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Ina Johanna Fandrich. *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans.* New York and London: Routledge, 2005. xiv + 329 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-97250-5.

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

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Evaluating a New Orleans Icon: Evidence and Reinterpretation

One of the major tourist attractions in New Orleans is the tomb of Marie Laveau in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1. When Laveau, a free woman of color, died in 1881, her lengthy obituary was published not only in the New Orleans papers but in the *New York Times* as well. She was a controversial figure, surrounded by rumor and legend. Seen by some of her contemporaries as a sorcerer who used her “magic powers” for evil, or perhaps for personal gain, Laveau was believed by others to be a healer and priestess who worked for the good of her people, the Creoles of color.

The Laveau legend is now the subject of serious academic research by women’s studies scholars. Martha Ward, a professor of Anthropology, Urban Studies, and Women’s Studies at the University of New Orleans, and Ina Fandrich, an independent scholar with a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Temple University, both seek to debunk the traditional negative, racist, and Eurocentric views of Laveau and Voodoo.[1] Described by her critics as a prostitute, a snake-handler, a devil-worshiper, a cannibal, a witch, or a sorcerer, she was instead, both authors contend, the well-respected priestess of a legitimate, African-based, female-dominated religion.

Ward’s book is methodologically flawed, replete with errors, and at times misleading. Designed as a crossover book for a commercial audience, it lacks standard academic footnotes and leaves whole sections of text undocumented. Ward combines gossip with archival evidence and blends fact with fantasy. She describes her methodology in the introduction: “I have relied on dreams, intuition, a hyperactive imagination, and funky Voodoo luck. From time to time I have stood in front of the Laveau tomb in St. Louis Cemetery One and talked with her” (p. xiii). She later adds, “Spirits of many kinds appear in this

biography whenever they feel like it ... [because] New Orleans is a high-spirited place” (p. xvi).

Ward recombines source material in ways that are confusing. She quotes, for example, from a newspaper article about a “flaxen-haired white girl” dancing with a black man as though this had taken place at Congo Square, but this was actually a report from the mid-1870s of a St. John’s Eve celebration on Lake Pontchartrain (p. 8). Exactly which year Ward intends this quote to illustrate is impossible to determine, since her narrative does not differentiate between the 1810s and the 1870s. Ward intersperses quotes from different decades in ways that are misleading, especially to the casual reader, and especially given the poor quality of the citations.

Ward repeats rumors (“gumbo ya ya,” as they say in New Orleans) when it enlivens her narrative, and she encourages readers to see these stories as reliable sources of fact. (Fandrich also repeats rumors, although with a different theoretical basis—to understand the legend of Laveau.) For example, there is a legend that surrounds the disappearance of Marie Laveau’s only legitimate husband, Jacques Paris. Ward speculates that, “Maybe he was unfaithful and Marie sent him packing or he abused his young wife and she fixed him.... [The documents] hint that she disposed of a first husband to make room for the next one” (p. 38).

Another example of Ward’s legitimization of rumors occurs when she discusses Marie’s life-long partnership with a white man, Christophe Glapion, and argues that he “passed” for colored; that is, that he adopted a biracial identity, but one that took him from a higher caste to a lower one (a highly unlikely assertion, but one that Ina Fandrich also makes in her 1994 dissertation on Laveau). Ward correctly points out that Louisiana law prohibited

the lovers from marrying, but she then “fantasizes” that Marie and Christophe “arranged a secret midnight wedding in St. Louis Cathedral,” blessed by the kindly Pere Antoine (p. 47). In fact, it was not at all unusual for white men to live with their quadroon mistresses, as Glapion did, nor was it unusual for them to acknowledge their children as their own in official documents, as Glapion also did. He is buried beside Laveau, but his death certificate lists him as white.[2]

Voodoo Queen contains many such mistakes. Ward wrongly identifies George Legendre as the domestic partner of Philomene Glapion, Marie and Christophe’s younger daughter. In fact Philomene’s partner was Emile Alexandre Legendre, George’s brother. (Because Legendre was white, they never married.)[3] Ward’s book adds nothing new to the interpretation of Laveau that Fandrich had not already explored in her dissertation.

