources, a burgeoning manufacturing industry that provided cheap labor, tax incentives, and a huge return on their investments.

the American government guaranteed the success of its enterprises by installing a Haitian military led by light-skinned elite men motivated by self-interests. As puppets for the capitalist West, the Duvaliers solidified the power of the American government and their own by taking advantage of the centralized political structure already in place, and creating a more repressive government. Thus, the presence of the Tonton Macoutes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* underscores not only the breadth of their power through the Duvaliers, spanning over thirty years and impacting even small, rural communities in Haiti; but the magnitude of the Duvaliers' power.

The figurative dark presence that represents the Duvalier era looms over Danticat's central characters, manifesting in their relationships with men and each other. The Caco family represent four generations of women that pass down names and traditions, as well as their burdens, to the next in line. The story is narrated by Sophie, a young girl raised by her single, childless aunt in Croix-des-Rosets until she is sent for by her mother in New York. Her time with her Tante Atie abruptly ends when Martine sends a recorded message to Atie, along with a one-way plane ticket for Sophie. As twelve-year old Sophie Caco settles in with Martine, a mother she knows only through photographs and cassette tapes, she learns about the nightmares that disrupt her sleep. Each night, Martine relives her rape by a masked man, likely a Tonton Macoute, and the fear and violence the memory evokes.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the reconstruction of memory involves the disclosure of black female trauma and a revision of Haiti's official history of resistance and triumph. In Danticat's novel, the myths embedded in the country's historical narratives are rewritten so that Haitian women are unsilenced. Sophie's reunion with her mother is an unraveling

of the past; the piecing together of fragments of her mother's history gleaned from her family in Haiti and the few details Martine provides. Sophie learns that her birth was not mystical as Atie had always told her, but as the result of a brutal rape. In Sophie's face, Martine sees her attacker as she bears no resemblance to the Caco women. Time does not ease Martine's anxiety, nor does her departure from Haiti bring closure. Martine's request for her daughter to join her in New York is an attempt to reconcile the past; however, as "a living memory of her past" (56), Martine finds it difficult to separate Sophie's existence from sexual violence. Although Martine attempts to give Sophie a sense of normalcy, her emotional scars are projected onto her daughter, who is at once the materialization of Martine's rapist and her protector who wakes her from her night terrors.

As the narrative voice in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie provides the details too difficult for her mother to divulge, although her view is limited. She states: "It took me twelve years to piece together my mother's entire story. By then, it was already too late" (61). It is a history that has already been written, but too painful to articulate; in Martine's mind, speaking about her experience offers no more relief than her waking moments. Although Atie is laden with the task of telling Sophie the truth about her conception, she too finds it difficult to reveal the truth. Behind the Caco women's guardedness, then, is the denial of trauma. Implicated in her family's silence, Sophie unwittingly becomes a conspirator in keeping secrets, thus, attributing to the difficulty of moving beyond the past. She is protective of her relationship with Atie and therefore, keeps Atie's affair with the man she once hoped to marry a secret. She allows Martine to believe that she has lost her virginity to Joseph, their next door neighbor and the man Sophie eventually marries,

to stop Martine's torturous testing. When as a young woman, Sophie returns to Haiti, she does not reveal the extent of her mother's psychosis nor does she fully acknowledge the impact her mother's memories have on her.

The death of a local coal man by the *Macoutes* triggers memories of her mother's rape in a sugarcane field. The violence that Sophie witnesses during her visit reflects the history of violence that preceded the Duvaliers, but intensified under their rule. The graphic details in which Sophie recalls Martine's attack reflects the internalization of memories that are now her own:

“My father might have been a *Macoute* (author's emphasis). He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground. He had a black bandanna over his face so she never saw anything but his hair, which was the color of eggplants. He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up” (139).

She goes on to describe the terror that caused Martine to tear at her own flesh; the unimaginable fear that made her “half insane.”

The trauma Martine experiences is generational and part of a cycle of violence on which Haiti, as a nation, was formed. Her assault in the sugarcane field alludes to Haiti's pre-revolutionary plantation economy and the commodification of black bodies. The Caco women's inability to speak directly about the atrocities ingrained in Haiti's colonial history are stated through storytelling. The folktales that are woven into Danticat's narrative are nuanced with memories of human exploitation and brutality. Coughlin argues that “in the stories that symbolize the mother line Sophie seeks to reclaim, Grandmè Ifé and Martine never name the slave master (or his violations) explicitly, but the religious and folk figures who inhabit their tales, like Erzulie, continue...to articulate and embody a memory of slavery, intimacy and revenge with their veiled narratives of

sexual danger” (39). Danticat evokes the memory of slavery through the death of Martine and Atie’s father as he stops to wipe the sweat from his brow and collapses from exhaustion. As peasants whose subsistence depends largely upon the backbreaking work of plantation labor, the Caco family succumbs to the economic demands that lock them into a state of abject poverty. Their father’s death and Martine’s rape supports Counihan’s claim that for the Caco women, the cane fields signify historical, political and sexual violence.

The psychological scars caused by living in constant fear of state-sanctioned violence cannot be separated from the physical scars that leave irreparable damage. Sophie learns this lesson when she makes the conscious choice to end the intrusive, demeaning process of testing by breaking her hymen with a pestle. After learning that Sophie is interested in Joseph, Martine tests her weekly; an attempt to reclaim her virginal purity through her daughter. In contrast, Sophie’s recitation of the virgin mother’s prayer while she is being violated is a plea for redemption after defilement. The first time Sophie is tested, the threat of violence if she doesn’t comply is tacit. The belt in Martine’s hand symbolizes the power dynamics of sexual violation.

The weapon, the belt that Martine wields, symbolizes the phallus in which male dominance, through sexual violence, is asserted. Martine is reinscribed as a rapist while Sophie becomes the victim: “[Martine] took my hand with surprised gentleness, and led me up to my bedroom” (84). Through the process of testing, Martine reenacts both her own experience with testing as well as her own rape; like Martine, Sophie is rendered silent, having no power in which to resist violation. Yet, violation by the mother is

justified as a preventative measure against premarital sex. Sophie breaks the cycle by choosing self-mutilation over sexual abuse.

Like Danticat, Barbara Sanon and Myriam Chancy utilize the bogeyman trope to examine the collective shame, silence and fear among Haitian women and girls; especially victims of sexual assault, in the face of political uncertainty. In Sanon's "Black Crows and Zombie Girls," the bogeyman materializes as a ruthless member of the Haitian gendarme and later, as the boyfriend of the young protagonist's mother when they migrate to New York. Sanon's young protagonist is keenly aware that her story will never be told because political rhetoric is far more appealing. In *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, Chancy weaves a fictional tale about a young girl named Solange into her analysis of Haitian women's literature.

Solange is representative of all young Haitian girls forced to navigate the political violence that jeopardizes their very existence. Chancy opens each chapter with another piece of Solange's story as a reminder that her personal narrative is impacted by and therefore, just as critical, as the political discourse taking place. In both Sanon's short story and Chancy's literary scholarship, folklore is used as a narrative tool that emphasizes the significance of the oral tradition in Haiti and more importantly, serves as a way to give voice to those excluded from official narratives. For Haitian women writers, storytelling is used to examine black female subjectivity beyond established gender norms; they incorporate elements of folklore in fiction as another way to explore what it means to be female in Haiti.

