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*A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of
Marie Laveau (review)*

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Carolyn Morrow Long. 2006. *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 336 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8130-2974-0.

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Since the nineteenth century, much has been written on Marie Laveau. All those writings fueled the legend of the Voodoo Queen but rarely told much about this free woman of color who lived in New Orleans through much of the nineteenth century. In the past four years, however, three scholarly works were published on this fascinating figure of the antebellum Crescent City. Carolyn Morrow Long's *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* is the latest addition to this series of publications. Her book discusses and adds to the two previously published books (respectively in 2004 and 2005) authored by Martha Ward (*Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*) and Ina Fandrich (her 1994 dissertation published as *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*).

These three books have added much to the knowledge on Marie Laveau, especially Long's, which came last and could thus discuss and correct some of the information contained in the previous two. To quote from Long's conclusion, "the purpose of this book is to separate legend from reality" (p. 207). To a large extent, she has managed to do

so, although she sometimes yields to speculation and eventually lapses into legend.

The book is divided into three parts. After an introduction, a set of definitions, and a prologue, the first part (Chapters 1 to 6) examines the life of Marie Laveau against the backdrop of the history of antebellum Louisiana. This part is extremely well done and seductive, weaving the actual facts of Marie Laveau's life with a presentation of New Orleans from the colonial period to the late antebellum era. Chapter One ("The Colonial Past") deals with her ancestry, Chapter Two ("The Antebellum City") discusses her birth, childhood, and early womanhood and gives a very good picture of what New Orleans looked like, drawing from narratives written by travelers to or sojourners in the city (like Benjamin Latrobe). Chapter Three ("Domestic Life") examines her associations with her husband Jacques Paris and her subsequent companion Christophe Glapion, correcting imagined facts and previous false deductions. These chapters are extremely well documented and strongly rely on sacramental and notarial records. A careful study of the terms of Marie Laveau's marriage contract to Jacques Paris, for instance, gives much insight into social practices in antebellum New Orleans. This first part demonstrates a good knowledge of previous literature and ability to rely on documented facts to separate reality from fiction. Long carefully corrects several false assumptions. Along with Ward and Fandrich, she shows, for instance, that Glapion was wrongly believed to be racially mixed. She also demonstrates that nothing can prove (or disprove) Marie Laveau's being a hairdresser. In a similar way, chapters four and five ("Slaves" and "Hard Times") address several issues of Marie Laveau's legend, insightfully examining the hard evidence. As a counterpoint to Ward and Fandrich, she quotes from documents proving that Marie and her companion purchased and sold slaves, thus fighting the seductive assumption that Marie Laveau was an active opponent to slavery. Long then writes a contrasting assessment of Laveau's power. It appears, Long suggests, that she was much less potent than what the legend pretends but still had enough strength and money to manage to help those in her community (the free people of color) who needed it (by guaranteeing security bonds for indicted free women of color, for instance).

The second part deals with Voodoo, examining successively Voodoo in New Orleans (Chapter Seven), Marie Laveau's supposed role in animating the St. John's eve ceremonies (Chapter Eight), and her alleged relationship with Voodoo priest Doctor John (Chapter Nine). This part relies on the newspaper articles of the time and uses the Louisiana Writers' Project (LWP) interviews as a counterpoint. Although this part does give few hard facts on Marie Laveau herself, it helps us understand the way a legend builds. It also reveals the difficulty in documenting Voodoo

in New Orleans, many of the main figures of the cult proving impossible to locate in archival material. Citing Malvina Latour, a Voodoo Queen often mentioned in the articles and interviews, Long writes that she is “nowhere in the New Orleans city directories, municipal and archdiocesan records, or the census” (p. 127), thus showing the quasi-impossibility for historians to deal with the topic. Long herself cannot help relapsing into the legend writing about an unidentified Voodoo Queen: “This regal personage certainly fits the description of Marie Laveau” (p. 129), thus inadvertently demonstrating how the legend really works.

The last part deals with a number of further legendary elements in Marie Laveau’s life. This is particularly evident in Chapter Nine (“Prison Ministry”), where Long discusses her alleged support of prisoners condemned to life sentence. Considering the topic of the chapter, it would probably have fit better in the first part, along with the discussion of Marie Laveau’s supposed antislavery crusade and the assessment of her power in the city. The next two chapters deal with genealogical and biographical material on those who lived with her (Chapter Ten, “Final Years”) and on her descendants (Chapter Eleven, “Descendants”). This part, using censuses and sacramental records, has little to do with Marie Laveau *per se* but is extremely informative on Reconstruction and early-twentieth century New Orleans, especially regarding the way in which the free people of color lived through those periods and their out-migration from New Orleans, often followed by their passing for white in their new abodes. Eventually, the last chapter (“The Second Marie Laveau”) probes into the belief—commonly held in the twentieth century—that the original Marie Laveau (Veuve Paris) was, at some point, replaced as a Voodoo Queen by a second Marie Laveau, probably her daughter. Long never manages to really prove (or disprove) that there was no other Voodoo Queen known as Marie Laveau. Although she tries to examine the various possible persons in her surroundings who could have been that second Marie Laveau, her last chapter ends up being highly inconclusive.

