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**THE HAUNTED HISTORY OF NEW ORLEANS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE  
INTERSECTIONALITY BETWEEN DARK TOURISM, BLACK HISTORY, AND  
PUBLIC HISTORY**

By  
Laura Foley

Submitted to the  
Department of History  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in History  
at  
Rowan University  
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William D. Carrigan, Ph.D.  
Jody Russell Manning

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this research to my parents, Thomas and Beth Foley.

Thank you for always encouraging my love of history and folklore. For without your love and support, this project would not have been possible.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Janofsky for her guidance throughout the research and writing process. Thank you for not only introducing me to the world of dark tourism, but for your guidance as well. The skills and knowledge that I have gained during this process are invaluable. I would also like to thank the other faculty members of Rowan University's History Department, particularly Professor Jody Russell Manning and Dr. William D. Carrigan. I have also appreciated your guidance and mentorship these past few years. I would also like to thank my friends, Laura Kincaid and Carmen Grasso, for reading this paper and assisting me during the editing processes. Your insight as friends and fellow writing tutors was invaluable and I cannot begin to express how grateful I am to you both. Lastly, I would also like to thank my family and friends for your constant love and support. Writing during a global pandemic was difficult and unexpected, but your love and laughter continued to brighten my day as I hope it will continue to do so for many years to come.

## **Abstract**

Laura Foley

### **THE HAUNTED HISTORY OF NEW ORLEANS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTIONALITY BETWEEN DARK TOURISM, BLACK HISTORY, AND PUBLIC HISTORY**

2020-2021

Jennifer Janofsky, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in History

This research examines three popular ghost stories/legends of New Orleans that deal with issues of race. Madame Lalaurie, Julie, and Marie Laveau are popular subjects that are often sensationalized and removed from their proper historical context while treating legend as fact. This study not only analyzes the historical accuracy or historical context of these tales, but also addresses how these stories shape public perception and memory on topics such as race and local history. In addition, this study focuses on the intersectionality of dark tourism and public history and the ethical questions that often arise when the two meet.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

While interest in the supernatural and stories of spirits can be found in every culture around the world, despite being rooted in tradition, these stories have a contemporary nature. As Michele Hanks asserts in her book, *Haunted Heritage: The Cultural Politics of Ghost Tourism, Populism, and the Past*:

Ghosts are intimately tied to the idea of heritage; both concepts are grounded in contemporary attempts to understand and represent the past. Attempts to know the past are necessarily partial... and often complicit in current politics... While contestations and erasures occur in many articulations of cultural heritage, haunted heritage and ghost tourism sustain multiple interpretations of the past while enabling the formation of new modes of expertise.<sup>1</sup>

Ghost stories are inherently intertwined with death, and they often deal with difficult, darker aspects of history. The violent tales described in these stories, occasionally include difficult topics such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and mental health. Ghost stories and lore feature topics that are often not discussed openly in public spaces. However, these stories amplify the violence experienced by these groups in order to frighten and entertain rather than educate the public. As ghost tales can be found in every culture, these stories can be found in the local folklore of the area, retold within the pages of a tourist's local guide, or featured on a ghost tour. Ghosts are often utilized as a way to attract tourists. Whether those participating in ghost tours or interacting with ghost stories realize it or

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<sup>1</sup> Michele Hanks, *Haunted Heritage the Cultural Politics of Ghost Tourism, Populism, and the Past* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 23.



not, ghost stories bear a nugget of truth to them as they often reflect the local history of the area. Thus, ghost tours can be considered part of the field of public history.

The National Council on Public History defines public history as “the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world. In this sense, it is history that is applied to real-world issues.”<sup>2</sup> The term ‘public history’ was formerly used interchangeably with the term ‘applied history.’<sup>3</sup> There are many careers that are a part of the field of public history, whether they may realize it or not. Some of the professions or stakeholders included in the field are:

...historical consultants, museum professionals, government historians, archivists, oral historians, cultural resource managers, curators, film and media producers, historical interpreters, historic preservationists, policy advisers, local historians, and community activists, among many many other job descriptions.<sup>4</sup>

There are many participants that make up the field of public history. This wide variety is included in sites or activities associated with public history. Some examples of sites include historic house museums, battlefields, museums, and memorials.

However, there are plenty of sites not dedicated to public education such as graveyards or locations associated with historic events but they can still be a part of public history. For example, historic walking tours might take groups to different sites associated with local history. However, the locations that they stop at do not always reflect its history. The guide might stop outside of a store or restaurant where an important house once stood. Even though the building no longer exists, the location lives

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<sup>2</sup> “About the Field,” National Council on Public History (National Council on Public History), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

on in the historical record and public memory. Tourists might also pay a visit to a local cemetery, despite having no relation to anyone buried there, due to the architecture or to visit the burial site of someone famous.

Dark tourism is also a part of the field of public history. Dark tourism is often referred to by many different names including death tourism and “thanatourism.” As Brigitte Sion writes in the introduction of *Death Tourism: Disaster Sites as Recreational Landscape*, the term often refers to the “promotion and attraction to sites of violent death...”<sup>5</sup> However, this term has been redefined by various scholars in order to elaborate or narrow the definition. It can also be associated with sites associated with “death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre.”<sup>6</sup> This extends the definition to include not only sites of violent death, but other activities associated with death, “including Halloween performances, ghost trains and other sites that may have been fabricated or remotely associated with actual violent death.”<sup>7</sup> This thesis will deal with the intersectionality found between dark tourism and public history, focusing on sites associated in public memory with “death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre.”<sup>8</sup>

One popular dark tourism activity is a ghost tour or haunted walking tour. On these tours, visitors walk to different locations associated with actual historic death, trauma, or suffering or locations associated with these concepts in public memory, whether the historical record reflects it or not. Ghost tours are often advertised to tourists as a source of entertainment as well as a sightseeing opportunity. These tours are

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<sup>5</sup> Brigitte Sion, ed., *Death Tourism: Disaster Sites as Recreational Landscape* (London: Seagull Books, 2014), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

frequently offered as walking tours, but sometimes conducted as bus tours. Ghost tours feature a mix of local history and folklore, often blurring the lines between fact and fiction as a source of entertainment. However, the tales often told on these tours feature darker aspects of history. While these legends are often fictional and the events portrayed in the story might have no factual basis, they do bear a nugget of truth. These legends might reflect aspects of the local history that are true or feature the past struggles of marginalized communities.

Although these tours are sometimes offered at historical locations as a way to raise funds, more often than not these tours are privately operated. Although the tours are often advertised as being a combination of historical fact and legend, they are not typically organized or written by professional historians. However, whether those running the tours realize it or not, they are still a part of the field of public history and contributors to public memory.

This thesis will analyze three ghost stories from New Orleans that address race relations. Variations of these legends can be found in a variety of places, including tourism books and walking tour businesses. The deaths and spirits of the individuals often shape local historical narratives. Some of the stories reflect public perspectives of the city's "difficult" histories or the local narratives surrounding them, such as assumptions surrounding race relations, New Orleans slavery, and the practice of *plaçage*.<sup>9</sup> All three stories will be examined as to how well they reflect the actual history of the city as well as explore the ethics of this aspect of dark tourism.

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<sup>9</sup> The French practice of a relationship formed between a white man and a free woman of color. Often these relationships are portrayed more in myths as being similar to concubinage. However, they were closer to common law marriages. For more information, see Keith Aslakson's, "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon."

Chapter three explores the story of Julie, also known as the “Octoroon mistress.” Other stories of a similar nature will also be highlighted in this section. This chapter will examine the stereotypes reflected in this legend, how it reflects the local historical myths surrounding the practice of plaçage and “Quadroon balls,” as well as the importance of context when discussing interracial relationships in a time of slavery.

Chapter four examines the legend of Madame Delphine Lalaurie and her haunted house on Royal Street. This legend is unique as it is based on an actual historic event. However, the events portrayed in the story are extremely exaggerated. This chapter will examine how the story exaggerates the real violence suffered by Lalaurie’s victims as well as how the story in its current form transforms when placed in context of the history of New Orleans slavery. This chapter will also explore whether the current legend perpetuates the actual historic violence that the victims’ suffered and the ethical responsibilities of dark tourism.

Chapter five discusses Marie Laveau and the history of Voodoo. This chapter examines what little is currently known about Laveau's life through historical record and how her legacy in public memory varies depending on public interpretation. Chapter three also discusses the history of Voodoo and how it directly correlates with the city’s black history. This chapter asserts that in order to gain a better understanding of Laveau, it is necessary to study the city’s complicated relationship with Voodoo.

## Chapter 2

### Historiography

This research was largely inspired by Collin Dickey's, *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*. Dickey explores a variety of supposedly haunted locations across America in the hopes of uncovering the origins of legends. Dickey's research discusses the intersectionality of dark tourism and public history as well as the ethics of dark tourism. In one chapter, Dickey explores New Orleans and some of the popular lore and legends. He concludes that New Orleans is a city which continually profits off of the trauma that it has endured. It also commodifies black culture in order to profit off of it. Dickey also asserts that ghost stories are a large part of the city's mythmaking. These stories are packaged for easy consumption as "[they] tread on the city's violent past while sectioning off that violence into a distant, romanticized past, a past that no longer has any connection to the city's actual politics, racial relations, or history."<sup>10</sup>

This work seeks to build off some of the ideas that Dickey brought forward and asks similar questions on the ethics of dark tourism. However, this thesis strictly focuses on New Orleans and does not cover as wide a variety of locations as Dickey's research. This research also exclusively focuses on three legends that intersect with the city's black history and argues that while these stories may be portrayed as being part of the city's violent but "distant, romanticized past," their connection to current events, politics, racial relations, and history cannot be easily removed. This connection should be acknowledged and considered when retelling these stories as they could be utilized as a vehicle for educating the public on the diverse history of New Orleans.

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Dickey, *Ghostland: an American History in Haunted Places* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2017), 242.

This research also pulls inspiration from Tiya Miles' work, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*. In her work, Miles explores how southern dark tourism grapples with race and memories of slavery.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, she concludes that in their current form, these stories misconstrue the historical record and often resort to stereotyping the people of color represented in the tales.<sup>12</sup> While Miles does examine New Orleans, it is not the sole focus of her work. Miles's work explores locations in Georgia as well as Louisiana.

This research will also explore similar questions into the ethical responsibilities of dark tourism operators, their reflection of the actual history of the location, as well as their treatment of race. This work differs from Miles as the legends selected for examination are found within the city of New Orleans. Like Dickey, Miles focuses on a broader range of locations including plantations, graveyards, and city homes. However, this work does not explore locations outside of the city limits and focuses solely on the city of New Orleans.

This thesis will analyze three ghost stories from New Orleans that address race relations. The deaths and remaining spirits of the individuals often shape local historical narrative. Some of the stories reflect public perspectives of the city's "difficult" histories or the local narratives surrounding them, such as assumptions surrounding race relations, New Orleans slavery, and the practice of plaçage. All three stories will be examined as to how well they reflect the actual history of the city as well as explore the ethics of this aspect of dark tourism.

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<sup>11</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

### Chapter 3

#### Of Star-Crossed Lovers and Quadroon Balls: The Tragic Tale of Julie

Said by some to be the “Crown Jewel of New Orleans,” the French Quarter is host to beautiful architecture, a variety of boutiques and shops, and well-known restaurants that have been a staple of the city for decades.<sup>13</sup> As this area holds so much rich history, it is unsurprising that numerous ghosts are rumored to dwell in this portion of the city.

The French Quarter’s beauty is reflected in some of its more infamous resident spirits, particularly the soul of a young woman named Julie. Legend says that on the darkest nights of December, visitors can catch a glimpse of her in her final moments as she walks completely naked on the rooftop of 734 Royal Street. Concerned passersby, well aware of the freezing temperatures, watch as this woman feebly struggles to protect her nude form from the bitter cold only to vanish with the dawn. Those who seek to rescue this woman or provide her aid will be unable to find her, only to see her once again the following night.<sup>14</sup>

Julie’s story is one of the more popular tales of the French Quarter. In life, she was said to be the octroon mistress of a wealthy Creole gentleman. He provided her with riches and an apartment on Royal Street, where he would visit her often. In every version of the tale, Julie is said to have been in love with the man, though accounts vary on whether or not he truly returned her affections. Another detail that remains consistent,

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<sup>13</sup> “French Quarter (The Vieux Carre),” neworleans.com (New Orleans & Company), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.neworleans.com/plan/neighborhoods/french-quarter/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

whether or not the man supposedly returned her affections, was that Julie was said to be unhappy with the arrangement and craved more.<sup>15</sup>

Julie wanted to marry him; to not be his mistress but his wife and partner. However, while their relationship was permitted, their marriage was forbidden. The law would not permit it, nor would the man's family, who was the source of his wealth. The man tried to explain this to her, but still she persisted. Eventually, he relented and promised to marry her on one condition: that she must display her love for him by staying up on the roof until morning with only their love to keep her warm. The man knew how cold it was and knew that his request was ridiculous. Surely, she would reject this ultimatum and the offer of marriage would be removed from the table.