For instance, Chancy opens her chapter on female identity and the politics of textual sexuality with Solange's dangerous trek from home to the lighted piazza in front

of the Palais National, where she and other schoolchildren make use of its electricity in order to study. She is warned never to stop, and to be on the lookout for the bogeyman because he is always lurking. With foreboding, the narrator cautions that the bogeymen in Haiti are unique from those in other places: “They don’t live in your mind; they are real and breathing and carry guns in leather holsters against their hips...The men walk through the crowded streets...like they own everything in sight—even your soul” (105).

Solange learns that the daytime is just as perilous as the night; the trees and bushes offer plenty of hiding places for bogeymen looking for easy prey. Her movements are determined by spatial boundaries; she walks in the middle of the road as opposed to the side so as to avoid being easily snatched. A brotherly smile, an offer to accompany her, or the tug of her hand as she walks by all signify danger; and whether she’s walking home, to school or to the piazza, her solitary journeys are filled with trepidation. The threat of rape is always present although at age eleven, Solange doesn’t make the connection between the screams coming from a neighbor’s house and the woman of the house slumped over with her dress torn open.

Sanon’s narrative expands upon Solange’s understanding of danger by exploring how sexual violation has become a normative tactic in Haitian politics. The story opens with a large black crow circling the unnamed narrator’s house in Haiti. Considered an omen, the crow’s presence symbolizes the terror the girl feels as she watches the gendarme effortlessly shoot and kill the bird. The violence she witnesses foreshadows the gendered violence she will experience soon thereafter; the physical removal from Haiti fails to protect her from sexual violation. In “Black Crows,” New York is an extension of Haiti; part of the political landscape in which the denial of sexual assault in the Haitian

community is an unspoken rule. The young girl quickly learns this lesson when a misplaced hand on her ten year-old body changes the dynamics of the paternal relationship between her and her mother's boyfriend. It is then, she states, that her spirit dies; that she transforms into a zombie, devoid of feelings and emotions in order to exist. Memories of the callous gendarme and the ominous crow haunt her, and the blood that spills from the crow's body symbolizes the blood that soils her underwear. Yet, she is not alone and with a knowing glance, she recognizes other "zombie" girls.

The young girls know each other's shame; yet, they also understand that they must never speak of it. The narrator describes how their mothers are equally complicit in silencing sexual assault through the washing away of evidence. To speak of it is to destroy the fallacy that allows the mothers to see their men strictly as providers and protectors. The young girl laments, "Maybe one day...there would be stories also told about me, the girl who was attacked by the bogeyman in her own mother's bedroom in broad daylight. There was no room for my own horrors in the midst of the political tales though. Mine was a story that could only be told through silences too horrific to disturb" (45). The pain that she, and other girls like her, endures cannot be articulated; their stories are forever lost in political discourse. Thus, the bogeyman that stalks the young girl in her dreams is simultaneously a living being, visible only to those forced to suffer in silence. The female characters in Sanon's, Chancy's, and Danticat's stories are all witnesses to and survivors of the political juncture in Haiti; and the resulting backlash for women and girls in the fight for democracy. The denial of the objectification of black female bodies, then, compels Haitian women writers to begin a new dialogue.

Vodou and Female Identity

In Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, women's lived experiences are examined within the context of African spirituality. For the Haitian peasantry in her novel, Vodou is life-sustaining. It is a syncretized African religion through which the complexities of life are revealed, and in which the spiritual connection to Bondye (the Supreme Being, the creator of the universe) is maintained through communication with the lesser gods (lwas). Danticat calls upon the spirits; specifically, *La Marassa* (the divine twins), *Erzulie* (the beloved goddess), *Papa Legba* (the sun god), and the lesser known *Grande Brigitte* (the female god of the dead), not only to celebrate Vodou culture, but to rewrite Haitian women's narratives in which female agency, individuality, and spirituality are central.

The relationship between mother and daughter in Danticat's novel is represented through La Marassa (or Marasa). Derived from the Kikongo word *mabassa*, meaning "those who come divided" (Houlberg 269), La Marassa is the concept of two halves coming together as a whole; the connection between the physical (mortals) and the metaphysical (spirits). In Dahomean creation stories, La Marassa are the first children to be born into the world, and are part of the life force (*Les Morts, Les Mysteres, La Marassa*) that sustains mankind. In turn, the divine twins are child spirits that rely on their devotees for nurturing and nourishment; therefore, great feasts are prepared in their honor. Like Christ, La Marassa has one human parent and one mystical parent. Their innocence symbolizes birth, renewal and the life cycle of mankind; thus, they are highly esteemed. However, they cause great mischief if they are not properly recognized with a special ceremony and their favorite foods (Bellegarde-Smith 193). If one twin dies, the

other carries a doll believed to possess the deceased twin's spirit; and the living twin sets aside some of his food for the other (Herskovits 206).

In Danticat's novel, the separation from one's other half explains Sophie's bulimia. She develops an eating disorder shortly after she marries and is best understood, Chancy suggests, "as having been caused by her separation from the unknown twin..." (124). Chancy makes the connection between Sophie's eating disorder and her loneliness as a child (the surviving twin) and the separation from her family in Haiti (making Sophie the deceased twin). It can also be linked to her strained relationship with Martine and the sexual shame Martine passes down to her. Sophie copes with her mother's neurosis, and the emotional impact of being tested, by purging. By consuming, and then voiding her body of the food she has ingested, Sophie tries to rid herself of hers and her mother's traumatic memories. In the same vein, part of Martine's fixation with Sophie's virginity is the belief that, as Sophie's *Marassa*, her own purity can be restored. As she tests her, Martine tells Sophie a folktale about La *Marassa* that is meant to distract her and at the same time, bind Sophie's soul to hers. Instead, Martine only manages to trigger Sophie's anxiety:

"The *Marassas* were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same. When they laughed, they even laughed the same and when they cried, their tears were identical. When one went to the stream, the other rushed under the water to get a better look. When one looked in the mirror, the other walked behind the glass to mimic her. What vain lovers they were, those *Marassas*. Admiring one another for being so much alike, for being copies. When you love someone, you want him to be closer to you than your *Marassa*. Closer than your shadow. You want him to be your soul" (85).

Suddenly, the imagery turns dark and the mirror image becomes that of a man staring back at Sophie. The face that inspires terror in Sophie doubles as Joseph's and the masked *Macoute*'s (Sophie's father and Martine's rapist). In her attempt to succeed

where her own mother had failed in maintaining her daughters' purity, Martine causes a deeper rupture in her relationship with Sophie. Chancy argues that "the image of her mother as her *marassa* only serves to terrorize Sophie and alienate her from her identity, which becomes both sexualized and demonized in its association (by the mother) with *vodou*" (124). Sophie's admission that "whenever Joseph and I were together, I doubled" (156), mirrors the necessity to "double" when she is being tested by her mother.

Breaking her own hymen stops the testing; however, it causes both emotional and physical pain. This is evidenced in Sophie's inability to enjoy sex or to build a healthy relationship with her husband. For Sophie, the intimacy between man and wife is disrupted by haunting memories of Martine's stories about La Marassa and her nightly terrors: "I would visit her every night in my doubling and, from my place as a shadow on the wall, I would look after her and wake her up as soon as the nightmares started, just like I did when I was home" (200). Martine's nightmares and sexual phobia become Sophie's burdens, and she flees to Haiti in order to come to terms with the shame that has crippled the women in her family. Estranged since Sophie's "deflowering," Martine attempts to reconcile with her daughter when she follows after her, returning to Haiti for the first time since she was raped. Danticat makes it clear that their reconciliation is not about resolution; it is an earnest attempt on both Sophie's and Martine's part to confront their issues with the past and each other. Sophie's trip to Haiti allows her to see Martine in a different light and she becomes her mother's Marassa; twins in spirit.

