

Voodoo Feminism Through the Lens of Jewell Parker Rhodes's Voodoo Dreams

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Abstract:

The tradition of conjuring is well documented and discussed in African American literary discourse. Marjorie Pryse comments on Alice Walker's professed role in writing *The Color Purple* (1982), "If there is magic involved in Walker's perception of herself as a medium, it is women's magic, the origins of which are as old as women themselves—and which, in the Black community, has often taken other forms but has also taken literary expression" (2). In his article on Charles Chestnutt's *Conjure Woman* (1899), Eric Sellinger comments "on the limits authors like Chestnutt worked within and against—including, perhaps, the definitions of masculinity and femininity his conjure figures suggest" (667). Concerned with the early tradition of casting conjure women as "comic or demonic," Lindsay Tucker argues that Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), "sees the conjure woman in need of textual restitution" (175). These scholars discern a relationship between gender and power—a relationship that emerges in the work of Jewell Parker Rhodes as well.

Keywords: African American literature | feminism | jewell parker | voodoo

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conjure women as “comic or demonic,” Lindsay Tucker argues that Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), “sees the conjure woman in need of textual restitution” (175). These scholars discern a relationship between gender and power—a relationship that emerges in the work of Jewell Parker Rhodes as well.

Rhodes, in her novel, *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993), contributes to the genre of African American conjuring tales through her fictionalized depiction of Marie Laveau, the Voodoo priestess of New Orleans during the early nineteenth century. Marjorie Pryse's reference to Alice Walker's positioning of herself as a medium is an act engaged by Rhodes approximately eleven years later. After establishing that Walker “sees folk magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring,” Pryse goes on to state, “Walker purposely gathers together the creative force of her Black and female forerunners. By acting as ‘medium’ for Celie, she gives voice to them all” (2). Rhodes, like her literary predecessor, is a medium who uses the novel form to bring together culture and gender. In the epilogue of the novel, Rhodes writes that she finds a reference to Marie Laveau in a Creole and Acadian cookbook. When she begins to write, she remembers her “conjuring grandmother” (435). A self-professed “African American woman and feminist,” Rhodes's focus on the most known of conjuring Black women, Marie Laveau, places her firmly in the tradition of Walker, Naylor, and other African American women “mediums” (435).

The influences of ancestral figures in writing about Black women and her own presence as a Black feminist compels us to consider the relationship between Voodoo and feminism and how Marie Laveau represents the two. In her book, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (2005), Ina Johanna Fandrich uses a feminist perspective to explore “Laveaux's significance as the quintessential figure within a larger movement: the emergence of influential free women of color, women conjurers of African or racially mixed origin ... and a deep commitment to the spirits of their ancestors” (2). Fandrich's research provides a socio-historical context for my analysis of Rhodes's fictionalized characterization of Marie Laveau and her journey towards empowerment.¹ Patricia Hill Collins in her classic text, *Black Feminist Politics* (1991), focuses on the significance of empowerment: “Empowerment remains an illusive construct and developing a Black feminist politics of empowerment requires specifying the domains of power that constrain Black women, as well as how such domination can be resisted” (19). In this article, I argue that Rhodes offers an empowering form of Black feminism I identify as “Voodoo Feminism.” Voodoo feminism is a unique form of resistance, practiced by women of African descent as it is rooted in West African cultures. Rhodes emphasizes how Black women implored African-based religious practices of Voodoo and conjuring to resist constraining domains of power, namely southern racism and gender oppression. More specifically, Marie's Voodoo practices allow her to find definition as a woman of African descent who is empowered by practicing the religion of her ancestors. She is further empowered by knowledge of her maternal history and this knowledge, as well as her willingness to engage in Voodoo, make it possible for her to emerge as an influential Black woman despite the restrictions of the slavery era for both

free and enslaved Blacks. In this article, I focus on the significance of Voodoo in Marie's journey towards defining herself through resistance of those who wish to oppress and suppress her, including her abusive lover, a privileged White male, a jealous female “friend,” her dead mother, and fearful grandmother.

Readers meet Marie in 1812 on her tenth birthday; she is a child who lives in an isolated town in Southern Louisiana with her grandmother, also named Marie. Her grandmother is a secretive woman who will not discuss the whereabouts of her absent daughter, Marie.² We later learn that Marie or Marie Laveau's maman was killed in New Orleans for leading a Voodoo ceremony in front of St. Louis Cathedral. The youngest Marie is unaware of her legacy as a servant to the serpent-god/loa Damballah and is confused by the visions she receives and the voice she hears. Marie's grandmother takes her to New Orleans to find her granddaughter a husband, but it is in New Orleans that the young girl meets an older man and a woman who answer the questions that she has about her missing mother, her legacy as a servant of Damballah, and her relationship to Voodoo.