Determined to marry her true love, Julie took his offer as serious. Despite the freezing cold, she was determined to meet his conditions. While the young man entertained a friend downstairs, Julie was determined to prove herself to him. With the sound of wedding bells in her ears, she removed her clothes and climbed onto the roof.

It was not until quite sometime later that the gentleman bid his friend farewell. According to various accounts, the details differ with some tales stating that dawn had already broken or that it was early morning. Nevertheless, Julie's lover went upstairs to find the bed empty and Julie's clothes on the ground. Realizing what she had done, the lover ran to the roof. However, he was too late. It was there he found Julie's body. She had frozen from the cold.

Although there are no records to show that Julie ever truly existed, her legend still persists as one of the most popular tales of the French Quarter. Julie's tale might be

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<sup>15</sup> This retelling is based on various versions of the tale. For one version of the retelling, see Kalila K Smith's *New Orleans Ghosts, Voodoo, and Vampires: Journey into Darkness*.



purely fictional. However, the tale exhibits aspects of public lore and memory that exist outside of historical fact. Various versions of Julie's tale bring up Quadroon balls or assert that the practice of interracial relationships was common amongst the wealthy elite. They paint a picture of grand balls, a place where wealthy, well-educated women of mixed race would attend in hopes of becoming the mistress of a wealthy, white gentleman. These women were often said to be encouraged to attend by their mothers, who would often arrange the matches for them.

Although there is not much solid evidence of Quadroon balls ever taking place, the public memory of them still persists as evidenced by Julie's tale.<sup>16</sup> Through tales like Julie's, the concept of Quadroon balls and the mythos surrounding the practice of "plaçage" are further cemented in public memory by asserting them as historical fact. By presenting these myths as historical fact, the public develops a false understanding of the history of New Orleans. These stories also overly romanticize and simplify the complicated nature of interracial relationships of the time period. They erase the complex lives of real free women of color who lived in New Orleans, and replace them with a fictional version wrapped up in a tragic, yet romantic, tale.

In order to better understand Julie's story and its impact on public memory, one must understand and examine several concepts illustrated throughout the tale. The first being the concept of "Creole." The concept of who constitutes as Creole will also play a role in the later chapters of this analysis as each of the subjects of the legends constitute

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<sup>16</sup> Keith Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2011): 714, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shr059>.

as Creole. In her work, *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House*, Carolyn Morrow Long offers an excellent explanation of the term ‘Creole.’

The word Creole has engendered a great deal of confusion. In colonial times and antebellum New Orleans, anyone born in the city and its environs (excepting indigenous people) was called a Creole. This was not a racial designation; Creoles could be white, brown, black, or any shade in between. With the rise of virulent racism after the Civil War and Reconstruction, white Creoles feared that outsiders perceived all Creoles to be people of mixed race. They therefore appropriated the designation for themselves, claiming that only native Louisianians of pure white blood, descended from French and Spanish colonists who came directly from Europe, were entitled to call themselves Creoles. Today, most people who identify as Creole are biracial descendants of French-speaking, Roman Catholic antebellum free people of color.<sup>17</sup>

As illustrated by this explanation, Creoles can be from any racial background. As all of the subjects of the legends would have lived during the antebellum period, they can all be considered Creole despite their differences in race.

It is also necessary to examine the practice of *plaçage* and Quadroon balls. For the purpose of this paper, the term “Quadroon” will refer to Kenneth Aslakson’s definition. In his article, “The ‘Quadroon-Plaçage’ Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon,” Aslakson states that in the dictionary, the term “Quadroon” is often “...defined as a person who is of one

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<sup>17</sup> Carolyn M. Long, *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), xi.

quarter African ancestry (and presumably three quarters European ancestry), but in the quadroon-[plaçage] myth, it is a synonym for all free women of color.”<sup>18</sup> Aslakson also recognizes that the term’s usage in the “quadroon-plaçage” myth is both broader and more narrow than the actual definition as it includes “women of several different phenotypes” but “excludes enslaved women.”<sup>19</sup>

This mythic interpretation of the practice lives on in the local lore as the ghost stories that feature Quadroon balls or the practice of plaçage heavily feature it. By introducing the false interpretation as undisputed fact, these ghost stories reinforce the idea that this practice existed in the form of grand balls, matchmaking mothers, wealthy gentlemen, “exotic” beauties, and doomed love affairs. These stories also overly romanticize and simplify the complicated nature of interracial relationships of the time period. Also, in the case of Julie’s story, they resort to the oversexualization and blaming of the victim.

In 1837, Harriet Martineau wrote of the practice of placage in the second volume of *The Society of America*. Her account echoes the tragedy found in Julie’s story. Julie’s story likely originates from writings similar to this one, travelers sharing the local tales of tragic, doomed interracial love until it spread beyond the region. On the practice of plaçage, Martineau writes:

The Quadroon girls of New Orleans are brought up by their mothers to be what they have been; the mistresses of white gentlemen... The girls are highly educated, externally, and are, probably, as beautiful and accomplished a set of women as

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<sup>18</sup> Keith Aslakson, “The ‘Quadroon-Plaçage’ Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2011): 714, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shr059>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

can be found. Every young man early selects one, and establishes her in one of those pretty and peculiar houses, whole rows of which may be seen in the Remparts. The connexion now and then lasts for life: usually for several years. In the latter case, when the time comes for the gentleman to take a white wife, the dreadful news reaches his Quadroon partner, either by a letter entitling her to call the house and furniture her own, or by the newspaper which announces his marriage. The Quadroon ladies are rarely or never known to form a second connexion. Many commit suicide: more die brokenhearted. Some men continue the connexion after marriage. Every Quadroon woman believes that her partner will prove an exception to the rule of desertion. Every white lady believes that her husband has been an exception to the rule of seduction.<sup>20</sup>

There are many accounts written by travelers similar to Martineau, some even predating the publication of *The Society of America*.<sup>21</sup> Despite the numerous retellings, they all appear to be secondhand information.<sup>22</sup> However, while these accounts might not be true, it is easy to see the influence of accounts similar to Martineau's. These accounts offer variations of a similar tale. At their core, these stories feature a woman of "lower" status rising in society, falling into either a star-crossed lovers scenario or a one-sided, doomed love affair, only to meet a tragic, untimely end, or to live out their days loveless and alone.

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<sup>20</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, vol. 2 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 117.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on the influence of the accounts of travelers perpetuating this myth, see Kenneth Aslakson's article "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon."

<sup>22</sup> Keith Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2011): 714, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shr059>.

In his article, “The ‘Quadroon-Plaçage’,” Kenneth Aslakson breaks down the myth of the Quadroon balls of New Orleans. He argues that while something similar to the mythic balls most likely did exist in New Orleans, they bear little resemblance to the grand balls often portrayed in local lore.<sup>23</sup> Aslakson states that “...the quadroon-plaçage myth is an Anglo-American (mis) interpretation of a French-Caribbean phenomenon.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to argue that the men attending these balls were often not wealthy, that the balls were not meeting places for plaçage relationships, that mothers did not “bargain away their daughters,” and that many of these relationships were long term.<sup>25</sup> Aslakson also states that “...these relationships looked much more like common-law marriages than concubinage.”<sup>26</sup>

The “quadroon-plaçage” myth often denotes that the practice is either French or Spanish in origin. As Aslakson states, the fact that the practice is French is somewhat true but it stems from French-Caribbean culture. Between 1791 and 1804, New Orleans saw an increase in population due to the tens of thousands of refugees that fled Saint-Domingue as well as the smaller numbers that fled from Guadeloupe.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that around twelve thousand refugees from Saint-Domingue eventually ended up in New Orleans.<sup>28</sup> Though it was through a series of three waves that the population increased, the largest wave was between May 1809 and February 1810.<sup>29</sup> It was at this

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 709-710.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 710.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 716.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 716.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

time that close to ten thousand Saint-Domingue refugees, who had originally fled to Cuba, made their way to New Orleans.<sup>30</sup>

According to Aslakson, this population boom nearly doubled the size of New Orleans within a nine-month period, and created food shortages, housing dilemmas, and general chaos.<sup>31</sup> This population increase was also noticeable when examining the city's population of free people of color.<sup>32</sup> Aslakson states that "Almost three fourths of the roughly 1800 adult free people of color were women. This demographic disparity helps explain the spike in white male-colored female relationships in New Orleans during the first two decades of the nineteenth century."<sup>33</sup>

Aslakson is not alone in the conclusion that Quadroon balls did not exist in the form of this mythic interpretation. A year later after Aslakson's 2012 article, Emily Clark would publish her work, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World*. Clark states that the origins of the "fictionalized figure of the New Orleans quadroon "...stems from the literary stereotype of the "tragic mulatto."<sup>34</sup> Clark discusses how Sterling Brown, a prominent African-American literary critic and poet, first identified and defined in the trope in the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> Brown identified it "...as one of seven literary stereotypes of African-descended people employed by white authors, the tragic mulatto debuted in antebellum antislavery fiction

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> "Sterling Brown," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., April 27, 2021), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sterling-Brown>.

in the 1840s.”<sup>36</sup> She explains that the figure could be male or female, and while their initial circumstances might differ, they are ultimately doomed to a tragic end.<sup>37</sup>

However, Clark’s interpretation of the nature of these relationships is much darker than Aslakson’s. Clark, like Aslakson addresses the number of refugees moving into the city during the 1800s. She clarifies that the disparity between the amount of free men and women of color arriving into the city is due to travel restrictions. Clark states, “By making it difficult, if not impossible, for adult free men of color to come to New Orleans and remain there, territorial authorities unwittingly increased the likelihood that its white male inhabitants would be drawn into relationships with free women of color.”<sup>38</sup> The limitations placed on travel widened the gap between the number of free women of color and the number of free men of color who arrived as refugees during this period.

As evidenced by baptismal records in the following years, a number of women likely formed relationships with white men, often for a variety of reasons. During the years 1810 to 1812, around three hundred and eight children were born to Dominguan free women of color.<sup>39</sup> A third of these women could not identify a father for the sacramental register.<sup>40</sup> Clark asserts that the significance of these figures is made clear when compared to children who were baptized by Orleanian free women of color during the same period. Only twenty two percent of the fifty eight children lacked a named father.<sup>41</sup> Clark goes on to discuss that the difference between the two groups further

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 133-134.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

highlights the fact that refugee women throughout history have been and continue to be vulnerable to sexual exploitation.<sup>42</sup> She states that some of these women “may have had sexual partners in Cuba who, for a variety of reasons, did not accompany them to Louisiana.”<sup>43</sup> She goes on to assert that there are a variety of scenarios that explain the “unattached mothers who baptized their children after their arrivals,” including the fact that free men of color were prohibited, that the women might have been in transitory relationships, or might have resorted to prostitution as a way to survive.<sup>44</sup>

Clark’s interpretation of these interracial relationships do not match the tales of grand balls, wealthy gentleman, and beautiful girls. Rather, they paint a picture of the much harsher reality that many of these women had to face and the struggle they endured in order to survive. Historical fact shows that these relationships arose from a variety of factors. Many of these women entered these relationships for reasons much more complex than the concept of love. The rosy mythos surrounding quadroon balls and the practice of plaçage does not reflect historical fact or the complex women who entered these relationships.

The treatment that Julie receives in her legend extends to other female ghosts of color found within the city. The romanticization of these often complicated mixed race relationships can be found throughout the city of New Orleans. In her book, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*, Tiya Miles discusses what she experienced on one of the ghost tours that she attended while she was in New Orleans. She writes about her experience with paranormal investigator,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



Karen Jeffries. Jefferies served as a tour guide and investigator on the tour that Miles attended. Miles recounts what occurred while they were looking for paranormal evidence:

The center of the ballroom seemed to produce the highest number of energy spikes. Jeffries soon revealed the reason: black female ghosts from the nineteenth century were causing the disturbance. Jeffries explained that African American women of partial white “blood”—“quadroons, octoroons, and mulats”—used to attend quadroon balls to meet their “protectors,” wealthy white men who would take them as mistresses. These men might find true love with their mistresses and maintain two families, Jeffries said. She knew from her paranormal investigations that “two quadroons” haunt the ballroom today: one was a matchmaker of mistresses and their “protectors,” and one was returning to the spot where she had “met her true love and been happiest.”<sup>45</sup>

Miles’s account highlights the romanticization of these relationships that these stories often feature. Julie’s story also features elements of a tragic romance. As local journalist Mike Scott notes in his retelling, entitled “Just in time for Halloween, the French Quarter legend of Julie the Naked Ghost,” New Orleans tour guides are quite fond of the story.<sup>46</sup> This is due to the story’s “romantic” elements, which often leads tour guides to hail “it as something of a Crescent City ‘Romeo and Juliet.’”<sup>47</sup> Similarly to how the concept of quadroon balls compares to historical fact, the idea that Julie’s story is inherently

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<sup>45</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 55.