Thus, the evocation of Erzulie in Danticat's novel involves the healing of the fragmented self, and underscores the lwa's significance as a symbol of Haitian women's liberation. In "Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*: Historicizing the Colonial

Woman,” Beauty Bragg contends that “the use of the Erzulie figure exemplifies the characteristic approach of *marasa* (author’s emphasis) consciousness and encodes the construction of Haitian female subjectivity as it emerges from the colonial past” (176). As the goddess of love, Erzulie (or Ezili) is the epitome of womanhood; a conflation of the Virgin Mary, a seductress, and a female warrior. According to Leslie Desmangles, “Ezili represents the cosmic womb in which divinity and humanity are conceived. She is the symbol of fecundity, the mother of the world who participates with the masculine forces in the creation and maintenance of the universe” (131). As a mother figure, Erzulie is associated with the Virgin Mary, and in the images that represent the lwa, she is often holding a child; thus, she is a symbol of the creation of mankind.¹⁰⁸ Yet, unlike the innocent, submissive archetype found in Western religious representations of motherhood, Erzulie is assertive and confident about her sexuality and femininity.

Described as a great beauty with vast wealth and refined taste, Erzulie is often depicted as an upper-class mulatto woman. She wears expensive jewelry, fancy clothes, and heavily scented perfumes. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston describes her as “the perfect female [who] must be loved and obeyed” (121). Towards women, Hurston asserts, Erzulie is vindictive as she considers them her rivals. She continues: “To women and their desires, [Erzulie] is all but maliciously cruel, for not only does she choose and set aside for herself young and handsome men and thus bar them from marriage, she

¹⁰⁸ Although Eve is more fitting as the mother of mankind, she is a “fallen” woman. The Virgin Mary symbolizes purity and thus, corresponds with Western religious ideals of womanhood. The introduction of Christianity to non-Christian cultures included an emphasis on chastity; hence, the distribution of images of the virginal mother. In turn, the syncretism of Vodou and Catholicism gave Erzulie a face through the Virgin Mary; hence, the use of her image isn’t a claim that Erzulie embodies similar characteristics.

frequently chooses married men and thrusts herself between the woman and her happiness” (122). Although she has countless lovers, Erzulie is said to be very jealous. She demands her suitors’ undivided attention in addition to lavish gifts and elaborate meals. When her needs are unmet, she is inconsolable and exacts her revenge upon the offending party. Thus, her duality is reflected in her personas: Erzulie Freda (maternal, nurturing) and Erzulie Danto (vengeful, possessive).

Among the ornaments that adorn Atie’s and Grandma Ifé’s home, Erzulie (in the form of Virgin Mary statues) is the most sacred. Even as a young girl, Sophie recognizes Erzulie’s power and she imagines that her mother embodies the same attributes that make the deity “the healer of all women and the desire of all men” (59). Like the women in her family, Sophie calls upon Erzulie in times of difficulty, and it is through the lwa that Sophie comes to terms with her sexual phobia. Whereas in their daily existence the women in her family are marginalized, through Erzulie, they are empowered. Perhaps it is no accident, then, that Danticat’s refashioning of Erzulie as a spiritual guide challenges Hurston’s claim that the female lwa is indifferent to women.

Undoubtedly, there are moments in *Tell My Horse* in which Hurston presents generalizations about Vodou and Haitian culture as facts. However, her chapter on gender oppression in Jamaica and Haiti corresponds with Danticat’s examination of socio-political conditions that categorize Haitian women as second-class citizens. Further, it reveals the contradiction between the important roles Haitian women play as spiritual leaders and the bleakness of their everyday lives. Hurston foregrounds her study on the

practice of Vodou and female spirituality in Haiti; particularly, the role of the mambo,¹⁰⁹ with an overview of life for Caribbean women in patriarchal societies.

In “Women in the Caribbean,” Hurston discusses how classism, sexism, and intra-racism influence the treatment of Jamaican and Haitian women. She argues that male chauvinism (and implicitly, colonialism) determines Caribbean women’s place in society, making life for impoverished black women difficult. “It is assumed,” Hurston states, “that God made poor black females for beasts of burden, and nobody is going to interfere with providence” (58). Here, Hurston is referring to the arduous, underpaid labor impoverished women take on in order to survive. Similar to Hurston’s study of the lived realities of poor Caribbean women, Danticat’s depiction of the Caco family toiling in the cane fields shows how systematic oppression continues from one generation to the next.

As the “mules” of the world, Hurston argues that in the Caribbean, female degradation ensures that men’s “honor” and social standing remain intact. For instance, she tells a story about a young, beautiful Jamaican woman seduced by a mulatto man who, after copulation, reveals that he is marrying a woman of his own class and color. He tells the distraught woman that he lied to her because he had to have her before he settled down (60). In other examples, Hurston looks at how gender oppression informs laws that prohibit unmarried Haitian women from accusing a man of being their child’s father; and how a Haitian man is allowed to divorce his wife simply by stating that he wasn’t the first after they consummate the marriage. Hurston argues that “it is barely possible that some girls, not really wanted as wives, but unattainable otherwise, have been traduced out of

¹⁰⁹ Mambos (Vodou priestesses) are spiritual leaders that preside over Vodou ceremony and counsel devotees.

their good names and their husband's homes at the same time after satiation" (61-2). Because the wife cannot prove her virginity, she is abandoned and ostracized.

The scenarios Hurston describes in *Tell My Horse* materialize in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* through Atie's character. Abandoned by her lover for a more suitable woman, Atie's dreams of becoming a wife and mother are never realized. Martine reveals to Sophie that when another woman came along, Atie's lover no longer wanted her (43). Unlike Atie, whose status as a peasant makes her no more than a concubine to the man she loves, the other woman's middle-class background makes her marriageable. Even after Atie's lover marries the "other" woman, Atie continues to allow him to objectify her.

Stolen, intimate moments together only deepen the pain as the proximity in which Atie and her lover live (across the road from each other) is a constant reminder of what she'll never have with him. Danticat parallels Atie's failed union with her lover to Martine's relationship with Marc, a middle-class Haitian expatriate. Martine remarks, "In Haiti, it would not be possible for someone like Marc to love someone like me" (59), reiterating that class trumps love. Both Martine and Atie fail to live up to idealized notions of womanhood and motherhood in Haiti; in actuality, it is the state that has failed women as the ongoing political strife in Haiti makes it impossible to achieve the country's goal of a nationalist society. As Alexander argues, migration legitimizes Martine's relationship with Marc although (by choice) she remains unmarried (382).