Although it has difficulties as well, Fandrich’s book is a solid academic work, grounded in postmodernist and feminist theory. An update of her Temple University dissertation and published as part of Routledge’s dissertation series, it lacks any copyediting or peer-review; as a result, typographical errors are rife. However, most of the factual mistakes that appeared in Fandrich’s dissertation have been corrected in the book. For example, since the dissertation appeared, Fandrich unearthed what appears to be Laveau’s baptismal certificate in the Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, which shows that Laveau was born in 1801 and not, as Fandrich and most others had presumed, in 1783.[4]

In addition to Martha Ward and Ina Fandrich, a third researcher, Carolyn Morrow Long, formerly of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, has also done extensive archival research on Laveau.[5] All three of the researchers use the Notarial Archives (unique to New Orleans) and newspaper articles as well as earlier (and highly unreliable) histories of Voodoo. Fandrich and Long have also searched the baptismal, marriage, and funeral records at the Archdiocesan Archives, as well as wills and court cases at the New Orleans Public Library.

The three researchers agree on certain facts: that Laveau’s father was a free man of color and was not white, as was rumored; that Laveau did not own the cottage where she lived until her death on St. Ann Street; that her only legitimate marriage was to a free quadroon, Jacques Paris; that her domestic partner for the rest of her life, Christophe Glapion, was white and not a free man of color; and that neither Laveau nor her common-law husband acquired any wealth to speak of. Many other facts

about her life are still in dispute, including the number of children she bore—her obituary says fifteen; Ward and Fandrich say five; Long says seven.[6]

It is easy for researchers to be confused about Marie Laveau. Not only was her name spelled in different ways, but “Marie Laveau” was also a common name in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Fandrich says there were at least ten women by that name who lived near the famous Marie, and two of them were related to her. Witnesses often confused these women with each other or with the many Voodoo “queens” (the term commonly used to refer to the female leaders in this religion) operating in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Given this, scrupulous attention to corroboration and scholarly methods are critical to unraveling the details of her life.

The interviews collected by the Louisiana Writers’ Project (LWP) in the 1930s provide valuable evidence for Laveau researchers, and each of these authors rely upon them. Many of the people interviewed, however, had not actually seen or known Marie Laveau themselves but were repeating stories about her, urban legends that were often embellished or that confused her with other Voodoo priestesses. Some of the interviews are quite reliable and are supported by corroborating evidence, but others are obviously fantastic.

Neither Ward nor Fandrich are historians, but both draw upon the work of historians Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Caryn Cossé Bell, Kimberly Hangar, and Virginia Meacham Gould in discussing early New Orleans society, the society of free women of color, and Voodoo as it was practiced in New Orleans. Contrary to earlier, racist, Eurocentric interpretations, the postmodernist view, ascribed to by these authors, is that Voodoo is a legitimate, African-based religion that reproduces the strong and powerful role of women in Africa. In antebellum New Orleans, black women outnumbered black men two to one in the city, and two-thirds of the free people of color in New Orleans were female. Marie Laveau lived in an area of New Orleans where women who had made plaçage arrangements with white men set up female-headed households. These women, like Marie, who could not legally marry their mates because of Louisiana’s anti-miscegenation laws, therefore dominated the Voodoo houses.

Whether that numerical preponderance translated into power for these women is questionable. Marie Laveau, both Ward and Fandrich argue, was seen as “dangerous” by authorities because she was so powerful. There is little evidence, however, that the New Orleans elite regarded Marie Laveau as any real threat. She was

never arrested or otherwise molested by authorities that we know of, and she had something of a cult following among white women in the city. Increasing police harassment of Voodoo priests and priestesses in the 1850s did not target Marie Laveau. Fandrich repeats the legend that this was because Marie Laveau exercised magical power over the authorities, or that she was somehow “in” with them. As her influence waned, the theory goes, police persecution worsened. In the second half of the century, increased police harassment and raids on the Voodoo celebrations on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain drove Voodoo underground.

It is incumbent upon scholars to draw conclusions based upon the evidence. Both Ward and Fandrich want Laveau to be more than she was. Fandrich describes her as a powerful female leader, and Ward portrays her as a prototype of the African-American women leaders of the Civil Rights movement. Her power was indeed legendary, but legends can take on a life of their own, and they must be tested carefully against the evidence.