<sup>46</sup> Mike Scott, “Just in Time for Halloween, the French Quarter Legend of Julie the Naked Ghost,” NOLA.com, October 28, 2020, [https://www.nola.com/entertainment\\_life/home\\_garden/article\\_4b68cdda-17a4-11eb-9b02-b77a4222fb47.html](https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/home_garden/article_4b68cdda-17a4-11eb-9b02-b77a4222fb47.html).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

romantic erases some of the darker aspects of the story, such as a lover who, whether the interpretation views the act as one of intention or not, ultimately sends her to her death.

Despite recent historical revelations, the myths surrounding the practice of plaçage and Quadroon balls can still be found in New Orleans. The fact that these legends, such as the story of Julie, still exist in their current form is proof that the local cultural memory of New Orleans surrounding the practice of plaçage and Quadroon balls does not align with actual historical fact. Although a more recent version of the tale can be found on New Orleans's website, there are still issues with the story's retelling. Mike Scott, a contributing writer for NOLA.com, retells the story. His tongue-in-cheek retelling does not make mention of Quadroon balls or the practice of plaçage.<sup>48</sup> Any context of Julie and her Frenchman's relationship is scrubbed from this retelling, perhaps for brevity's sake.<sup>49</sup> All that the article states is that she was in love with him and wanted to marry him. Besides the mention of Julie being a woman of color, the context and background of their mixed race relationship is left undefined.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the differences in the retelling and the possible intentional avoidance of fueling the mythos of Quadroon balls and the practice of plaçage, his brief retelling falls into the same trap that other previous retellings have fallen into. The first issue being the lack of historical context needed for this story to be beneficial. While Scott does briefly discuss that there is no historical evidence to back up the existence of Julie, he does not define the nature of Julie and her lover's relationship, provides no historical context on

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Jeanne deLavigne, *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans* (1946; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 30.

the complexities of mixed race relationships, and sexualizes her body in the title. Thus, he falls into the same shortcomings of previous retellings.

It is interesting to note that while most recent versions portray Julie as a free woman of color, not every version does. In Jeanne deLavigne's version, which can be found in *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans*, Julie is portrayed as an enslaved person. In this version, she is enslaved to a rich widower. deLavigne describes Julie as follows:

But there was one slave, Julie, whose nature ran to dreams. Romance filled her strangely blended soul. She was an octoroon—seven streams of white blood, one stream of black. But her spirit cleared the black barrier at a single leap. She fell in love with her master—passionately, hopelessly, without reason or reserve.<sup>51</sup>

Like all versions of the tale, she is described as being of mixed race. However, she falls in love with her master. Strangely enough, the way deLavigne describes her suggests that Julie initiated the relationship. Her master appears to “humor” her. This is further supported by the following excerpt:

The master accepted her gift, laughing because she was, after all, merely something he had purchased and which he could sell again when he wearied. He humored her because it suited his fancy to do so— set her at the head of his household, gave her a spacious and beautiful apartment adjoining his own, bought more slaves to wait on her, loaded her with costly trinkets and clothed her in silks....velvets and delicate laces...of course, when his friends came to call....Julie was shunted severely into oblivion. Not a glimmer of her must appear...The doors

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

to her chamber were locked and bolted, and the windows were barred and shuttered.<sup>52</sup>

It is unclear as to why Julie appears as an enslaved woman in this version. deLavigne's version predates more contemporary retellings as her book was first published in 1946.<sup>53</sup> It is also a collection of stories from the time.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the story evolved to give Julie a bit more agency over the years and avoid the uncomfortable subject of slavery, or deLavigne took some creative liberties. Either way, this version falls into a similar trap of oversimplification of their relationship, not to mention the issue of portraying the relationship between a master and slave as "consenting" or "romantic."

By portraying Julie as a hopeless romantic, deLavigne erases the complexity often found in these relationships and minimizes the struggles that actual individuals faced while they were enslaved. Even though most tours portray Julie as a free woman of color rather than an enslaved person, it still erases the complicated nature of the relationships formed between free women of color and white men. As stated previously, these very real relationships differed from the ones formed at fictional grand balls. These relationships were formed for a variety of reasons, including survival, as these free women of color, often refugees, fought to forge a new life for themselves in New Orleans.

Some versions of Julie's tale are more sympathetic to her lover than to Julie. Despite the fact that in the tale, he encouraged her to go to the roof. By doing so, many of these versions end up placing the blame on Julie. Her death becomes a punishment for the fact that she is not content with her "place" in society. In the version found in Kalila

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, ix.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, xx.

Katherina Smith's *New Orleans Ghosts, Voodoo, and Vampires: Journey into Darkness...*, the language Smith uses ultimately suggests that Julie is responsible for her death and that if she had just been content with the arrangement, she might have lived.

Smith writes:

Julie...had anything any woman could possibly desire, servants to wait on her, prepare her meals and draw her bath. But Julie wanted one thing she could never have; she wanted to be her lover's wife. Even though society condoned and even encouraged plaçage, the law forbade interracial marriage.<sup>55</sup>

It should be noted that Smith states that Julie has everything any other woman could desire, not just those limited to her class or race. This not only suggests that Julie should be content, but oversimplifies the limits of her station and race. While it is true that a white woman would also be unable to marry a black lover, the situation would still be different.

If one assumes the mythic arrangements of the practice are true and the relationships are arranged by the girls' mothers, the arrangement could be interpreted as a way for girls to rise in societal status and wealth. If the man chooses to end the relationship, the reality is that the girl could lose her position as well as her financial stability. Even if they did love the man with whom they were placed, they are ultimately reliant on their lover. Therefore, the relationship has a disproportionate balance of power, not only one of racial inequality but of wealth as well.

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<sup>55</sup> Kalila K Smith, *New Orleans Ghosts, Voodoo, and Vampires: Journey into Darkness...* (New Orleans: De Simonin Publications, 2012), 30.

Smith goes on to justify the lover's cruel ultimatum by "explaining" his position. It is quite clear that Smith portrays the lover as a more sympathetic figure despite the fact that his actions play a role in Julie's demise. She writes:

Julie's lover knew that marriage was impossible. Even if he were to find someone in the city to marry them legally, the repercussions would be more than he could bear. His family would disown him, society would shun him and his associates would refuse to do business with him. He would lose his fortune and that was unacceptable.<sup>56</sup>

This section not only rationalizes his point of view to the reader, but it also reinforces the idea that Julie's notion of marriage is impossible. This is further reinforced in the next section, which portrays Julie as begging and nagging for months.<sup>57</sup> Smith writes that the fighting was "destroying the peace of their home" and that the lover's ultimatum was "so ridiculous, he believed, that she would ignore it."<sup>58</sup> These details further draw sympathy away from Julie, the victim of the story, shifting it to her white lover.

While Smith might have hoped that her language would justify the lover's actions and make him seem less cruel, it places further blame on Julie. In the audience's eyes, she becomes greedy, dissatisfied, foolish, nagging, and naive. The story shifts its sympathy from a free woman of color bound by the confines of society, who dies after attempting to meet her lover's ultimatum in hopes of true love, to a wealthy white gentleman. Even in a story that should make the audience more sympathetic to the fictional heroine's plight, that sympathy is diminished by focusing on Julie's lover. It is

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 31.

important to note that unlike other versions, the lover appears to live on rather than dying of a broken heart as is sometimes stated in other versions.

Even the language that Smith uses to describe her supposedly active spirit reflects this. Smith calls her “predictable but not modest.”<sup>59</sup> She states that she is an opportunist who “takes every opportunity to get the attention she craves.”<sup>60</sup> At one point, Smith even describes a “temper tantrum” that Julie’s spirit supposedly throws.<sup>61</sup> This further reinforces Smith’s earlier portrayal of Julie.

In addition to the importance of historical context, the emotional response expected of the audience is just as important to consider. Ghost tours and stories bridge the gap between the past and present. They ask audiences to feel empathy for past figures and the struggles that they endured, whether fictional or not.<sup>62</sup> This emotion can allow the audience to have a new understanding about the past, but too much emotion can lead to misunderstanding about historical events.<sup>63</sup> In Heath Ellison’s article, “Should Charleston Guides Give Up the Ghost on Dark Tourism?,” Tiya Miles asks an important question that those conducting haunted tours should adopt into their practice. She states:

The issue again is, what kinds of emotional reactions are the tours set up to elicit?...And are people being encouraged to think about those emotional reactions? Are they being encouraged to empathize with people who are engaging

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Heath Ellison, “Should Charleston Guides Give up the Ghost on Dark Tourism?,” *Charleston City Paper*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/story/should-charleston-guides-give-up-the-ghost-on-dark-tourism?oid=29730868>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

in violent acts or are they being encouraged to empathize with people who are actually subjected to violent acts?<sup>64</sup>

If tour guides are going to continue to tell Julie's story, they should examine the version that they are utilizing. It is important to consider that most ghost stories hold some truth to them, shreds of historical fact buried within the lore. There were women like Julie living in New Orleans. They were free women of color, who formed interracial relationships for a variety of reasons, including survival. They endured countless challenges based on their race and sex. Some grew up in the city, while others found refuge in the city of New Orleans and made it their home. These are the women found at the heart of Julie's story. Therefore, it is important that the audience sympathize with their plight.

Ghost stories often deal with difficult histories due to their darker nature. The stories deal with very real concepts of racism, sexism, ableism, violence, and death. They allow the audience to interact with aspects of history that are often unfortunately overlooked. In this case, Julie's story could be utilized to educate the public on aspects of black history, specifically focusing on free women of color.<sup>65</sup> It is important to question whether the story allows the audience to sympathize with these figures, because descendants are still very much present. With proper historical context, this story could be utilized as a way to navigate the discussion into one on the diverse history of New Orleans.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 24.



## Chapter 4

### Madame Lalaurie and Her House of Horrors

Nestled on the corner of the crossroads of Governor Nicholas and Royal Street lies a gray, three-story building. To the unassuming passerby, the mansion is just another example of the diverse architecture found in New Orleans. Fans of Nicholas Cage might recognize it as the house that he once owned (he lost the house to foreclosure in 2009).<sup>66</sup> However, to those fascinated by the myths and legends of the city, it is a ghastly site.

The story of Madame Lalaurie can be found in numerous ghost books and tours featuring the legends of the city. Madame Lalaurie, unlike some of the figures found within legends of New Orleans, did exist. However, her legend often portrays her as an outlier and rarely places her within the context of New Orleans slavery. Her legend, like other ghost stories, is quite violent but focuses on the perpetrator's crimes rather than her often nameless victims. The details in these stories are horrifically embellished and with little attention paid to the victims, one cannot help but feel that these stories continue to perpetuate the violence found in the actual events that occurred. While there are some variations that can be found in different versions, the core of the legend remains the same. The following recount is a conglomeration of various retellings of the tale.<sup>67</sup>

Madame Delphine Lalaurie moved in with her husband, Dr. Louis Lalaurie, to a mansion on Royal Street. They were a wealthy pair and soon became a part of New Orleans society.<sup>68</sup> Although they were still quite new to the area, they became renowned

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<sup>66</sup>Missy Wilkinson, "The French Quarter's LaLaurie Mansion Will Star in a New Horror Franchise," Curbed New Orleans (Vox Media, LLC. , October 29, 2019), <https://nola.curbed.com/2019/10/29/20938439/lalaurie-mansion-new-horror-franchise-film-the-conjuring>.

<sup>67</sup> This tale is a conglomeration of various retellings. For one version of the story, see

<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that historical record shows that Madame Lalaurie was no stranger to New Orleans society. However, the tale spins it as such. They moved in 1831. For more information on their marriage, see Carolyn Morrow Long's *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House*.

for their lavish parties. Madame LaLaurie was known for being quite beautiful. Guests were enchanted by their beautiful house, lavish furniture, expensive food, and beautiful hostess who charmed the Creole elite. Lalaurie had a well-dressed “mulatto” butler, who never left her side. His presence seemed to add to regal bearing.

Occasionally guests caught a glimpse of their other servants. Unlike the butler, the Lalaurie’s other slaves appeared to be gaunt and wore tattered clothing. Neighbors would notice that slaves disappeared, only to be quickly be replaced by another. Rumors began to circulate about the fate of the Lalaurie’s slaves with some neighbors whispering that Madame Lalaurie cruelly mistreated them.

One day, a neighbor witnessed Madame Lalaurie chasing one of her servants with a whip. The little girl, clearly terrified, attempted to escape Lalaurie’s clutches and climbed up to the roof. Both Lalaurie and the young girl disappeared from sight. With a terrible shriek, the young girl plummeted to her death to the courtyard below. Her body was quietly buried in the night and neighbors were not sure if it was an accident or if the girl had been pushed.

Eventually, the authorities took action. The Lalauries were summoned to court and fined for their actions. <sup>69</sup>To prevent further mistreatment, their slaves were sold at auction. However, Madame Lalaurie was able to convince her relatives to purchase the slaves and return them back to her care. Madame Lalaurie continued to claim that what happened to the young girl had been an accident and that the neighbor who had claimed to see the incident was simply out to tarnish her reputation.