Through Erzulie, both sisters attempt to define their self-worth; yet, unlike the idealized female, they are unable to overcome the Madonna/whore dichotomy that shapes gender relations in Haiti. It is only when Atie returns home to La Nouvelle Dame Marie

(loosely translated as “the new lady, Mary”), after Sophie is sent to New York, that she is liberated from chauvinist standards of womanhood. As the storyteller in the family who imparts knowledge through mythical tales, Atie reclaims her voice when later, she learns how to read and write. “Atie regains control over who she is,” Maha Marouan contends, “by breaking the silence and deciding to write about her experiences” (48). Atie’s notebook is a record of her life and the lives of women like her. Emotionally stunted by her own personal traumas, Atie’s writings are testimonials that free her from both social and gender constraints. Later, she tells Sophie: “I always felt, I did, that I knew words in my head...Now once every so often, I put some nice words down. Louise, she calls them poems” (103). Atie registers her family’s name in the national archives as well, a step towards amending Haiti’s historical narratives and restoring women’s voices.

As a symbol of female empowerment, Erzulie recalls for the Caco women a forgotten spiritual past severed by slavery and oppression. The prevalence of the female lwa in the novel is an attempt to recover an African-centered, female identity through the mythical return to Guinea, the ancestral homeland. In “Restless Spirits: Syncretic Religion in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” Yolanda Pierce connects the Caco women’s recovery of their ancestral past with the names they are given. Sophie’s return to Haiti prompts a visit to the cemetery where Atie tells her to “walk straight...you are in the presence of family” (149). Atie calls out the names of the women who once bore the names they now bear; the grave markers serve as a record of the Caco family’s lineage. Pierce traces Ifé’s name to an “ancient Yoruba city in what is now southwestern Nigeria, according to Yoruba myth” (70). She continues: “Ifé is the site of the creation of the world, where the founding deities created humans from clay and the god Olorun

breathed life into their bodies. Ifé is the site of origins; it is literally an African Genesis” (70). As the matriarch of the Caco women’s matrilineal line, Sophie’s grandmother, Ifé, represents the creation of wo(man) and the continuity of life through childbirth.

In “In the Spirit of Erzulie,” Marouan traces Atie’s name to the Vodou lwa Ati-Bon Legba (Papa Legba). As the guardian of the crossroads, Papa Legba is the gatekeeper that serves as the intermediary between the living and the dead. In order for the devotee to pass from the physical to the spiritual world, proper supplications must be made. Nicknamed the “sun god” because he is said to draw his creative power from the sun, the life force in which all living things exist (Desmangles 108), Papa Legba is the most important among the Vodou deities. Although associated with St. Peter¹¹⁰ and referred to in the masculine, Papa Legba is said to be androgynous; hence, sexually complete (Desmangles 108).

Atie’s similarities to Papa Legba are evidenced in her role as mediator, and through her relationships with both male and female lovers. In Martine’s absence during Sophie’s childhood, Atie is the surrogate who nurtures Sophie and prepares her to be reunited with her mother. Like Papa Gede who, in his many roles, is the protector of children, Atie watches over Sophie, ensuring her safety and well-being. When Sophie returns to Haiti as an adult, it is Atie who is waiting for her at the crossroads: “Tante Atie was standing at the crossroads, with a very wide grin on her pudgy face...She walked with her hands supporting her back, as if it hurt her” (100). Danticat’s description of an

¹¹⁰ According to scripture, St. Peter is the keeper of the keys to the gates of heaven: “Now I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19).

older Atie is similar to descriptions of Papa Legba as an old man who uses a cane for support. Yet, like Papa Legba, Atie is stronger than she appears.

She takes control of her sexuality by rediscovering love and intimacy with a woman. Although it isn't explicitly stated, there are subtleties that suggest an intimate bond between Atie and Louise. Further, Atie's relationship with Louise gives credence to Hurston's claim that women do not give Erzulie food (offerings) "unless they tend toward the hermaphrodite or are elderly women who are widows or have already abandoned the hope of mating" (122). Whereas Atie's relationship with a man is based on reproducing children in the reproduction of predetermined gender roles, her relationship with Louise defies gender constraints. Like Erzulie, who Bragg notes, "'marries' both women and men," Atie, reinscribed as the androgynous Papa Legba, refuses "restrictive gender roles, and in this way is an apt figure for a novel whose concern is disrupting the social roles that restrict the development of female subjectivity" (176).

Ifé's annoyance with Louise's constant presence also indicates that hers and Atie's relationship goes beyond friendship, as well as Atie's heartache upon learning that Louise is saving money to buy her passage on a boat headed to the U.S. Before Louise's departure, Atie states, "I will miss her like my own skin" (145), evoking images of La Marassa. When she discovers that Louise has left without saying goodbye, Atie's reaction is that of a betrayed lover. In Sophie's comparison of Louise's sudden departure to the regular occurrence in which friends and family in Haiti disappear, is the implication that Atie has been deserted by another lover: "In our family, we had come to expect that people can disappear from thin air. All traces lost except in the vivid eyes of one's

memory. Still, Tante Atie had never thought that Louise would leave her so quickly...” (170). Ifé worries that Atie won’t recover from Louise’s disloyalty; however, Martine’s remark that “Atie will live. She always has” (205) is a reminder of Atie’s inner strength.

Brigitte, the name that Sophie gives to her infant daughter, connotes death and spiritual transcendence. In Haitian lore, Grande Brigitte¹¹¹ is a minor lwa and the wife of Papa Gede, another manifestation of the Vodou lwa of death.¹¹² Papa Gede is described as a trickster spirit whose vulgarity and playfulness do not supersede his wisdom or his omniscient power over Man’s destiny (Desmangles 116). Like her husband, Grande Brigitte is a guardian of the cemeteries; yet, her role is less important. Food offerings to the female lwa include rum that she likes to consume with hot peppers, potatoes, plantains, herring and cod (Noonan 123).

In *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Karen McCarthy Brown argues that Brigitte is inferior to her husband; an old woman who, unlike Gede, lacks prominence and sexuality. Yet, she also notes that “Haitians pay special attention to the grave of the first female buried in every cemetery, calling it the Brijit grave” (380). Brown doesn’t explain why this is significant; however, as the female counterpart to Papa Gede and as “the guardian of the past” (Desmangles 116), Grande Brigitte is another pathway to the ancestral dead. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s great-grandmother

¹¹¹ Also known as Gran Brijit, Maman Brigitte and Gran Boujitte. Although she is a lesser known lwa, Grande Brigitte is associated with St. Brigit of Ireland, a fifth-century nun who performed various miracles, including hanging her cloak on a sunbeam and tending to a perpetual flame at the convent (Noonan 123-29). Commonly depicted as an old woman, Grande Brigitte is also said to be a young prostitute with uninhibited sexual proclivities.

¹¹² See my earlier discussion about Baron Samedi.

bears the name Brigitte, and she is the first buried among other relatives that have passed on. Thus, Danticat uses the lwa, Grande Brigitte, to challenge patriarchy in Vodou, reclaiming it as a female space.

In a scene that foreshadows Martine's death, the meaning behind Brigitte's name becomes clearer. Even the food Martine serves, fish and plantains with pickled peppers, is Danticat's deference to the female lwa. During a visit with Sophie, her husband, Joseph, and Marc, Martine rocks Brigitte in her arms as she sings a Negro spiritual, a remnant from the slave era that she learns at her Harlem church. Martine reconciles her feelings for Joseph, a musician from New Orleans, through their shared knowledge of gospel songs and through her feelings of connectedness to the American South. She states that she "could have been Southern African American" (214), her attempt to find commonality between her journey and those before her who were taken from their homeland and forced to adapt to a new language, new customs, and a different way of life. In her statement, Martine acknowledges the African blood that flows throughout the diaspora, and the history between Haiti and Louisiana.