The book is well-researched and most of its content well-documented. Long’s relying on the notarial archives, various city archives, censuses, city directories, and sacramental records makes much of the information undisputable. Her balancing the newspapers articles with material extracted from the LWP interviews also provides a variety of sources which gives strength to her argument. The book, for many, probably tells as much on New Orleans in the nineteenth century as on Marie Laveau herself, as well as on legendary New Orleans and the making of legends in popular culture, which renders it all the more interesting but also makes its title slightly misleading and insufficiently inclusive.

As with every book, there are some flaws in Long’s work. The general

parts on the history of New Orleans would require a more complete referencing of sources. Some background information is disputable and tends, at times, to deviate from the topic. Some connections are loose (the transition from Henriette Delille to Congo Square in chapter three, for instance). Some sources would also have required a more thorough methodological discussion. We may wonder, for instance, whether the fact that newspaper articles do not mention Marie Laveau's presence at public executions really proves that she was not there; or question the weight of the legend in the minds of some of the LWP interviewees who did not know Marie Laveau personally; or wonder whether the interviews and newspaper articles are reliable sources to "construct an accurate narrative" (p. xix).

Finally, time and again, Long falls into the trap of conjecturing. She writes, for instance, that Marie Laveau's grandmother "might have been born in Louisiana to an African mother or she herself might have been born in Africa" (p. 9), and that she "may have been brought into the faith through the efforts of the Ursulines or the Children of Mary" (p. 12). Mentioning the people of African descent congregating on Congo Square, Long remarks that "it is easy to imagine that Marie Laveau's ancestors were among them" (p. 11). When speaking of Charles Laveaux, Marie's father, she adds that he "probably" received his elementary instruction in one of the private academies for free children of color in New Orleans, that he "may have been sent to France to continue his schooling," and that it is surprising that he did not offer Marie an education, which leads her to conclude that "perhaps she declined his offer" (p. 32). In such conclusions, Long adds neither to the legend nor to the reality of Marie Laveau. All those conjectures—as shows the recurrent use of modals—are not really useful, except if we consider that the book is more a description of life in New Orleans using Marie Laveau's life as a backdrop than the opposite.

All in all, however, Long has managed to separate hard fact from dubious truths and entirely mythologized aspects of Marie Laveau's life and legend. Her book is useful in showing the mechanisms of fabrication of a legend, dissecting how one account is later taken up by subsequent authors without verification or how some writers purposefully ignore facts to feed the legend. This is probably one of the main strengths of the book and helps us understand some of the mysteries of historiography. Long has brought Marie Laveau closer to life and, in doing so, has revealed many of the specificities of New Orleans and its society through history. She has quite naturally tumbled on a number of elements which are neither verified nor verifiable, elements which might well be reality or pure fiction.

When dealing with the topic of Marie Laveau, this is probably

unavoidable, the character being *per se* elusive, and most of the documentation (even the newspaper articles and interviews of the LWP) on Marie Laveau's Voodoo practice often relying on hearsay, being largely personal, and thus essentially subjective and prone to mythmaking. This is probably why so few historians have tackled the topic. Even after Long's book, Marie Laveau still is, to a certain extent, "a blank state, a receptacle for our prejudices, our fantasies, and our desires" (p. xx). Part of the legend remains, maybe all for the better, and this makes Long's extremely informative book a very pleasant read.

Renée Larrier. 2006. *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 185 pp. ISBN 0-8130-3005-6.

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Renée Larrier's latest book, *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean* is centered around a very interesting and original argument in favor of "*danmyé*, a combat dance tradition in Martinique, [as] a framework for reading Francophone Caribbean texts" (p. 2). Careful to educate her reader and get her point across, Larrier explains at length the particulars of *danmyé* insisting specifically on its performance aspect, linking it in so doing to the Caribbean tradition of oral storytelling, and its modern incarnation—the printed narrative.

The author then focuses on the representation and evolution of *Identity* in autofictional texts, underlining its "complexity and fluidity [...], rejecting the binaries" (p. 10), and highlighting by her choice of typography—the "I" is italicized—the importance of the active subject standing in stark contrast with the historically negated or unacknowledged colonial subject. The importance Larrier gives to narratives with an active subject enables her to stress the testimonial aspect of her texts while at the same time paying attention to their eclectic nature, what she calls "collages Text[ile]s" (p. 26), thus playing on the island depicted by texts 'glued' to each other in no particular order as well as on the French word "textile" (fabric), a generic word which does not disclose the fiber with which the fabric is made.