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<sup>69</sup> There are some parts of the legend that do line up with historical fact. For more on the court records dealing with the Lalaurie’s, see Carolyn Morrow Long’s *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House*.

On the morning of April 10th, 1834, a fire broke out at the Lalaurie Mansion. The firemen found the Lalauries directing the crowd to help save their possessions. They would not answer anyone who questioned if there was anyone still left in the house and appeared to be more interested in their material possessions. The fire was reportedly started by the enslaved cook, who was chained to the stove. Eventually, some men went into the house in an attempt to search for any slaves that might have been left behind. When they reached the attic, it was locked but a horrible odor radiated from behind the door.<sup>70</sup> The Lalauries refused to open the attic and the door had to be broken down. What the men found horrified them: men and women imprisoned in chains. Their bodies bloodied and broken, some appeared to have been the victims of bizarre and cruel experiments.

The men quickly freed the enslaved and moved them to a nearby jail in order to treat them and shield them from the crowd. However, the crowd caught a glimpse of what the Lalauries had done to their slaves and formed an angry mob as the story spread throughout the city. The Lalauries had no choice but to flee. While the Lalauries escaped, their butler remained and met his fate at the hands of the angry mob.<sup>71</sup>

Hungry for vengeance, the crowd, unable to get their hands on the Lalauries, turned to the lavish mansion and ransacked it. No one is quite certain what happened to Madame Lalaurie. Some claim that she fled to rural Louisiana, while others say that she

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<sup>70</sup> Other legends and accounts say that it was an out building. However, the attic remains the most popular reiteration of the legend, regardless of historical fact. For more on discrepancies in the tale, see Carolyn Morrow Long's *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House*.

<sup>71</sup> The coachman or Butler is often given the name, Bastien. He is normally described as "mulatto" within the story. He is also often characterized as an accomplice in the legends. There was an enslaved person named Bastien, who was a coachman. He would have been forty at the time and was not described as mulatto. It is uncertain what happened to him. For more on Bastien, see Carolyn Morrow Long's *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House*.

fled to France where she lived out the rest of her days. The mansion remained vacant for many years, with some claiming to have heard screams coming from within the mansion. Many avoided the site and found themselves walking on the other side of the street to avoid it. Eventually the property was turned into apartments and it was at this time that bodies were later claimed to have been found at the site. Some say that Madame Lalaurie's spirit has returned to the mansion and continues to torment the souls that are trapped there.

The story of Madame Lalaurie remains one of the most popular and well-known ghost stories of New Orleans. Delphine Lalaurie did indeed exist and she was known for torturing her slaves. However, the historical events in the story are not only embellished upon but leave out quite a bit of context. The first issue is that her story is never told within the context of New Orleans slavery and she is often viewed as an outlier. In these stories, she is portrayed as a terrible figure to be feared, a mad woman, and an outcast amongst the slave-owning class due to her cruelty.

However, besides her cruelty, it is important to note that at the beginning of the legend, Delphine Lalaurie is not seen as an outcast by her peers. Although there appears to be some attempt to portray her as a newcomer to the city, this is not true. For all intents and purposes, Delphine Lalaurie was considered Creole. She was born Marie Delphine Macarty and despite her three marriages, she always remained so. According to Carolyn Morrow Long's book, *Madame LaLaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House*, her legal surname remained Macarty due to the European civil law that governed Louisiana.<sup>72</sup> After her third marriage, documents show that she signed her name Lalaurie née

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<sup>72</sup> Carolyn M. Long, *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 11.

Macarty.”<sup>73</sup> Perhaps this is one of the reasons she maintains her individuality in the story rather than merely becoming her husband’s accomplice.

Although the story portrays the Lalauries as newcomers to the area, Delphine Lalaurie would have been quite familiar with the territory. Her family settled in New Orleans in its infancy, when it was still known as the French settlement of La Nouvelle Orléans.<sup>74</sup> Her family continued to reside in New Orleans when it was transferred to Spanish rule. During this time, there was much unrest as the French settlers, who were upset by the new Spanish rule, attempted a coup.<sup>75</sup> Unlike some of their neighbors, the Macartys did not participate in the coup and they flourished under the new Spanish regime. Their wealth continued to grow and the family established a plantation on the Mississippi River below New Orleans. However, like other Creole families, they maintained their French language and culture.<sup>76</sup>

The relationship between slave owners and enslaved persons was complicated. Laws and freedoms differed in every state or colony, and New Orleans was no exception. New Orleans was known as a great importer of slaves. While the public was shocked by the level of cruelty that Madame Lalaurie (and possibly her husband) inflicted upon their slaves, they are not an outlier amongst the slave class. They were merely caught.

Although the city had a history of laws and codes that did provide some protection for those who were enslaved, the law also permitted a certain level of cruelty. An account of such cruelty can be found within the pages of *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, which is a collection of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 13.

Louisiana's folklore, culture, and customs published by the Louisiana Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in 1945.<sup>77</sup>

Across from a brief description of the Lalaurie tale is an account from Carlyle Stewart, who details the cruelty that her family and other enslaved people endured. Stewart was born on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1853.<sup>78</sup> At the age of seven, she was set free.<sup>79</sup> Stewart states that it was not uncommon for whip scars to be found on the backs of her peers.<sup>80</sup> She also discussed how her grandmother had tried to escape but was later caught. As punishment, Stewart's grandmother was whipped and branded in the shoulder. Stewart witnessed her master stick a fork in another woman's eye as she "talked back to him."<sup>81</sup> She also recalls how her master would "take men and hitch 'em to the plow like mules." Frequent bed checks were not uncommon to ensure that no one had escaped. If they had and were caught, Stewart asserts that the punishment would have been somewhere between one hundred and fifty to two hundred lashes.<sup>82</sup>

It appears that *Gumbo Ya-Ya* was not the only project for which Stewart was interviewed. Although there is some discrepancy in spelling as her name is labeled as "Carlyle Stewart (?)," she appears to have been interviewed as part of the Louisiana Works Progress Administration, another New Deal project. The interview, which was conducted on May 3, 1940, was part of a series of interviews detailing the experiences of

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<sup>77</sup> Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: Louisiana Folktales* (New Orleans: River Road Press, 2015).

<sup>78</sup> Flossie McElwee, "Interview with Ex-Slave Carlyle Stewart in 1940," Louisiana Digital Library, June 12, 2006, <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/state-lwp%3A5786>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: Louisiana Folktales* (New Orleans: River Road Press, 2015), 236.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

former slaves.<sup>83</sup> Stewart's account differs from the one in *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. This is due the fact that the interview focuses more on an overview of her life where the book appears to have an excerpt of another unknown interview. However, it does not differ in terms of the cruelty that she witnessed. This is possibly due to the fact that it not only focuses on other parts of her life, but she might have been asked different questions.

Within this account, Stewart discusses how punishments for pregnant women were carried out. She states, "We had no pleasure at all and when they went to beat us women, they dug a hole and put the women's stom'ch in the hole, when she was pregnant, so they could whip them without having the child hurt, cause the children were worth money."<sup>84</sup> Stewart's accounts highlight the cruelty that enslaved people often endured. Although the Lalaurie family's cruelty shocked the public, it is just another example of cruelty. When compared to other acts it becomes an example of cruelty rather than an outlier.

Tension between slave owners and the enslaved could be found within Delphine Lalaurie's family history. Although the murder of her uncle occurred before Delphine was born, it can be assumed that she might have heard the tale. In 1771, enslaved persons murdered her uncle, Jean Baptiste Césaire la Brenton, on his plantation.<sup>85</sup> A blaze broke out in the shed next to the kitchen and when la Breton stepped out to direct the men who were extinguishing the fire, those who were revolting shot him dead.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Flossie McElwee, "Interview with Ex-Slave Carlyle Stewart in 1940," Louisiana Digital Library, June 12, 2006, <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/state-lwp%3A5786>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Carolyn M. Long, *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 16.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

The punishments inflicted on Temba and Mirliton, two enslaved persons who confessed to the crime after being tortured on the rack, are an indicator of the strict punishments that could be found in Louisiana.<sup>87</sup> According to Long, after the Spanish governor conducted an inquiry, both were sentenced “to be dragged from the tail of a pack-horse with a...halter tied to the neck, feet, and hands, the town crier to go before announcing the crime they have committed. They must pass through the accustomed streets to the gallows where they will be hanged until dead.”<sup>88</sup> The punishment of death for the murder of a master by a slave was not an unusual one. However, the punishment does not end there as it was only a part of the sentencing.

Further punishments were given out to Temba and his accused accomplices. Long goes on to state that “further indignity was reserved for Temba, whose body was ‘to remain on the gibbet...until consumed. His hands were ‘to be cut off and nailed up on the public road.’”<sup>89</sup> Temba and Mirliton were not the only ones to receive punishments for la Brenton’s murder. Three other slaves, who were deemed to be accomplices, received one hundred to two hundred lashes and their ears were cut off. In addition, one man was “tarred and feathered and mounted on a pack-beast.”<sup>90</sup> No doubt, the public nature of these punishments was to serve as an example to any enslaved person who thought to attempt something similar. The punishments for interracial crimes where the victim was white were cruel and public.

Although the murder of la Brenton occurred before Delphine was born, she would have witnessed rising racial tensions during her lifetime. Like other slave-owning

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



families in New Orleans, the Macartys would have witnessed or heard about the local slave revolts that were occurring nearby. When the massive slave revolt occurred in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791, Delphine Macarty was four years old.<sup>91</sup> Another uprising occurred the same year in July at Pointe Coupée, 150 miles up the river from New Orleans.<sup>92</sup> In 1795, another rebellion was planned by the enslaved at Pointe Coupée. The plot was inspired by the revolution that was still raging in Saint-Domingue<sup>93</sup> but the plot was stopped before it occurred.

Another notable insurrection occurred in 1811. Known as the 1811 German Coast Uprising, it was led by Charles Deslondes, an enslaved person. He recruited other enslaved persons from nearby plantations. With a force of around five hundred men, Deslondes and his followers marched on New Orleans. The rebellion was almost successful.<sup>94</sup> According to historian Daniel Rasmussen, the rebellion was carefully planned and had experienced fighters in their ranks.<sup>95</sup> Many of the enslaved members of the rebellion had copies of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man hidden in their quarters. Some of the rebels had experience fighting in civil wars in Ghana and Angola.<sup>96</sup> Others had led smaller attacks within the nearby area.<sup>97</sup> The revolt would meet a violent end on January 10, 1811, when U.S. federal troops and the slave owners' militia ended

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Marissa Fessenden, "How a Nearly Successful Slave Revolt Was Intentionally Lost to History," Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, January 8, 2016), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/its-anniversary-1811-louisiana-slave-revolt-180957760/>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

the insurrection.<sup>98</sup> Many were killed during the battle. Surviving leaders faced judicial action with many executed.<sup>99</sup>

Around the same time, Delphine McCarty's second husband, Jean Blaque purchased a two story townhouse on Royal Street in 1808.<sup>100</sup> The Blagues would divide their time between the townhouse and their plantation.<sup>101</sup> Although it is uncertain whether or not the Blagues were in the area at the time of the revolt, it would have likely impacted them as they owned property in the area. None of these events excuse Delphine Lalaurie's violence and cruelty but they do provide some insight into important events that would have taken place during her lifetime and possibly influenced her behavior. With proper historical context, Delphine Lalaurie becomes less of an outlier and more of an example of the cruelty enslaved persons routinely faced. The lack of proper historical context is not the only problem with the retelling though.

The second issue is the perpetuation of violence. While it is true that ghost stories often feature violent acts, the acts that are often attributed to Madame Lalaurie, whether true or not, are particularly gruesome. Descriptions of the torture found in the locked space vary, but the more vivid and gory versions can originally be traced back to Jeanne deLavigne's version, published in 1946.<sup>102</sup> Popular versions of the story also consist of descriptions found in a more recent retelling written by Kalila Katherina Smith in

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Carolyn M. Long, *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 39.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>102</sup> Jeanne deLavigne, *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans* (1946; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), ix.

1997.<sup>103</sup> Both of their versions consist of terrifyingly detailed, yet largely unsupported, accounts of torture.