In her rendition of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," Martine expresses what is best described as separation anxiety from her homeland of Haiti, and her ancestral home of Guinea, as a result of violence and trauma. Like Sophie, Martine is at once the surviving twin and the deceased twin; her identity is never fully reconciled. The solemnity of the song and Martine's request to have it sung at her funeral speaks to her inability to find solace at home or abroad. Her forced exile leaves an emotional void and death is the only way she can have peace. When her neurosis is worsened by a second, unplanned pregnancy, triggering more vivid and more frequent memories of her

rape, Martine is determined to do what she was unable to do after Sophie was conceived: end the pregnancy, the nightmares and her own life.

As the female guardian over the dead, Brigitte signifies Martine's transition from the physical to the metaphysical world. This is evidenced in Sophie's daughter's sleeping patterns. Once a sound sleeper, Brigitte inherits her mother's and her grandmother's insomnia when Sophie leaves her behind and returns to Haiti to bury Martine. Brigitte, the granddaughter, becomes an observer, watching over the women who came before her. Sophie's choice of name is not only in memory of the great-grandmother she never knew, it is also in memory of Martine, the mother she never fully understood. The reconfiguration of a minor (female) god as an important spiritual entity serves as a metaphor for the peace and protection Martine will finally have in the afterlife.

Healing Narratives

While Martine's suicide can be interpreted as resignation, I agree with Donette A. Francis's argument that it is her one and final act of resistance. She states: "This act demonstrates an instance of 'embodied protest' wherein resistance pathologically manifests itself on the body. For Martine, her body is the only site over which she can exercise power...death is the only way of liberating herself from the living torture that she has experienced since the rape" (86). Through her pregnancy, Martine's rapist is reincarnated and in order to destroy him, she has to terminate him. She tells Sophie that she can hear the baby's voice, and she identifies it as a boy who calls her "a filthy whore" (217). Tortured by what she believes to be the baby taunting her, Martine performs her own version of a ritual killing. She spreads several bed sheets over the bathroom floor and repeatedly stabs herself in the stomach. As Martine is rushed to the hospital, she

stresses that she could not carry the baby; that it made the rape that took place twenty-five years before, real again. Death puts an end to her nightmares, it is her escape from sexual victimization.

In turn, having internalized her mother's traumatic memories, Sophie seeks to reclaim hers and her mother's sexual autonomy. She views sex with her husband as rape, stepping outside of her body whenever Joseph initiates sex. Like Martine, she struggles to separate the sex act from violence. Reinscribed as Erzulie and the surviving Marassa twin, Sophie chooses a crimson red suit for Martine to be buried in, giving her the appearance of a "Jezebel, a hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them*, and killed *them*" (227). In her choice of the color red, Erzulie's color, Sophie subverts systematic gender oppression and the entrapment of victimhood. As she prepares to say her final farewell, Sophie remembers a story about the woman who couldn't stop bleeding and who sought Erzulie's help.

The folktale she heard growing up about the woman who turns into a butterfly becomes Martine's story. After bleeding for twelve years with no relief, the woman consults Erzulie on what to do. Erzulie advises the woman that in order to stop the bleeding, she will have to give up her life as a human being. The woman divides up her worldly goods among friends and family, and shortly thereafter, she returns to Erzulie to be transformed. When Erzulie asks her what she wants to become, the woman asks to be turned into a butterfly so that she can truly be free (87-8). Death is not an end, but part of Martine's transition. Through the story, Sophie finds comfort in knowing that her mother is finally free of her burdens.

In Danticat's works, Haiti is transformed from a dark, brooding place stunted by masculinist discourse and violence to a site of hope, progress, and redemption. The un-silencing of women's voices in her writing creates a dialogue that offers Haitian women redress and the power to effect change. As the *poto mitan*, the pillars of society, the women in Danticat's novel reflect Haitian women's recognition of their power. Even in the face of danger, they are compelled to share their stories for the betterment of future generations. In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat explains her motivation for telling Haitian women's stories: "To create dangerously is also to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts" (148).

The fearlessness of Danticat's characters is rooted, not in a superficial ability to overcome obstacles, but in their resiliency in the face of difficulty. For example, in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," a story in *Krik? Krak!*, a young woman whose mother is imprisoned and accused of being a witch after a child dies in her care, reconnects with a community of women who, like her mother, survived other atrocities. The story opens with the Madonna statue the daughter possesses shedding a tear, a sign, Josephine¹¹³ believes, that her mother has passed away. Although Josephine visits Maman at the women's prison regularly, she is unable to speak to her.

She describes herself as mute, struggling to formulate the words that will allow her to ask her mother if, in fact, she is a witch, if she really knows how to fly. As

¹¹³ Her name is revealed in another story in Danticat's short fiction collection, *Krik? Krak!* All of the women in the individual stories are connected to each other through the matrilineal line.

Josephine recalls the day her mother was beaten by a group of angry neighbors before being thrown into prison, she reflects on how most of the women that populate the jail have been similarly persecuted simply because they are poor and female. Her mother, now haggard, frail and bald, seeks solace in the Madonna figurine that Josephine brings along on each visit. Given to her great-great-great grandmother, Défilé, by her slave master, the Madonna represents the women's familial line that precedes the Haitian Revolution and speaks to their spiritual faith.

Just as Danticat reinvents a woman named Défilé, a former slave who liberated herself after being raped by her master and who purportedly gave Jean Jacques Dessalines a proper burial after he was assassinated (Dubois 50), she demonstrates, through literature, how women's narratives provide a more accurate history. The official story that black and mulatto men fought for and won Haiti's independence silences the women who fought alongside them. Thus, the Madonna/Erzulie figure that "cries" in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" symbolizes the release from yet another silenced moment in Haiti's history. As Josephine prepares to make the obligatory trek to the prison, either to confirm her mother's death or to force her mother to endure another one of her silent visits, she shares her family history. Her frequent trips to Port-au-Prince are reminiscent of her journeys with her mother to the Massacre River at the Haiti-Dominican Republic border. Born on the night when Haitians living and working in the Spanish-speaking country, including her grandmother, were massacred in the spirit of ethnic cleansing, their pilgrimage to the river is so that they never forget. As a site of memory, the Massacre River is where Josephine, Maman, and other women that have lost their mothers, honor their ancestors for sacrificing their lives.

Both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” examine the mother-daughter relationship within the framework of a nationalist identity. Compounded by a guardedness meant to protect their children, the mothers alienate their daughters who are simultaneously alienated from their homeland. The folktales interwoven in Danticat’s narratives demonstrate how women’s autonomy is perceived as a threat to the nation. For instance, when Sophie heads toward the cane field, she overhears a song being sung by male laborers about a woman who removes her skin at night and flies. When she returns home, she finds that her husband has peppered her skin to teach her a lesson. She cannot put her skin back on and soon, she dies.