Marie Laveau does not appear to have worked on behalf of her people. She led no crusades, movements, or social organizations that worked to bring about change for people of her class or for women of her social order. Furthermore, while Ward and Fandrich portray Laveau as an anti-slavery activist, Laveau and Glapion owned eight slaves at various times, and they did not purchase them with the intent to free them, as many people of color did.[7] The couple did not work on behalf of freeing any slaves. Ward and Fandrich portray Laveau, too, as a champion of the poor and the imprisoned, but there is only one contemporary newspaper account that claims she visited the prison regularly to provide food and religious solace to the condemned.[8] More likely, since it was a common Voodoo practice to try to influence the courts and the justice system, Laveau was carrying out Voodoo charms at the behest of the prisoners (or their families) to try to get them out of jail.

To buttress the theory of female power, both Ward and Fandrich open their books with a quote from one “Tom Bragg,” who described Marie Laveau as “the most powerful woman they is [sic].” Tom Bragg, however, was not a real person but one of LWP assistant editor Robert Tallant’s fictional “sources.” This quote exists nowhere in the original LWP interviews, and both Ward and Fandrich point out that Tallant cannot be trusted.

Another problematic source used by both authors is Zora Neale Hurston, an ethnographer who wrote a history of Voodoo in the 1930s, *Mules and Men*. While Hurston, an African American, had a more sympathetic

approach to Voodoo than previous white male writers, she, too, used informants whose identity cannot be verified. Yet Ward uses stories from one of Hurston’s fictional sources, “Luke Turner,” to create dramatic, fictionalized narratives of Voodoo rituals, initiation rites, and curses (in one case, she even has Marie Laveau walking on water). In Ward’s use of these quotes, it is difficult to tell where reality begins and fiction leaves off.

Both *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen* and *Voodoo Queen* must be read with some caution. Of the two works, Fandrich’s is the more reliable and her thesis more nuanced. Fandrich rescues Voodoo and the women who ran the Voodoo houses in New Orleans from the patriarchal, Eurocentric, Christian-centered, cultural imperialism of past writers. She illuminates how poor, uneducated, and oppressed people, women in particular, created a sense of empowerment and space for themselves in an oppressive system. This is an important contribution.

Notes [1]. The major book-length sources of this traditional interpretation are Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was* (New Orleans: L. Graham, 1895); Herbert Asbury, *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publications, 1938); Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946; reprint, New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Co., 1998); Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen* (1956; reprint, New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Co., 1983).

[2]. Ward also asserts that Christophe Glapion, Marie’s partner, impersonated Marie’s deceased husband Jacques Paris, using the name “Jean Jacques Christophe Paris,” in order to free a slave. However, civil records prove that Jean Jacques Christophe Paris was another person altogether and not Glapion in disguise. See Carolyn Morrow Long, “Marie Laveau: A Nineteenth-Century Voodoo Priestess,” *Louisiana History*46, no. 3 (2005): p. 274, n. 29.

[3]. Ward apparently mistook the identity of Emile Alexandre Legendre based on the work of Robert Tallant, an author whom she says herself is highly unreliable. Tallant, who was an assistant editor on the Louisiana Writers’ Project, sensationalized and fictionalized his sources and misattributed quotes. His *Voodoo in New Orleans*, along with his novel *The Voodoo Queen*, are the source of much of the misinformation and myth surrounding Marie Laveau. Both Fandrich and Ward note this, but still use Tallant’s quotes throughout their work.

[4]. In the latest edition of *Louisiana History*, Fandrich provides further evidence that this document is actually the baptismal certificate for the famous Marie

Laveau. "The Birth of New Orleans' Voodoo Queen: A Long-Held Mystery Resolved," *Louisiana History* 46, no. 3 (2005): pp. 293-309.

[5]. Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), chapters 1-3; "Marie Laveau: A Nineteenth-Century Voudou Priestess," *Louisiana History* 46, no. 3 (2005): pp. 263-292; and *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, forthcoming 2006).

[6]. All three of the Laveau researchers take up the issue of the identity of the later Marie Laveau, who reportedly assumed the identity and role of the elder Marie. Ward and Fandrich conclude that the second Marie was

probably the elder daughter, Marie Eloise Euchariste Glapion, but the evidence is sketchy and cannot be corroborated. It is clear that this Marie was not alive past the end of Reconstruction. Long and Fandrich both cite a source that points to a death date of 1862. Ward uses a later date of 1874, but because there is no death certificate for Marie Eloise, no one knows for certain. Due to the conflicting nature of the evidence, Carolyn Long concludes that the identity of the "second" Marie cannot be ascertained.

[7]. Long, "Marie Laveau," pp. 273-278.

[8]. The story of Laveau's prison visits was told originally in an 1871 article in the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*. It is repeated in her obituaries but cannot be independently verified.

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