In her book, *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans*, Jeanne deLavigne recounts the fireman's discovery. deLavigne's retelling of Madame LaLaurie is no exception. While she does seem to exhibit some shred of sympathy to the victims, the way deLavigne describes them is incredibly violent and at points animalistic. She writes:

The man who smashed the garret door saw powerful male slaves, stark naked, chained to the wall, their eyes gouged out, their fingernails pulled off by the roots; others had their joints skinned and festering, great holes in their buttocks where the flesh had been sliced away, their ears hanging by shreds, their lips sewed together, their tongues drawn out and sewed to their chins, severed hands stitched to bellies, legs pulled joint from joint. Female slaves there were, their mouths and ears crammed with ashes and chicken offal and bound tightly; others had been smeared with honey and were a mass of black ants. Intensities were pulled out and knotted around naked waists. There were holes in skulls, where a rough stick had been inserted to stir the brains. Some of the poor creatures were dead, some were unconscious, and a few were still breathing, suffering agonies beyond any power to describe.<sup>104</sup>

The writing found in deLavigne's book is often riddled with thinly veiled racism. deLavigne's prejudice was addressed in an introduction of a later 2013 republication of the book by Frank de Caro, professor emeritus of English at Louisiana State University. Although he has since passed since the book's publication, he was a New Orleans native,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 257.

served as president of the Louisiana Folklore Society, and was an editor of the *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*.<sup>105</sup> In the introduction, de Caro writes of deLavigne's problematic portrayals of African Americans:

Another mark of the time is deLavigne's casually derogatory portrayal of African Americans: her occasional use of the word "darky"; her use of the "n-word"—but only in character dialogue— and her use in characters' speech of exaggerated, fake dialect that no writer today would likely employ. deLavigne was working toward the end of a period when... respected publications printed what would today be regarded as racial or ethnic slurs and falsifications of ethnic and class accents.<sup>106</sup>

De Caro goes on to argue that although the work has its flaws, he feels that readers should be fortunate to have a book from the period that records the ghost stories of the time. He points out that these stories stem from long-standing oral traditions that extend to the present day.<sup>107</sup> However, the racism found in deLavigne's writing is not merely limited to her word choice or use of stereotypical accents.

While dated language and stereotypes can be found in deLavigne's retelling of the Lalaurie tale, "The Haunted House of the Rue Royals," the racism of the time period extends to her descriptions as well. By calling the victims creatures and embellishing on the actual events, deLavigne dehumanizes the actual victims in her writing by reducing their real human suffering to fiction. Unlike the other enslaved characters mentioned

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<sup>105</sup> Jessica Turner, "Frank De Caro (1943-2020)," AFS Review: News (American Folklore Society, March 22, 2020), <https://www.afsnet.org/news/495273/Frank-de-Caro-1943-2020.htm>.

<sup>106</sup> Jeanne deLavigne, *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans* (1946; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), xx.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

earlier on in her version of the tale, this group becomes a nameless mass of horrors. As de Caro stated in his introduction, deLavigne's version can be found in the current popular iteration of the tale. As her version is still part of the retellings, those telling the story continually dehumanize the victims.

Even though the authors may change some of the language and more recent versions do differ from deLavigne's popular retelling, the issue of dehumanization still persists. Although it is clear that Kalia Katherine Smith, a self-proclaimed expert in the paranormal, took inspiration from deLavigne's version of the tale, her version does differ slightly. Smith, who was born and raised in New Orleans, claims to be an expert on the paranormal.<sup>108</sup> Her book was published in conjunction with Haunted History Tours. Smith has also written material for the tour company. Smith further elaborates on the torture found in deLavinge's retelling. Most popular versions of the tale draw inspiration from Smith and deLavigne's versions. In her book, *New Orleans Ghosts, Voodoo, and Vampires: Journey unto Darkness...*, Smith writes of the discovery of the victims:<sup>109</sup>

Slaves were chained to the walls throughout, maimed and disfigured, obviously victims of cruel medical experiments...Many looked dead but some were still alive. Several had faces so disfigured they looked like gargoyles. One man looked as if he has been the victim of some crude sex operation... Another victim obviously had her arms amputated and her skin peeled off in a circular pattern, making her look like a human caterpillar. Yet another had been locked in a cage that a newspaper described as barely large enough to accommodate a medium size

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<sup>108</sup> "Bio," Kalila Smith (Haunted History Tours), accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.kalilasmith.com/bio.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Yes, the ellipses are indeed part of the original title.

dog. Breaking the cage open, the rescuers found that all of her joints had been broken and reset... at odd angles so she resembled a human crab.<sup>110</sup>

While there are some differences between the versions, it is clear that Smith's version pulls inspiration from deLavigne's. Smith, like deLavigne, dehumanizes the victims by portraying them as animalistic. The victims' transformations make them appear as something other than human. She describes their features as mimicking gargoyles, caterpillars, and crabs, even going as far to place one of the victims within a dog cage.

It is important to remember that although this story is meant to entertain and frighten, the basis of this story is as unique as it is true. Thus, the retelling, no matter how elaborate or deviated from the actual events, is painted as being a true account. By declaring this account a true tale and highlighting key dates and facts, the audience expects to walk away with factual information. However, the purpose of the popular retelling is not to inform but rather to extort human suffering in consumable, entertainment form. Although the audience might take some of the tale for superstition, such as Madame LaLaurie's ghost still haunting the property, it portrays the exaggerated conditions in the attic as factual. This not only causes audiences to walk away with false information, but their memory of the victims becomes one of frightful, inhuman creatures rather than real people who suffered at the hands of a cruel woman.

Historian Tiya Miles draws a similar conclusion after attending numerous ghost tours within the city. While she found it intriguing that the stories in New Orleans did often highlight or focus on race relations, they were often limited in their

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<sup>110</sup> Kalila K Smith, *New Orleans Ghosts, Voodoo, and Vampires: Journey into Darkness...* (New Orleans: De Simonin Publications, 2012), 26-27.

interpretation.<sup>111</sup> Miles asserts that the radicalized subjects, grotesque bodies, horror, and broken taboos make the house a “dark tourism magnet.”<sup>112</sup> She goes on to state that consumers “engage in an experience that allows for a dalliance with—and disassociation from—troubling historical realities.”<sup>113</sup> Although the purpose is ultimately entertainment, the audience interacts with what can be considered part of “difficult histories” due to the nature of the legend. However, there is still a disassociation from it as the events happened in the past, the story is often decontextualized or treated as an outlier, and often the focus of the tour is the sensationalized details.

Although ghost tours are seen as light entertainment and are often a popular tourist activity, especially in the city of New Orleans, they are not without their consequences. In her chapter on Madame Lalaurie, Miles highlights how the story’s current form packages an actual event featuring racialized violence into a digestible form of entertainment. Miles argues:

The Lalaurie story turns on crimes of racial violence, a kind of violence that our post-civil rights society rightly and vociferously rejects. In other, more mainstream social circumstances, listeners might feel self-conscious or even ashamed for enjoying the recounting of such brutal acts. However, the popularized Lalaurie tale includes within it an easy means for the dissolution of critical self-awareness. By participating in the castigation of a vicious slave mistress with whom they have nothing in common, tourists can distance

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<sup>111</sup> Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 57.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves from her actions and relieve themselves of personal responsibility for indulging in scenes of abuse, racism, and torture.<sup>114</sup>

The story of Madame Lalaurie, like other stories featuring African American spirits, is an opportunity for audiences to connect with the subject of Black History, while including some of the difficult topics that are often brushed over. Topics such as slavery and racism are not always heavily covered in American classrooms. However, Madame Lalaurie's story is often retold in a way that sensationalizes the suffering of black individuals and is often removed from the historical context of slavery in New Orleans. Ghosts, themselves, are an embodiment of both the past and contemporary present; a once living soul from times past supposedly lingering in the present. Whether or not they truly exist is up to individual interpretation, but they are still rooted in this idea of heritage.<sup>115</sup>

These tours, although they are often not conducted by professional historians, often claim to contain elements of historical fact. Therefore, they are a part of the broad understanding of both the categories of dark tourism and public history. Recently, both public and academic historians have been faced with the wider call to include diverse people and stories in their telling of history as well as educate the public in the more difficult topics such as genocide, slavery, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. Although there are no standard requirements for these tours in terms of content as well as the fact that they vary from private companies to events put on by public institutions, one could still argue that there is a moral duty to evaluate the material portrayed as well as the contents of the ghost story's current retelling.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Michele Hanks, *Haunted Heritage the Cultural Politics of Ghost Tourism, Populism, and the Past* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 23.



Although Miles's work was originally published in 2015, the message is still relevant today. Miles writes from her perspective as both an African American woman as well as a public and academic historian.<sup>116</sup> It is also important to note that Miles's work was published after the start of the Black Lives Matters Movement, which began in 2013.<sup>117</sup> Since then, both public and academic historians have tried to consider how their work affects the community and the resurgence of the movement to include diverse stories and people in their telling of history. While some might argue that these tours are based in fiction, they often harbor elements of historical fact or are reflective of the time portrayed. Although the people portrayed in the story may be fictional or no longer living, the groups that are highlighted within the ghost stories found in New Orleans reflect living, breathing marginalized communities who are still dealing with repercussions from their historical struggle today.

The story of Madame Lalaurie puts the black body on display. Whether it be a carefully detailed recount of events or a more sensationalized version, the audience is hearing a story about violent black deaths at the hands of a wealthy white woman. The story being packaged into a more digestible form sold for entertainment purposes does not change the historical fact that, Madame Lalaurie did murder and abuse her slaves. Historically, it is no secret that the commodification of the suffering of black individuals has existed within the United States for quite some time.

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<sup>116</sup> "Tiya Miles," Harvard University (Harvard University), accessed April 10, 2021, <https://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/tiya-miles>.

<sup>117</sup> "Herstory," Black Lives Matter, September 7, 2019, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

In an article published in the same year as Miles's book, William C. Anderson writes of the consequences of commodifying black death.<sup>118</sup> In his article, entitled "From Lynching Photos to Michael Brown's Body: Commodifying Black Death," Anderson writes of the consequences of sharing visual images of black death on society as well as his experience of viewing them as a black man.<sup>119</sup> Anderson does not limit his article to images attached to more recent examples of racial violence. While he does reference the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner, Anderson makes the argument that the visual commodification has historically existed for quite some time from lynching photos to more recent videos of police brutality.<sup>120</sup>

Although Anderson's article focuses on photographs of black death, the Lalaurie story is not dissimilar as it is based on a historical event and has been immortalized in tale, television, comic, and wax form. Anderson grapples with the trauma associated with public repetition of sharing these images and the desensitization that comes with repeatedly viewing and sharing these images, even if the intention is to rally outrage amongst the public.<sup>121</sup> In his article, Anderson writes:

Though these images highlight and often expose injustice, they show human beings at some of their most vulnerable moments. Personally, if I am ever murdered or beaten, I don't want it to become a public spectacle for critique, entertainment and observance. We consume these images for public debate and

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<sup>118</sup> William C Anderson, "From Lynching Photos to Michael Brown's Body: Commodifying Black Death," Truthout (Truthout, January 16, 2015), <https://truthout.org/articles/from-lynching-photos-to-michael-brown-s-body-commodifying-black-death/>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

recycle them as energy to push our protests, whether it is for a protest sign or to hear Peter King say, “If you can’t breathe, you can’t talk.” In our observance of incidents, we rarely stop to ask ourselves what the victim would think of our gaze.<sup>122</sup>

As Anderson argues, images capturing the deaths of these individuals show them in their most vulnerable moments and often those close to the victims are powerless to stop these moments from being shared by strangers on the internet. Ultimately, Anderson comes to the conclusion that those sharing the image run the risk of reducing the victims to their death and erasing “...the beautiful existence many of them had prior to the deadly moments that introduced them to us all.”<sup>123</sup>

Although the victims are often not visually portrayed in the retelling of the events that occurred at the Lalaurie Mansion (there are a few notable exceptions such as the graphic novel retelling or *American Horror Story: Coven*), the way that they are described is detailed, graphic, and often visceral.<sup>124</sup> The retellings and portrayals also stem from an actual historical event, which involves the suffering of enslaved individuals. Those retelling the story of Madame Lalaurie need to properly contend with the fact that these victims were once living people and not just fictional spirits. These individuals deserve to be remembered as such rather than reduced to gory examples of the crimes committed by a white female perpetrator.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> For the graphic novel retelling, see volume three of Serena Valentino and Crab Scrambly’s *Nightmares & Fairy Tales*, which is entitled *1140 Rue Royale*.

## Chapter 5

### The Eternal Legacy of Marie Laveau, Voodoo Priestess of New Orleans

Marie Laveau, or, as she's sometimes known as, the "Voodoo Queen of New Orleans" still remains a prominent figure within New Orleans' culture and lore. There are numerous legends dealing with Laveau, so many that it would be difficult to address all of them. Although there are some ghost stories about her, most of her legends come in the form of tall tales or rumors. Laveau remains just as much a person of intrigue in death as she was during her life.

One legend states that Marie Laveau, a Voodoo priestess, brought a creature known as 'The Devil Baby of Bourbon Street' to Madame Delphine LaLaurie, "who raised it as her godchild for sinister reasons unknown."<sup>125</sup> While the legend is completely unproven, there is a shred of truth in it. Madame Lalaurie and Marie Lavaeu would have lived in New Orleans at the same time.<sup>126</sup> It is strange to think that these two figures, considered to be polar opposites due to their race, position within their society, and place in public memory, would have lived in the same city at the same time.

Laveau's identity in public memory and folklore is a complex one. She is simultaneously old and young. She is both beloved and feared. She is a healer and a witch, responsible for the births of newborns and the deaths of her enemies. She is an advocate and a slave owner. Only two things throughout the stories remain consistent: her

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<sup>125</sup>James Caskey, *The Haunted History of New Orleans: Ghosts of the French Quarter* (Savannah, GA: Subtext Publishing, 2013), 255.