In “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” the protagonist’s mother is given a life sentence because the guards believe that the loose skin and wrinkles that hang from her protruding bones are a sign that she takes her skin off at night. The prison guards also shave the female prisoners’ heads and force them to douse each other with water every night to prevent them from building up enough body heat to fly. The imagery in both stories evokes the tale of the flying Africans who grew wings and returned to Africa.¹¹⁴ Yet, Danticat’s retelling is an inversion of the myth. Instead of escaping subjugation, the women’s power is subverted by their fellow countrymen. In “(Dis)Locations of

¹¹⁴ The tale about the “People Who Could Fly” begins with a history lesson on how African people were enslaved. We learn about the capture of men, women and children, and the long voyage from Africa’s shores to the American South. The ones that survive are brought to a plantation in South Carolina, among them, the son of a witch doctor. One day, as the slaves toil in the fields under the hot sun, a young, pregnant woman faints. The white overseer jolts her awake by cracking his whip against her back. When she faints again, she receives several more lashes. The young man inches toward her, getting close enough to whisper in her ear. The secret word is passed along to the others in the field so that when another person faints, the young man shouts, “Now!,” followed by a strange word. One by one, the people begin to take off into the air, flapping their arms like wings as they head back home (Lester 147-52).

Oppression: Redemptive Forces in Edwidge Danticat's "Krik? Krak!," Susana Vega-González argues that "the connection this condemned woman maintains with the spiritual world and with the past transforms her into a potential threat and an outsider who, like many other women, must be marginalized and, even, eliminated" (48).

While Josephine's journey to the Massacre River prompts her to remember, Sophie's return to Haiti to bury her mother is about closure. After Martine's burial, Sophie runs off into the cane fields, seeking answers and hoping to purge the ghosts of the past. Remembering her therapist's words that she must confront the past in order to move forward, Sophie stands in the middle of the field, beating back the cane stalks; the stalks, a stand-in for the man who stalked her mother's psyche until her death. In this moment, the yanking of the cane stalk from its roots is an unearthing of historical and political trauma. Sophie's anger towards her mother and grandmother for upholding the same patriarchal standards that oppressed them is released, allowing the real healing to begin.

When Josephine learns of her mother's death, she resumes the pilgrimages to the Massacre River, joining other daughters in the solemn ritual of remembrance. On the day of her mother's death, Josephine receives an unexpected visitor. Jacqueline, the woman who will guide her through the process of healing, identifies herself as a daughter of the river. When Josephine asks who she is and the purpose of her visit, Jacqueline replies: "I am a child of that place...I come from that long trail of blood" (44). The coded language is a gendered language that bespeaks their historical legacy. It is a language that only those women that know the history can articulate. Their final visit to the prison reminds Josephine that her mother did, in fact, know how to fly: "On that day so long ago, in the

year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin...as though it were in flames” (49).

Similarly, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s journey is about unraveling the past, reconciling a fragmented identity through African spirituality, and rebuilding her community. Group therapy helps her to understand how testing impacted her intimacy, giving her the courage to confront her mother and grandmother about the degrading process. Sophie addresses her shame so that it isn’t passed down to her own daughter. When she presents the Erzulie statue her grandmother gave her to the group, she reclaims her power and her voice. Joined by other women with sexual phobias, she also learns that sexual abuse and trauma is a global phenomenon. Their stories of incestuous rape, generational sexual trauma, and female circumcision documents women’s struggles around the world.

The group itself represents the African continent, Latin America, and the island of Hispaniola, on which Haiti and the Dominican Republic are located. Rena, the female therapist, is a black woman and Santeria priestess. The convergence of Santeria, Vodou, and Candomble religions acknowledges the diverse belief systems that can be traced back to Africa, and their symbiosis and survival across the African diaspora. Further, Sophie’s mention of Rena’s volunteer work in the Dominican Republic suggests the need for redress of cultural misunderstandings between two countries politically divided by a legacy of occupation, genocide and xenophobia. Thus, Danticat historicizes women’s experiences within the context of a globalized sexual economy.

While Danticat stops short of suggesting that, by the end of the novel, Sophie's issues have been resolved, she does show that healing from traumatic experiences is possible. After Sophie vents her anger in the middle of the cane field, Grandma Ifé asks: *Ou libéré?* Atie responds for Sophie in the affirmative, *Ou libéré!* The repetition of the Kreyol phrase, posed as both a question (are you free?) and a response (I am free), examines what freedom means for Haitian women. Whether it is a short reprieve from a long day's work or from the fight for gender equality, *Ou libéré* connotes the ways in which Haitian women understand what it means to truly be liberated.

At the end of the novel, Danticat inserts her own voice in a letter she writes to Sophie to stress that she is not simply a mediator. As a storyteller, she speaks to her own experiences as well as the experiences of other Haitian women. In the Afterword, Danticat calls upon her own ancestors for knowledge and understanding. She chooses to write from atop her great-grandmother's tomb, seeking spiritual guidance from the women that have come before her. She tells Sophie: "I guess I have always felt, writing about you, that I was in the presence of family, a family full of kindness as well as harshness, a family full of love as well as grief, a family deeply rooted in the past, yet struggling to confront an unpredictable future" (235). In creating Sophie, Danticat returns to her twelve year-old self, negotiating her identity as a Haitian and through immigration, an American. She writes through the fear and uncertainty of a strange, unwelcoming new place; and she writes back to the homeland in which her sense of self is deeply embedded.

Danticat's letter is also an apology. She acknowledges that she has unwittingly burdened Sophie with a huge task—to represent all the women and girls from Haiti who

have similar stories. She states: “I have always taken for granted that this story which is yours, and only yours, would always be read as such. But some of the voices that come back to me, to you...respond with a different kind of understanding than I had hoped” (236). Although Danticat’s depiction of Sophie’s life and the women that surround her is meant to be Sophie’s own personal, albeit fictional, narrative, she acknowledges that Sophie’s story is greater than the pages of a novel can contain. By telling her story, Danticat tells the stories of countless Haitian women. Not all of them are tragic, but in Sophie’s narrative, they recognize a piece of their own history.

In the epilogue of *Krik? Krak!*, titled “Women Like Us, Danticat refers to Haitian women as “kitchen poets” (219). These are women that impart knowledge while standing over a hot stove, women who tell folktales while cleaning the house or braiding their daughters’ hair, and more importantly, women who keep the oral tradition alive without even trying. In the same vein, there are other kitchen poets who choose the written form to express themselves. These are women who write despite their families’ objections; who write despite their words being perceived as dangerous; who write despite the risk of getting raped or killed, imprisoned or exiled. The young girl in the epilogue represents Danticat and all the other Haitian women writers like her. They write with the knowledge that their writing is an avenue for women that have no other way to tell their stories. She is one of many that despite the obvious risks, writes anyway.

CHAPTER V
EPILOGUE: *HAITI NOIR*: THE LITERARY IMAGINATION OF HAITIAN WRITERS
IN TIMES OF DISASTER

Haiti Noir, an anthology of short stories edited by Edwidge Danticat, opens with Patrick Sylvain's chilling short story "Odette." Within a matter of seconds, distinct noises penetrate the pristine white kitchen in which Odette and her granddaughter are preparing for an outing: "The hum quickly gave in to the sound of a hundred tumbling oil drums. Then a morbid absence of sound" (19). Through lapses of consciousness, Odette tries to make sense of the shattered glass, spilled grapefruit marmalade and blood coating her granddaughter's face. Odette and five-year old Rose lock eyes sandwiched between a cement beam and the shifting ground. Amidst the chaos, Odette is unable to distinguish between the intermittent silence, the earth's droning and crashing, and her granddaughter's screams. When she attempts to verbalize her disconnected thoughts, to tell the child that she loves her, Odette's dust-coated throat cannot formulate the words. Seeing her grandmother's anguish, the terror in Rose's tear-filled eyes changes to compassion. As her final act, Rose drags her torn body over to Odette, gently caressing her grandmother's face with her tiny hand.