<sup>126</sup> It is unknown where this story originated. The legend most likely takes place in the 1830s or around the time of the fire. Marie Laveau (1801-1881) and Delphine Lalaurie (1787-1849) would have both lived in the city at that time. There are tales and legends of the Lalaurie children exhibiting deformities. For more on those legends, see Carolyn Morrow Long's *Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Mad House*. It is uncertain if they actually suffered any physical disabilities but legends often reflect ablest ideals. However, that is a conversation for another paper and another day.

power and infamy. Her identity is a formation of several, but her folklore provides a history into the lives and occupations of free creole women of color as well as the city's history of Voodoo. In order to better understand Marie Laveau, as well as the city's history of Voodoo, it is important to separate historical fact from fiction.

When Laveau died in 1881, she was already a figure of public interest. There was even an obituary in *The New York Times*. In the obituary, it is clear that the author is trying to paint a clearer figure of Marie Laveau as the author attempts to pin down not only her age but who she was. Like all accounts of Marie Laveau, the obituary paints a contradictory portrait of a woman who was feared by “superstitious Creoles” who viewed her as a “dealer in the black arts and a person to be dreaded and avoided.”<sup>127</sup> However, the obituary also paints her as a benevolent and intelligent woman, a healer whose advice was often sought.<sup>128</sup>

Not much is known about Marie Laveau's profession outside of her voodoo practice. Some of the professions that are often associated with Laveau are historically professions that many free people of color worked within the city. They worked in a variety of professions “including carpentry, cigar making, masonry, shipping, embalming, hairdressing, nursing, and midwifery.”<sup>129</sup> Legends about Laveau often state that she was a hairdresser who served white clients and gained inside information about their lives in order to manipulate them. While there are some interviews from the

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<sup>127</sup>“The Dead Voudou Queen: Marie Laveau's Place in the History of New Orleans,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1881.

<sup>128</sup> “The Dead Voudou Queen: Marie Laveau's Place in the History of New Orleans,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1881.

<sup>129</sup> Amy R Sumpter, “Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 1 (May 2008): 23.

Louisiana Writers' Project that state that hairdressing was Laveau's profession, there are no official records listing her as such.<sup>130</sup>

Another public misconception is that Marie Laveau was a staunch abolitionist. This misconception has also permeated scholarly work about Laveau's life. Several scholars, including Ina Fandrich, Susheel Bibbs, and Martha Ward have argued that Laveau was an abolitionist. Their works argue "... that Marie Laveau and her domestic partner...bought slaves in order to liberate them, helped others 'disappear' by providing them with charms...and that the Laveau-Glapion home might have been 'a Southern terminus for the Underground Railroad.'"<sup>131</sup> However, historical evidence seems to prove otherwise as archival documents show that Laveau actively bought and sold slaves. Laveau's common-law husband, Christophe Glapion, was involved in the slave trade before his relationship with Laveau.<sup>132</sup> His involvement did not stop after their relationship began. Both Laveau and her partner bought and sold slaves. Archival documents show that Laveau and Glapion bought and sold eight slaves between the years 1828 to 1854.<sup>133</sup>

The practice of owning slaves was not uncommon for wealthy free people of color residing in New Orleans. In her book, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess*, Carolyn Morrow Long elaborates on the commonality of this practice:

Virtually all well-to-do New Orleanians, including free people of color, owned slaves. Some used enslaved people as household servants and some hired them

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<sup>130</sup> Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: the Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 50.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

out for wages. According to data for the year 1830, free people of color compromised a little over 25 percent of the population of New Orleans; there were 1,645 free colored families, and 753 of these households (almost 46 percent) owned an average of 3.14 slaves per household. Many of the men of color who became community leaders after the Civil War were former slave owners.<sup>134</sup>

As illustrated by the quote, it was not uncommon for free people of color to participate in New Orleans' slave trade. It is uncertain as to where the public memory of Laveau as an abolitionist originated. In terms of public memory, when most people think of a slave owner, they tend to picture a white, wealthy man, who owns a grand plantation. While historically the majority of slave owners were white, there were areas such as New Orleans where it was not uncommon for wealthy, free people of color to own slaves.

Although records show that Laveau did own slaves, she was an advocate for her community and other marginalized groups in other ways. Although Laveau's situation suffered after the family's financial crisis and Glapion's death, she did still have enough to get by. While Laveau could not pay for Glapion's funeral expenses, reclaim their home, or repay the bank the funds that were owed, she utilized some of what she had left to aid free women of color who had been arrested for minor crimes.<sup>135</sup> In her book, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess*, Long discusses the aid that Marie Laveau provided to her community.

No money actually changed hands in these cases— Marie simply pledged that the defendants would appear for trial. On September 4, 1850, she guaranteed a security bond of \$500 for her neighbor Julia Evans, who lived on Burgundy

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 84.

between St. Peter and Toulouse. Evans was charged with “grossly insulting, abusing, and threatening” a white woman in violation of the Black Code, which mandated that free colored persons “should not imagine themselves equal to whites; on the contrary, they are to defer to whites on every occasion and treat them with respect.” Evans was arraigned and, despite her plea of not guilty, she was sentenced to one week's imprisonment and order to pay court costs.<sup>136</sup>

This was not the only instance of Laveau aiding free women of color in court. On January 11, 1858, Laveau guaranteed a security bond of \$200 for a woman who was charged with a similar crime of “grossly abusing and insulting” a white woman.<sup>137</sup> In another instance, Laveau once again furnished a security bond in 1860 for a woman who was arrested for “assault and battery against another free woman of color.”<sup>138</sup> While she did own slaves, she served as an advocate for her community in other ways, such as procuring security bonds for those wrongfully imprisoned.

Her physical appearance, much like her life, is shrouded in mystery. Even images that are often attributed to Laveau might not actually be her. Laveau's daughter, Philomène Glapion Legendre, was interviewed by a *Daily Picayune* reporter after her mother's death. In the interview, her daughter stated that “her mother never sat for an artist or allowed herself to be photographed.”<sup>139</sup> This has not stopped the public from attempting to profit off of Laveau's image as there are several portraits of women of color that have been attributed to the Voodoo Queen. In her book, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess*, Long discusses other portraits attributed to Laveau:

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 56.



Nevertheless, almost every nineteenth-century portrait of a woman of color is said to represent the Voudou Queen...The image of Marie Laveau most often reproduced is a painting that hangs in the Louisiana State Museum in the old Cabildo on Jackson Square. The woman in this portrait appears to be in her middle thirties, with a rounded face, full lips, a rather flat nose, dark, penetrating eyes beneath gracefully arched brows, and a light complexion....According to the label, this is “Marie Laveau, legendary African American Voodoo Queen is New Orleans during the early nineteenth century.” When Louisiana Writers’ Project interviewees were asked by fieldworkers if the portrait resembled the Marie Laveau they remembered, they uniformly agreed it did not.<sup>140</sup>

This example is not the only image that has been associated with Laveau. Other paintings have been attributed to Marie Laveau or her daughter, including one that can be found in the New Orleans Museum of Art.<sup>141</sup> There is no evidence that this painting, which was first attributed to Laveau in a 1922 *Times-Picayune* article, is actually of Laveau. However, this has not stopped the public from associating this image with the voodoo priestess.<sup>142</sup> Charles Gandolfo, the late founder of the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum, hung a copy of the NOMA portrait in the museum to represent Laveau.<sup>143</sup>

Historians may never fully understand Laveau. Part of her intrigue is the mystery she provides. Much of what is currently known or attributed to her has been pieced together from documents or exists in the form of second-hand knowledge from those who knew her. In order to better understand who Laveau was in life, it is just as important to

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

understand the history of New Orleans Voodoo. Although the practice is different than it was when Laveau practiced, Laveau still holds a prominent place in New Orleans Voodoo history.

Inside the city of New Orleans, Laveau holds a place within contemporary voodoo practices. Some modern practitioners view her as a goddess or patron saint of the city. Devotees call on her for “healing, legal problems, protection, and matters of sex and love.”<sup>144</sup> Her gravesite has also become a pilgrimage destination, though it is debated if the grave is actually her final resting place.<sup>145</sup> It is a place where both white and black believers have “...made offerings to her spirit in return for favors.”<sup>146</sup> Curious tourists have also visited her grave, which bears multiple x-marks. Many tourists mark the tomb in hopes of earning a wish. In her article, Rebecca Alexander explains the tradition and discusses how it is harmful to the tomb’s preservation:

Decades ago, someone started a rumor that if people wanted Laveau to grant them a wish, they had to draw an "X" on the tomb, turn around three times, knock on the tomb, yell out their wish, and if it was granted, come back, circle their "X," and leave Laveau an offering...

This practice comes from a rumor started long ago perhaps started by local tour guides.<sup>147</sup> This practice has damaged the grave and is now discouraged by preservationists.<sup>148</sup> Others have noticed the similarity between other African and Voodoo

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<sup>144</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 88.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Nora Goddard, “New Orleans Cemetery Etiquette,” Nola Tour Guy, May 25, 2019, <https://www.nolatourguy.com/new-orleans-cemetery-etiquette/>.

<sup>148</sup> “Marie Laveau's Tomb,” Atlas Obscura (Atlas Obscura, October 10, 2016), <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/marie-laveaus-tomb>.

traditions. In her work, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess*, Long discusses where the tradition possibly derived from:

Believers also draw cross marks, an African tradition symbolizing a point of concentrated power where the world of the living meets the world of the spirits. Identical rituals are observed in Haitian Vodou, where the drawing of the cross mark is called the *kwasiyen* (to sign with a cross) and is used to establish contact with the lwa and the dead.<sup>149</sup>

Even if the ritual did have some basis in Voodoo tradition at one time, it is now far removed. Most of the people who damage the tomb are often tourists, who are unfamiliar with Voodoo. The ritual described by Alexander likely was a form of cultural appropriation created by tour guides or spread through rumor by those who do not understand the religion.<sup>150</sup>

Marie Laveau's final resting place has also been subject to other acts of vandalism. In 2013, the tomb was vandalized with pink latex paint in an attempt to cover up the markings,<sup>151</sup> an act that would do more harm than good in terms of the tomb's preservation. In 2014, the tomb was restored by Bayou Preservation, LLC<sup>152</sup> costing around \$10,000 and took months to complete.<sup>153</sup> Tourists who attempt to participate in

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<sup>149</sup> Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: the Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 177.

<sup>150</sup> Nora Goddard, "New Orleans Cemetery Etiquette," Nola Tour Guy, May 25, 2019, <https://www.nolatourguy.com/new-orleans-cemetery-etiquette/>.

<sup>151</sup> Rebecca Alexander, "Marie Laveau's Vandalized Tomb: NOLA.com Readers Sound Off," NOLA.com, December 31, 2013, [https://www.nola.com/news/article\\_df922ea6-57ee-5c2b-aa2b-6a93f2812648.html](https://www.nola.com/news/article_df922ea6-57ee-5c2b-aa2b-6a93f2812648.html).

<sup>152</sup> "Marie Laveau Tomb," Bayou Preservation, Llc., accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.bayoupreservationllc.com/marie-laveau-tomb>.

<sup>153</sup> Vanessa Bolano, "Restoration Work on Marie Laveau's Tomb to Be Completed on Halloween," WGNO (WGNO, October 30, 2014), <https://wgno.com/news/entertainment/marie-laveaus-resting-place-restoration-efforts-halloween-and-history/>.

the tradition of marking the grave will be met with a hefty fine.<sup>154</sup> Although it has been many years since Marie Laveau's passing, she still holds a presence through the city's folklore and the practice of Voodoo that remains in the city today.

The dichotomy of Marie Laveau's image as both a healer and witch can be attributed to the city's complicated history with Voodoo. Thoughts of New Orleans often bring to mind the smell of gumbo or the sound of jazz. Like gumbo or jazz, Voodoo is just one example of how the city is built upon the legacy of African American culture. Both Laveau and the Voodoo that she practiced have complex histories. These complexities are not fully highlighted in the city's public history outlets and are currently not embraced within the public memory of the city.

Although there are white practitioners, educators, and scholars of Voodoo, the story of voodoo within the city of New Orleans is ultimately one of black struggle. While the city now appears to embrace the practice of Voodoo through the commercialization of tourism, this was not always the case. Practitioners of Voodoo faced both religious persecution and racial prejudice from the city's white population.

In the early 18th century the Black Code of Louisiana made it more difficult for enslaved practitioners to continue their practice. The 1724 code was based on the earlier 1685 Code Noir. Like its predecessor, it served to regulate the status of slaves and free blacks.<sup>155</sup> The code's fifty five articles also sought to define relationships between

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<sup>154</sup> "Marie Laveau's Tomb," Atlas Obscura (Atlas Obscura, October 10, 2016), <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/marie-laveaus-tomb>.

<sup>155</sup> "The Code Noir," France in America (The Library of Congress), accessed February 20, 2021, <http://international.loc.gov/intldl/fiahtml/fiatheme2c3.html>.

masters and the enslaved.<sup>156</sup> The third article of the code “[p]ermits the exercise of Roman Catholic creed only” and renders “every other mode of worship” as prohibited.<sup>157</sup> Although this ruling did much to undermine conjure as it forced the enslaved population to practice Catholicism, it also gave practitioners the ability to preserve their practice. Followers of Voodoo were able to keep their gods and goddesses alive in the form of Catholic saints.<sup>158</sup>

As historian Jeffery E. Anderson explains, African gods were not merely masked with the names of saints. Rather, they became “... a single entity worshipped in two different ways, depending on whether the Voodoo devotee was participating in a Voodoo dance or attending mass.”<sup>159</sup> Saints would be merged with African deities based on shared personalities or characteristics. Within his writing, Anderson goes on to provide examples of common pairings:

For instance, Blanc Dani, the Voodoo snake god, shared an identity with St. Michael the Archangel, who was frequently depicted in religious iconography battling a serpentine Satan. Likewise, St. Peter, keeper of the keys of heaven, was identical to Papa Lébat, the linguist god who opened the door to other deities at the beginning of religious rituals.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> “The Code Noir,” France in America (The Library of Congress), accessed February 20, 2021, <http://international.loc.gov/intldl/fiahtml/fiatheme2c3.html>.

<sup>157</sup> B. F. French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana*, vol. 3 (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1851), 89.

<sup>158</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 57.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

Although forced to practice Catholicism, practitioners of Voodoo were able to keep their faith alive through the shared commonalities of Catholic saints and African deities. Other Catholic practices also lended themselves to this assimilation:

The Catholic practice of honoring saints with holidays and statues was similar to African practices, which frequently employed images of divinities and festivals in their honor. For example, St. John's Eve was a Catholic holiday characterized in Europe by bonfires and visits to holy bodies of water. Voodooists linked traditional African practices of ritual bathing, drumming, singing, and dancing to the occasion and made it the most important Voodoo celebration of the year.<sup>161</sup>

The shared commonalities of Catholicism and Voodoo allowed practitioners to continue practicing their faith while adhering to the Code Noir. The assimilation of Voodoo and Catholicism would eventually lead to the distinct form of Voodoo practiced within New Orleans today. Although it differs from African Vodun and Haitian Vodou as well as the version that Laveau would have practiced, contemporary New Orleans Voodoo still bears some ties to its predecessors.

Despite the similarities and the religion's assimilation with Catholicism, Voodoo was regarded with suspicion by the white population. Voodoo and conjure were often seen as offensive pagan beliefs and possible sources of slave rebellion by white slave owners.<sup>162</sup> Gatherings between the enslaved were often observed with scrutiny and any mention of a possible slave revolt, even the rumor of one, would often affect their ability to continue to congregate.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 51.

As gatherings held amongst the enslaved class were already viewed with scrutiny by the white, slave owning population, Voodoo gatherings raised the additional issue of superstition. Like other crimes committed against whites, magic practiced against whites could lead to judicial punishment.<sup>163</sup> Such was the case of Carlos, a slave who attempted to use magic to kill his master, Fransisco Bellile.<sup>164</sup> For his crime, Carlos was imprisoned where later died.<sup>165</sup>

During the 18th century, governors of Louisiana banned slave imports from Santo Domingo and Martinique because of anxiety surrounding Voodoo. Due to its prominence in Santo Domingo and Martinique, they feared the practice would become more predominant in Louisiana. Those who attempted to practice magic against whites could suffer legal action and be imprisoned as punishment. The suppression of Voodoo practices within New Orleans extended beyond the Civil War. During this period, the authorities of New Orleans fined believers, broke up practices, and arrested suspected leaders.<sup>166</sup>

After Union forces captured the city of New Orleans, soldiers occupying the city broke up Voodoo gatherings.<sup>167</sup> The participants of these gatherings were usually arrested.<sup>168</sup> After Union forces departed, the New Orleans police took over the task of breaking up the rituals.<sup>169</sup> Participants were usually charged with unlawful assembly and

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

nudity.<sup>170</sup> Due to these raids, practitioners of Voodoo began to practice outside of the city.

By 1873, the *Daily Picayune* reported that the only ritual still practiced was the annual St. John's Eve gathering that took place on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. By 1876, even this ceremony, considered to be an important part of this holy holiday, occurred sporadically. In the following years, organizers of this ceremony catered towards "...white spectators, who paid entrance fees and additional sums for charms, the right to witness 'secret' rituals, and the services of prostitutes."<sup>171</sup> This shift would mark what would begin the commercialization of Voodoo.

In his 1895 work, *New Orleans as It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, Henry C. Castellanos writes about Voodoo. Castellanos was a prominent citizen of New Orleans and served as a judge, attorney, teacher, and journalist.<sup>172</sup> His negative opinion of the practice gives some insight into why these raids might have taken place. Castellanos states:

Drifting into this country and the West India Islands with the constant influx of the Slave Trade, this disgusting organization or order, with its stupid creed and bestial rites, made considerable progress among the low and ignorant of our population in the early period of the present century, and extended its ramifications among the servile classes through most of our Creole parishes.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> "Henry C. Castellanos," Pelican Publishing Company (Pelican Publishing Company), accessed April 27, 2021, <https://pelicanpub.com/products.php?cat=108>.

<sup>173</sup> Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, 2nd ed. (New Orleans: The L. Graham Co., Ltd, 1905), 99.



Castellanos was not alone in his prejudice against practitioners of Voodoo. Other writers of the time covered the practice of Voodoo, which they often portrayed in a negative light. These writings are evidence that practitioners of Voodoo not only faced legal persecution but public persecution as well.

Written accounts on Voodoo covered a wide variety of topics relating to the practice, such as gatherings, raids, judicial proceedings, or practitioners.<sup>174</sup> White newspapers regularly portrayed practitioners as barbaric.<sup>175</sup> In her article, “‘Midnight Scenes and Orgies’: Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy,” Michelle Y. Gordon argues that the accounts found in white newspapers were often used as evidence of white supremacy:

Since slavery, Voodoo accounts had helped “authenticate” fundamental rationalizations of white supremacy. The fetish and demon worship, animal sacrifice, cannibalism, nudity, drumming, sexual promiscuity, and interracial “orgies” recurrently reported in public narratives of Voodoo “verified” the wildness of the postwar city, the inexorable barbarity of its inhabitants of African descent, and the perils of Louisiana's particularly radical Reconstruction. From the 1850s through the Civil War, New Orleans papers regularly covered the police raids, court proceedings, and purported nefarious doings of the city's Voodoo practitioners and queens.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Michelle Y. Gordon, “‘Midnight Scenes and Orgies’: Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2012): pp. 767-786, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2012.0060>.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 769.

These articles served to paint black practitioners as barbaric heathens while simultaneously elevating the status of white Christians within the city.

As stated earlier, the shift towards the commercialization of Voodoo began during the nineteenth century. This practice, which was referred to as “Tourist Voodoo” by Jeffery E. Anderson, remains a staple within the city of New Orleans today.<sup>177</sup> Voodoo tourism can be traced back to the St. John’s Eve ceremonies of the 1870s, when white clientele were charged an entrance fee.<sup>178</sup> During this period, the Pontchartrain Railroad offered late-night rides to the nearby lake for those that hoped to catch a glimpse of these rituals.<sup>179</sup> Shortly thereafter, by 1885, at least one guidebook featured a chapter on the city’s practice of Voodoo.<sup>180</sup>

Today, Voodoo tourism remains a prominent part of the city’s tourism industry. Shirts featuring stereotypical interpretations of Voodoo or Marie Laveau, Voodoo dolls, books such as Robert Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* or *The Voodoo Queen*, and shot glasses can be found in any souvenir shop.<sup>181</sup> The New Orleans’ website offers a list of Voodoo and occult shops that can be found within the city.<sup>182</sup> Marie Laveau House of Voodoo, Reverend Zombie’s House of Voodoo, Bloody Mary New Orleans Haunted Museum and Voodoo Pharmacy, and Voodoo Authentica are just a few of the more notable shops that can be found on Bourbon Street or within the French Quarter area.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 135.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*; this description is based off of my own experience as well as Anderson’s.

<sup>182</sup> “Voodoo and Occult Shops,” *neworleans.com* (New Orleans & Company), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.neworleans.com/things-to-do/shopping/voodoo-and-occult-shops/>.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum closer resembles a cabinet of curiosities than the contemporary idea of a museum. Objects hang from the walls, litter tables, or reside in the odd glass cabinet. The museum was founded in 1972, when Charles Gandolfo, an artist and hairdresser, “wanted a more stable career.”<sup>184</sup> His brother, Jerry, suggested the idea of a voodoo museum. Neither Charles nor Jerry, were practitioners of voodoo but that did not stop them from opening the museum.

The brothers then set to work. Charles gathered a “hodgepodge of artifacts of varying authenticity” including, but not limited to, “horse jaw rattles, strings of garlic, statues of the Virgin Mary, yards of Mardi Gras beads, alligator heads, a clay “govi” jar for storing souls, and the wooden kneeling board allegedly used by the greatest voodoo queen of all: New Orleans’ own Marie Laveau.”<sup>185</sup> He also acquired human skulls, which are still in the museum. According to his brother, once he made it known that he was interested in purchasing human skulls, sellers appeared.<sup>186</sup> No questions were asked about how the remains were acquired, though Jerry states that “Officially, they came from a medical school.”<sup>187</sup> Jerry spent most of his time behind the scenes researching the history of Voodoo.<sup>188</sup>

Charles also became the public face of the museum recreating voodoo ceremonies on St. John’s Eve and Halloween night.<sup>189</sup> Sometimes, he officiated private weddings.

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<sup>184</sup> Abigail Tucker, “The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian Institution, June 1, 2011), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-new-orleans-historic-voodoo-museum-160505840/>.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

These events either took place in the museum or were held outside at Congo Square. The events “...often involved snake dances and traditional, spirit-summoning drumming.”<sup>190</sup>

There is value in the museum though. Many scholars who have studied Voodoo cite the museum as an inspiration for their work.<sup>191</sup> Martha Ward, a University of New Orleans anthropologist and author of *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*, states that the museum is a good starting point for those interested in learning more about Voodoo.<sup>192</sup> However, there does not appear to be an educational space that allows for a deeper understanding of New Orleans Voodoo, one that not only removes misconceptions about Voodoo but also places it in proper historical context and one that tackles the difficult history intertwined with Voodoo, such as slavery and the struggles that practitioners faced.

The history of New Orleans Voodoo is intimately intertwined with the city’s black history. In his work, *Conjure in African American Society*, Jeffery E. Anderson writes of the importance of conjure within black history and acknowledges that its importance has largely been overlooked. After discussing the importance of the founding of the Hampton Institute’s folklore society, Anderson leaves readers with this important food for thought.

If a record of conjure was not preserved, blacks would become a people without a history beyond what whites choose to give them. Progress, destined to wipe out

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Nina K. Müller-Schwarze, “Museums and Meaning-Making,” *Collections* 9, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 358.

<sup>192</sup> Abigail Tucker, “The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian Institution, June 1, 2011), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-new-orleans-historic-voodoo-museum-160505840/>.

folk beliefs like conjure, would nevertheless preserve knowledge of such

“savagery” for future generations through the work of professional folklorists.<sup>193</sup>

Overtime, history has evolved into many different forms, shifting from oral to written traditions. If the city of New Orleans wishes to truly embrace its diverse nature and acknowledge the city’s black history, it must take into account the city’s history of Voodoo. In addition, understanding the rich history of Voodoo is necessary to understand Marie Laveau. Although Marie Laveau’s true identity might remain a mystery lost to the ages, she still remains a prominent figure within New Orleans’ history. In order to better understand her though, it is necessary to understand the history of voodoo and the struggles practitioners faced.

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<sup>193</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 6.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

In May 19, 2017, the city of New Orleans removed a statue of Robert E. Lee. Up until that day, the statue had stood there for one hundred and thirty-three years, looming over the residents of the city from a 60 foot pedestal.<sup>194</sup> It was the last of four statues that the city had removed. The movement was started by Mayor Mitch Landrieu in 2015.<sup>195</sup> On the same day as the statue's removal, Mayor Mitch Landrieu also gave a speech. In his speech, he not only recognized the city's historically diverse population, but also the city's shortcomings as well. Landrieu went on to discuss how the city lacks memorials to its more difficult histories, such as its strong ties to slavery.<sup>196</sup> He also stressed the importance of contextualizing and remembering all forms of history, even the ones that are not as pleasant to remember.

Landrieu went on to discuss that despite his experience of growing up in a diverse neighborhood and his family's history of involvement in the fight for civil rights, he never truly considered what the statues represented for some.<sup>197</sup> He had never considered that these statues might be a painful reminder for the city's African American residents. It was not until a friend pointed this out to him that he began to consider what should be

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<sup>194</sup> Jeff Adelson and Jessica Williams, "New Orleans Completes Removal of Confederate Monuments with Take down of Robert E. Lee Statue," NOLA.com, May 19, 2017, [https://www.nola.com/news/article\\_ea7f25d7-ddab-58b4-b168-38965e9129e6.html](https://www.nola.com/news/article_ea7f25d7-ddab-58b4-b168-38965e9129e6.html).