The ominous rumblings that coincide with the collapse of concrete walls, suffocating clouds of dust and chaos in Sylvain's story echo warnings by seismologists that a catastrophic earthquake would ravage Haiti. On January 12, 2010, at 4:53 p.m., a 7.0 magnitude earthquake ripped through Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince, leaving hundreds of thousands dead, hundreds of thousands more injured and over a million people homeless. The disaster was inevitable; a large fault line runs through Port-au-Prince and had recently shown signs of activity after 200 years of dormancy. In an article published a week before the earthquake, Robert Yeats, professor emeritus at Oregon State

University predicted, “If they have an earthquake on this fault that runs through Port-au-Prince, the death toll would be tremendous” (Harmon n.p.).

Time Magazine published an article a day after the earthquake in which Roger Musson, a seismologist with the British Geological Survey, explained why the 2010 earthquake had such a great impact: “This was what we call a strike-slip, or transform earthquake, where one side of the fault slides horizontally past the other one...strike-slip faults often run through populated areas, so they can be the most damaging to humans” (Harrell n.p.). In another interview with *Time* prior to the earthquake, Musson was asked if there were other reasons besides geological factors for seismologists to be concerned about the magnitude of the imminent natural disaster; specifically, the vulnerability of Haiti’s population. He responded solemnly that “seismologists are human” (Harrell n.p.). Upon seeing the data, his heart sank for he knew that this earthquake would be one of the most catastrophic ecological episodes in almost four hundred years. From a scientific standpoint, the earthquake was two centuries in the making. From a human standpoint, the earthquake in Haiti was confirmation that untold casualties and destruction were inevitable despite prior knowledge.

However, other factors contributed to the staggering number of casualties and inconceivable destruction. The standard response that Haiti’s issues are due largely to its status as “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere” (Woodson 271) is a diversion from the West’s role in the country’s current environmental condition. As Carol Boyce Davies argues, “the fault lines that run through Haiti are economic, social, political, geographic...all contributing to the major environmental fault line that produced one of the world’s worst earthquakes” (Davies 92). Years of political and military interference

by the U.S., UN and other Western powers, corruption, dictatorships, cover-ups, state-executed murders, exploitation, and preventable deaths and diseases due to abject poverty have crippled Haiti, causing what some believe to be irreparable damage. Further, a combination of poorly-constructed buildings, ineffective evacuation plans and an already weakened infrastructure due to ongoing environmental issues intensified the impact of the disaster. The stories in *Haiti Noir* reveal the effects that land exploitation has on local populations and helps us understand the difficulty in rebuilding devastated regions. The fictional retelling of the 2010 disaster, and the events leading up to it, gives a voice to those silenced by colonialism, racial oppression and unmitigated violence.

For the survivors of the earthquake, the stories in *Haiti Noir* capture the resiliency and determination that define the citizens of Haiti. While only three of the short stories focus specifically on the earthquake, the bulk of the stories challenge the victimization label placed on Haiti and expose centuries of exploitation, political corruption and mounting debt that exacerbate existing issues. In the introduction to *Haiti Noir*, Danticat notes that most of the stories were selected prior to the earthquake and that her initial concern was whether or not they would still be relevant under the circumstances. Upon further reflection, she discovered that the stories do in fact resonate with the changes in “Haiti’s physical and psychological landscape” (15); in many ways the stories preserve images and memories of the towns irreparably damaged by the natural disaster.

While Sylvain’s story is a work of fiction, the personal impact of the 2010 earthquake that his story embodies forces developing nations with political and economic stakes in the country, to “witness,” and thus, be held accountable for the deaths and destruction. For the citizens of Haiti, the aftershocks of the disaster manifested both

physically and mentally. With nowhere to go and no means to get there, the citizens of Haiti were “sitting ducks.” The fictional character Odette symbolizes the multitudes of people uninformed about and unprepared for a major disaster, and the more than one million people left homeless and fearful about the immediate future.

Images of Haitians crowded into makeshift tent cities and military ships were counterposed with bodies crushed beneath concrete slabs and other collapsed structures. Other images showed bodies piled up at the local morgue or being bulldozed into mass graves, bodies stacked upon other bodies as if they were refuse instead of humans. The most frightening images to surface in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake were that of UN and U.S. soldiers armed with automatic weapons, prepared to use violence in order to establish control (they were no major incidents that required a heavy military presence), and to prevent desperate and wounded Haitians from attempting to sail to safety into U.S. waters.

As Sylvain and other writers in *Haiti Noir* demonstrate, the psychological damage would take longer to heal, if at all. After Odette is rescued from the rubble and taken to a makeshift shelter, she likens the city to Hiroshima after World War II: Bodies are strewn in the streets with little distinction between the living and the dead; missing or shattered limbs are the result of fragile bodies being crushed between buildings and the earth; and collapsed building and homes litter Port-au-Prince and outlying areas. As Odette’s mental state deteriorates, those around her remember her psychic gifts and in a strange twist, she is blamed for having knowledge about the earthquake. “Many could now recall her predicting some horrible event that had actually taken place,” the narrator states. “A car

accident, A coup d'état. A bad hurricane season. Why didn't that old witch see this one coming?" (24).

When she does have a premonition, it is to warn her once again that her life is in danger. The people's anger is misplaced as the government's culpability for failing to inform and evacuate its citizens is blamed on Odette. She is attacked with fists, slaps and sticks, and in that moment, she prays for an end to the emotional pain. Policemen standing nearby rush to her aid and whisk her away. As the truck in which she has been placed maneuvers through concrete, bodies and waste, Odette looks up at the sky, wondering what will happen to her and the other survivors. The calm in the sky contradicts the chaos in Haiti and it pains her to think about it. For Odette, even glimpses of sunshine fail to shield her from darkness.

In her essay, "The Writing of Disaster in Haiti: Signifying Cataclysm from Slave Revolution to Earthquake," Deborah Jenson examines the colonial discourse of the late eighteenth-, early nineteenth centuries that predicted, through writings, Haiti's demise. After Haiti won its independence, pamphlets, editorials, letters, etc., expressed the danger in allowing black citizens to govern themselves let alone govern an entire nation. In some of the writings, the existence of a free black state was likened to natural disasters of biblical proportions. Even free people of color that were former plantation owners fought against Haiti's independence, warning colonial powers that the citizens would self-destruct. Jenson notes that "slave insurrection as figurative earthshaking, seismological upheavals as literal earthshaking, are mixed and matched in the history of Haiti" (103). In other words, Haiti's turbulent political history served as a precursor to the cataclysmic

event in 2010. Just as Christianity was used to justify slavery, vengeance of biblical proportions was believed to be caused by the “insolence” of black people in Haiti.

Similar statements have been made through the media recently with Hurricane Katrina. Televangelist Pat Robertson claimed that the 2005 hurricane that devastated New Orleans was God’s wrath against a place of “sin.” Reverend Bill Shuler made a similar statement on Fox News about Haiti, stating that “each time there is mass devastation due to acts of nature in areas of the world there is discussion as to whether or not these are acts of God's judgment...What makes God mad enough to level an entire nation? Whoring and boobs and drinking and witchcraft, of course.” The ignorance and privilege with which these men speak unsurprisingly represents the attitudes many in first world countries hold about marginalized communities and people in developing countries.