<sup>195</sup> Tegan Wendland, "With Lee Statue's Removal, Another Battle Of New Orleans Comes To A Close," NPR (NPR, May 20, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/20/529232823/with-lee-statues-removal-another-battle-of-new-orleans-comes-to-a-close>.

<sup>196</sup> "Mitch Landrieu's Speech on the Removal of Confederate Monuments in New Orleans," The New York Times (The New York Times, May 23, 2017), [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/opinion/mitch-landrieus-speech-transcript.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&fbclid=IwAR3QbHEPE1XvMbWrqkVof2qDIGyJgKYvXcZW\\_iTD49WAYQQiEMHAMSGk1x0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/opinion/mitch-landrieus-speech-transcript.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&fbclid=IwAR3QbHEPE1XvMbWrqkVof2qDIGyJgKYvXcZW_iTD49WAYQQiEMHAMSGk1x0).

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

done with the statues. In his speech, Landrieu emphasized the importance of the statue's removal. He stated:

This is, however, about showing the whole world that we as a city and as a people are able to acknowledge, understand, reconcile and, most importantly, choose a better future for ourselves, making straight what has been crooked and making right was wrong...Otherwise, we will continue to pay a price with discord, with division and, yes, with violence.<sup>198</sup>

Although Landrieu was talking about the removal of the statues, his point extends to the city's relationship with public history. There is still quite a bit of the city's history that needs to be recognized and contextualized.

Landrieu was not the only leader of this movement. He merely heard the voices of others who had long been fighting this fight. One such group, Take 'Em Down NOLA, wants to see change to all of the city's monuments that feature confederates, white supremacists, or slave owning individuals. This "black-led, a black-led, multiracial, intergenerational coalition" formed when other activists, who had participated in other local and national movements involving race related issues, came together.<sup>199</sup> The group believes that there is more work to be done and that after removing four monuments, the city should focus on removing all symbols of white supremacy.<sup>200</sup> The group has identified a list of monuments, parks, squares, streets, and schools that they hope to change.<sup>201</sup> It is a daunting task and while it may seem impossible to some, they are

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Clint Smith, "The Young Black Activists Targeting New Orleans's Confederate Monuments," *The New Republic*, May 18, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/142757/young-black-activists-targeting-new-orleanss-confederate-monuments>.

<sup>200</sup> "Why It Matters," #TakeEmDownNOLA, accessed April 13, 2021, <http://takeemdownnola.org/why-it-matters>.

<sup>201</sup> "The Symbols," #TakeEmDownNOLA, accessed April 13, 2021, <http://takeemdownnola.org/symbols>

sparking important conversations about how the city memorializes its history and who is ultimately recognized in that history.

Changes are not just being made to current monuments. The city is also erecting new ones. In 2018, the city of New Orleans celebrated its three hundredth birthday.<sup>202</sup> Of course, like any city, events and celebrations were held but the most important, but overlooked, acknowledgement came in the form of recognizing the city's historic ties to slavery. Two groups, The New Orleans Committee to Erect Historic Markers on the Slave Trade, and New Orleans Slave Trade Marker and App Project, sought to address the city's ties to slavery by placing informational plaques.<sup>203</sup> Many saw these markers as an important first step to addressing the more difficult parts of the city's long history.<sup>204</sup>

Changes are already being made, and hopefully will continue to be made, in the areas of public history within New Orleans. Although dark tourists and those that operate the city's ghost tours might not realize it, they are participating in or are a part of the field of public history. While these tours might serve as a source of entertainment, they are still feature partial reflections of the local history. In their current form, these retellings and legends often ignore their connection to the actual history of the city while embracing falsities and reinforcing stereotypes.

Tourism has historically been and continues to be a large part of New Orleans's economy. After the Civil War, New Orleans became a tourist destination, particularly a popular winter destination. The city's debut as a tourist destination was aided by the

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<sup>202</sup> Famion A Roberts, "Efforts Underway to Mark New Orleans Sites Where Slaves Were Bought and Sold," NOLA.com, May 5, 2018, [https://www.nola.com/news/article\\_8b417385-a22f-5975-8791-451cc0bfdc76.html](https://www.nola.com/news/article_8b417385-a22f-5975-8791-451cc0bfdc76.html).

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.



arrival of first-class hotels, transcontinental railroads, and guides. Like other southern cities, New Orleans hoped to entice northern investment through tourism. Although African-Americans have contributed so much to the culture of New Orleans, the tourist industry did not always include them. During the 19th century, New Orleans advertised itself as an idyllic, romantic southern location. This image “...relied on Jim Crow restrictions to forge the illusion of a stable racial order.”<sup>205</sup> In the promotional items created during this time, African Americans were rarely portrayed, unless they were in the background as servants and dock workers.

As seen in this study, New Orleans Voodoo also became commercialized. Although New Orleans Voodoo stems from African beliefs and practices, black practitioners were prohibited from practicing. It was only upon the interest of white clients that Voodoo became commercialized and accepted as part of New Orleans tourism. While New Orleans tourism and Voodoo practice has changed today, it is important to consider that the city of New Orleans has historically kept its black population out of consideration. Therefore, if the city of New Orleans truly wishes to embrace and acknowledge its difficult and complicated history regarding race, it needs to examine how members of its black population are regarded and treated in all factions.

In recent years, there has been an increase in New Orleans tourism. In his article, “N.O. Tourism Spending Breaks Records in 2019,” Rich Collins, an associate news editor for Biz New Orleans, discusses the recent increase in tourism.<sup>206</sup> Collins discusses a D.K. Shifflet & Associates report that determined that in 2019, 19.75 million people

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<sup>205</sup> J. Mark Souther, “A City Built on Baubles: A Brief History of Tourism in New Orleans,” *Perspectives on History* (American Historical Association, October 1, 2012), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2012/a-city-built-on-baubles>.

<sup>206</sup> “Meet the Staff,” Biz New Orleans, May 18, 2021, <https://www.bizneworleans.com/meet-the-staff/>.

visited New Orleans. This was a 6.7 percent increase from 2018. The report also estimates that visitors spent around ten billion dollars, which was a 10.3 percent increase from 2018.<sup>207</sup>

The amount lost due to the pandemic is also important to consider as it demonstrates the city's reliance on tourism. Collins states that New Orleans & Company, formerly the Convention and Visitors Bureau, estimated that the city has lost more than two hundred million dollars per week in tourism revenue. While tourism has taken a hit due to the pandemic, travel will most likely increase once the pandemic has ended. These statistics, whether taken prior to or after the pandemic, demonstrate the city's reliance on tourism.<sup>208</sup>

While activities such as ghost tours and haunted houses are considered to be entertainment, it does not mean that they are without consequence. Just like any type of entertainment, these activities can perpetuate harmful stereotypes. For example, many haunted houses often utilize asylum scenes. Some even conduct their events within former asylums.<sup>209</sup> Their depictions of mental illness are often seeped in stereotypes. These caricatures end up portraying real life mental health struggles or victims of malpractice as something to be feared.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Rich Collins, "N.O. Tourism Spending Breaks Records in 2019," Biz New Orleans, May 14, 2020, <https://www.bizneworleans.com/n-o-tourism-spending-break-records-in-2019/#:~:text=NEW%20ORLEANS%20%E2%80%93%20A%20new%20report,10.3%20percent%20increase%20over%202018.>

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Jamie Tarabay, "Haunted House Has Painful Past As Asylum," NPR (NPR, October 30, 2010), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130840594>.

<sup>210</sup> Colby Itkowitz, "Halloween Attractions Use Mental Illness to Scare Us. Here's Why Advocates Say It Must Stop.," The Washington Post (WP Company, March 31, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/10/25/this-halloween-mental-health-advocates-are-taking-a-powerful-stand-against-attractions-depicting-asylums/>.

Similarly, the stories explored in this study often utilize common stereotypes of African Americans or negatively shape the victims in other forms. As discussed in this study, Julie's ghost story employs the "tragic mulatto" stereotype. While Marie Laveau's story appears to break stereotypes as she is largely celebrated, (though some could argue that she plays into the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype in some of her portrayals), the problems of her various legends can be found in their discrepancies and differences.<sup>211</sup> Her legacy is changed depending on the viewpoint of the teller. To some, she is a supernatural force to be reckoned with, while playing into some of the fears and stereotypes surrounding voodoo. To others, she is an example of advocacy, even if that legacy is not held up by historical fact.

Madame Lalaurie's story also creates another issue. The story not only focuses on the perpetrator rather than the victim, but transforms very real victims into a faceless animalistic mass, doomed to be tortured for eternity. The story's effect can be seen in how the house has been treated. In her article, "Another era for Lalaurie House: See elegant makeover for haunted French Quarter mansion," Susan Langenhennig interviews the owner of the mansion, Michael Whalen, as well as the interior designer, Katie Stassi-Scott. Walen states in the article that they "wanted to acknowledge its haunted past..." but clarifies that they were "...not trying to glamorize the hauntedness." They also had a priest bless the house after the renovations were completed. Stassi-Scott had similar intentions for the design, "I prayed about this house.... [a]nd I felt maybe this is the time

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<sup>211</sup> For more on this stereotype, see the following source: Kara Manke, "How the 'Strong Black Woman' Identity Both Helps and Hurts," Greater Good (Berkeley University of California, December 5, 2019), [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_the\\_strong\\_black\\_woman\\_identity\\_both\\_helps\\_and\\_hurts](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_the_strong_black_woman_identity_both_helps_and_hurts).

to let light into this place, honor and respect the history, not erase it, but bring peace to these souls.”<sup>212</sup>

While their intentions might have been to honor and respect the history, some of the design choices shown in the article appear to do the opposite. One example can be found in the interior design selected for the kitchen. For the kitchen table, Stassi-Scott selected “...Louis XVI-style chairs upholstered in a Fortuny-like fabric with a skull motif.” Stassi-Scott discusses the chairs in the article, “That fabric was one of the first things I found for this project...It's beautiful and elegant, and when I saw the skulls, I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, that's the fabric for Lalaurie.’”<sup>213</sup> This is just one example of questionable design choice that appears to glorify the perpetrator, without properly respecting the very real victims that suffered at Lalaurie’s hand. The perpetuation of the legend, in its current form, not only focuses more on the perpetrator, but trivializes the suffering of her victims.

Although some may argue that ghost tours and stories are just for entertainment and should not consider the history that they are inspired by, it does not mean that factions of entertainment are free from ethical responsibility. The stereotypes, exaggerations, and false information do not exist in a bubble, but rather, shape the audience's understanding of the minority groups portrayed and historical events. Stereotypes not only affect the group that they are about, but shape other groups perceptions of the group based on the stereotype. Studies have shown that they affect the

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<sup>212</sup> Susan Langenhennig, “Another Era for Lalaurie House: See Elegant Makeover for Haunted French Quarter Mansion,” NOLA.com, October 24, 2013, [https://www.nola.com/entertainment\\_life/home\\_garden/article\\_f0c51023-9560-5fc9-9063-f550e01c7b0c.html](https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/home_garden/article_f0c51023-9560-5fc9-9063-f550e01c7b0c.html).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

actions of both groups, with some changing their actions as not to be perceived as the stereotype while others change how they respond to the stereotyped group.<sup>214</sup>

Ghost stories and lore exist in every culture. They have patterns and similarities that can be found in the stories despite cultural differences. At the heart of the stories, they are reflections of human desire to connect with what has been lost as well as an attempt to grapple with the concept of death. Ghost stories will continue to exist long after those that created them. Some will go on to live on in different forms, give up the ghost and die out of popularity, and new ones will be made.

In his epilogue of *Ghostland*, Colin Dickey offers, “Ghost stories are about how we face, or fail to face, the past—how we process information, how we narrate the past, and how we make sense of the gaps in that history.”<sup>215</sup> At face value, ghost stories are neither inherently good nor bad. It is how they process the history that they reflect or bare pieces of that that matters. New Orleans is just starting to grapple with its darker, more controversial histories. As evidenced by these popular tales, a lot of work still needs to be done in order to reflect the diverse populations who have lived there over the years. This not only includes the tours but other areas of public history if the city truly hopes to address the more difficult parts of its past.

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<sup>214</sup> For more on how stereotypes affect behavior, see the following sources: Magdalena Zawisza, “The Terrifying Power of Stereotypes – and How to Deal with Them,” *The Conversation*, June 11, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-terrifying-power-of-stereotypes-and-how-to-deal-with-them-101904>.; Michele W Berger, “How Do Stereotypes Affect What People Think Is Fair?,” *Penn Today* (University of Pennsylvania, September 26, 2018), <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/how-stereotypes-affect-behavior>.

<sup>215</sup> Colin Dickey, *Ghostland: an American History in Haunted Places* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2017), 284.

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