As the world learned about the 2010 disaster in Haiti through major media outlets, it also waited for a response from the United States, France and the UN. The earthquake in Haiti forced the global community to reevaluate the country’s troubled relationship with the U.S. and France, and to come to terms with the political tensions that continued long after the end of slavery and colonialism in the early nineteenth century. It also recalled for many the U.S.’s occupation of the country in the early twentieth century, again in 1994 and recently with former President Bill Clinton’s arrival in Port-au-Prince after the 2010 earthquake. There to survey the damage and to advise the Haitian government about rebuilding, Clinton’s role as co-chair of Haiti’s international commission gave him political power equivalent to the country’s president (Dubois 9).

Disaster in the Making

In 1988, after refusal from other U.S. cities and foreign governments, a cargo vessel dumped 4,000 tons of incinerator ash and waste in Gonaive, Haiti. Initial reports indicated that the waste was actually fertilizer and would be used as topsoil in the port city. Later reports revealed that the waste transported from Philadelphia was a mix of toxins that posed a threat to human and animal populations, and the environment. Today, controversy still surrounds what is commonly referred to as the Khian Sea incident. In *Haiti Noir*, literary representations of the ecological implications of colonialism underscores the impact that both manmade and natural disasters have had on Haiti.

“The Blue Hill,” by Rodney Saint-Eloi, addresses the dumping of toxic waste in the fictional town of Ozanana and the apocalyptic crisis of which “everyone is afraid to say who is responsible for [the] open gash in the earth that poisons everything and will, eventually, eat up the legs of children and rot the roots of plants, cause the dogs, the flies and the fish to disappear” (301). The omniscient narrator describes the unnamed “friendly” country in search of a “generous” neighbor to help dispose of its barge-filled refuse. Set in January, the narrative foreshadows the 2010 earthquake and “blue disease,” another disaster in the making:

“One fine Monday, at exactly noon, the ship, sailing under the friendly neighbor’s flag, reached the harbor...instead of being filled with generous tourists, the wharf was under military watch. The ship was full of guards with the faces of unleashed and untrained dogs eager to stuff themselves with nigger meat. You could see battle dress, golden flashers, and a thousand boots of the Special Forces...They spoke sternly into walkie-talkies, surely of matters of state. The seaside was promptly evacuated, with a huge deployment of troop vehicles whose sirens and tinted windows scared the locals...The chemical trash-dumping troops went around every street, every neighborhood, showing off their machine guns at every window...It was just a matter of military strategy, letting people know that they had taken over the city. So every mouth stayed quiet. Local men were rounded up and forced to work day and night for a whole week to burrow everything into the blue hill (302-3).

The protagonist, Detective Simidor, symbolizes the impotence of local authority when Western powers take over national governance. Detective Simidor is stripped of his position with the Ozanana Police Department and literally silenced when the blue disease that causes pustules and lacerations infect his brain.

The toxins from the nearby dump site eat away Simidor's memory and his ability to speak; yet, he realizes that silence is the death of the people. Determined to solve this crime against humanity, through fragmented thoughts and a weakened physical state, Simidor pieces together how greed and corruption have ravaged Haiti's people and their landscape. The city is diminished to a blue hill and the community is paralyzed by fear and the realization that they have no power. As Simidor plans what he will say to his neighbors in his refusal to remain silent any longer, the blue disease takes over. He calls upon Agwe, the god of the sea, and Ogun, the god of war, to stop the invaders from causing further damage. However, the book of Revelations comes to mind and he knows that the end of the world is near. In a moment of clarity, he turns over and the clock reads 4:53 pm, the end for Simidor and the people of Ozanana.

The neglect and exploitation of marginalized people isn't unique to Haiti; however, it serves as an example of the difficulty in becoming economically and politically independent when a region is targeted by more powerful countries. By no means was the dumping of waste in 1988 one-sided. The Haitian government reaped financial rewards for allowing toxic landfill to contaminate the soil and water. The

detriment to citizens' health was of little consequence from the government's perspective. In a country with eighty percent of the population living below the poverty line, human welfare is not a priority. Even so, perseverance never dies and the community's response to the earthquake is proof of that.

In Ibi Aanu Zobo's twisted love story, "The Harem," Robby's desperate search for his three lovers shows how he and other survivors navigated Port-au-Prince in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Robby's juggling of three women becomes a mission to save their lives after he realizes that he loves them all. In a moment both sobering and surreal, Robby ponders whether he's in heaven or hell as white dust blankets the city and the sun beams from a bright sky. He notes that "people were screaming and there was still that horrible sound as if the world was crumbling" (145). After hours of searching, he finds one of his girlfriends in a pile of rubble. He recognizes Tanya by her "beautiful legs," but once he lifts concrete and wood off of her, she seems foreign to him: "Her flesh was sunken in places that, as well as he knew her body, he no longer recognized. Her face had been chipped apart by the debris...her features, her beautiful nose and mouth, all flattened into one, as though she had been kneaded by some gruesome baker's hands" (148). As other men search for survivors in the rubble, Robby gingerly lifts Tanya and carries her lifeless body to his home.

Robby goes back out, wondering if the cracked structure that is his home will hold up, and if he will find his other lovers. The rumble of earth temporarily stops him in

his tracks; yet, through Robby's journey, he shows how the community immediately sprung into action to save lives. While Robby's search is self-serving; he doesn't even attempt to look for his roommate and best friend, Toni, nor does he attempt to help others trapped, Zoboi's story demonstrates how survivors gave little thought to their own safety as they worked diligently to save their neighbors.

Minouche, another girlfriend, is severely injured and dies after Robby takes her to his home instead of a hospital. He eventually finds his third lover, alive and well, and brings her to his home where she "meets" the other two women—a place that none of the women had ever visited, but where Robby ensures that he and his three loves will be together forever as the building threatens to collapse. Through the use of dark humor, Zoboi provides a nuanced view of Haitian cultures and the complexities that shape daily life. Her story also reveals the ways in which Haitians came together in the midst of the earthquake to save lives. As first responders, citizens worked diligently to free those trapped under collapsed buildings and homes without stopping to ponder whether or not external aid would be offered.

Danticat learned this firsthand when she returned to Haiti to learn about the fate of her own family. In "Our Guernica," Danticat laments the loss of some of her family members including her favorite cousin, Maxo. As she surveys the damage, she notices cracked walls and broken windows. She also notices the "fields around the runway...packed with American military helicopters and planes" (162). She states: "Past

a card table manned by three Haitian immigration officers, a group of young American soldiers idle, cradling what seem like machine guns. Through an arrangement between the Haitian and the U.S. governments, the American military, as leader in the relief effort, has taken over Toussaint L'Ouverture Airport" (162). While welcomed in terms of recovery and rescue efforts, the presence of U.S. personnel is a reminder of North America's imperialist aims in Haiti.

Port-au-Prince's transformation into a city of the dead was surreal. Danticat could barely take a step forward without coming across a decaying corpse in the street. When she notices remains in the shape of two large balls, her friend explains that they are in fact body parts pulled from the rubble and "melded together" (165). Racked with grief, worry and despair, Danticat finds some relief upon learning that other family members are wounded but alive. As she notes in *Create Dangerously*, the immigrant artist is both a distant witness and interpreter of the land she has left behind. She states, "in the face of both external and internal destruction, [immigrant artists] are still trying to create as dangerously as [those before them], as though each piece of art were a stand-in for a life, a soul, a future" (20).

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