Rather than to shroud the practices of the characters in mystery as Gloria Naylor does in *Mama Day* (1988), Rhodes is more specific.³ She integrates the practice and culture of Voodoo to develop her characters and theme. Voodoo is a West African based religion. Fandrich provides four meanings of the term:

(a) Usually spelled V-o-d-u-n, it refers to the traditional religion of the Fon and Ewe people residing in today's Republic of Benin, the former kingdom of Dahomey, West Africa; (b) spelled Vodou, it is the popular syncretic Afro-Creole religion of Haiti; (c) commonly spelled Voodoo (in the 19th century usually spelled Voudou), it addresses the Afro-Creole counterculture religion of southern Louisiana; (d) but as mentioned above, Voodoo is also the common term in American English for any African-derived magical or religious beliefs and practices, often associated with Black magic and witchcraft. (“Yoruba influences” 779)

Carolyn Morrow Long informs that Vodou of Haiti is similar to Voodoo of Louisiana. She notes further that it is a religion distinctive of New Orleans as it is the only Afro-Catholic religion to emerge in North America. As early as 1758, African religious and magical traditions arrive in Louisiana along with first slaves (93). The importance of Voodoo as a cultural religious practice in slave communities emerges as a prominent theme in the novel.

A religion that emerged from slave communities, Voodoo is associated with resistance towards oppressive authorities. By 1773, court records document a case in which several slaves, including a Mandingo man, were tried for using a gris-gris⁴ to kill their master and overseer (94). Further, the Haitian Revolution started with a Vodou ceremony when it began in 1791. Long notes, “The service was led by a priest named Boukman; a black pig was sacrificed, and the worshipers swore a blood oath to overthrow the French” (95). Hundreds of people from

Haiti, including free people of color and enslaved persons, came to New Orleans during the time of the Haitian Revolution. Rhodes's novel captures the spirit of resistance among the people of the African diaspora that emerges in New Orleans. Some of them brought their knowledge of Vodou and their desire to remain connected to their ancestors. However, Fandrich argues that the Vodou practices emerged in New Orleans before the Haitians arrival to the city.

Resistance is further noted by both enslaved and free persons' desire to remain connected to Africa through the practice of Vodou. The religion formed from the beliefs of people from Senegambia, the Fon and Yoruba from West Africa and the Kongo of Central Africa. Fandrich notes, "... a recalcitrant African spirit survived in ever unexpected, fascinating, new ways despite the countless attacks by the dominant white groups of society" (*The Mysterious* 10). The African spirit was one of survival that would exist in many forms. Similar to the Catholic Europeans who colonized the Africans and imposed their own belief systems, the Africans from these regions believed in a supreme creator, the existence of intermediaries between humans and the highest god. Catholics believe in a supreme creator called God and intermediaries referred to as Saints. Fandrich sees a similarity between Legba who is called on to open the door to the spirit world and St. Peter who is thought to guard the gate to heaven. Acceptance of Catholicism was not so much a shedding of the old, as it was a means to keep the old traditions alive.

In keeping with West African practices, it was not unusual for women to serve as Vodou practitioners. One researcher finds that "Eighty percent of New Orleans' Vodou practitioners were women" (Fandrich, *The Mysterious* 37). Fandrich explains that both men and women were respected as having been chosen by gods to lead people in worship. Therefore, Marie Laveau's place as Queen of Vodou in New Orleans is neither unusual nor improbable. In particular, people would have been attracted to her for her ability to heal others during the time of cholera outbreaks and yellow fever. She was sought in cases to cure the ills of the romantic heart as well. While many reportedly feared Laveau because of her communications with the spirit world, she was also well respected by those who saw her as a woman who served both the Catholic God through her charity work and still others who respected her for remaining obedient to West African-inspired traditions. Rhodes borrows from historical facts of early nineteenth century New Orleans, its Vodou culture, and the myth of Marie Laveau to construct *Voodoo Dreams*.⁵

Rhodes's novel makes use of the influences of West Africa and the tragedy of the slave trade. Significantly, when Grandmère is dying and Marie is pregnant with her first child, she knows that it is time to tell her granddaughter the story of Membe. The story of the Maries—three generations of women born with the gift to communicate with Damballah—begins off the coast of Africa. As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, Grandmère says, "Memories of Damballah and Africa were being lost" (331). In response, Membe is called by Damballah to be captured by European enslavers and to go to the New World. She has been chosen to "mother [his] lost children" by reviving the people's faith in Damballah and to worship him accordingly. In the tradition of earlier African American women's novels, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *Song of Solomon* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Rhodes makes a connection between

spirituality and historical memory. The story of Membe, a woman chosen to mother the displaced children of Africa, gives purpose and definition to the woman who was forcibly removed from her place of origin. Grandmère accepts the story that her mother, Membe, tells her as truth. As a result, she sees her not as her mother, but as a woman of great strength so much so that she feels incapable of accepting that she is in line to carry out the wishes of the loa, Damballah. Nevertheless, Membe's true legacy is the story. Pryse observes, "Black women have long possessed 'magical' powers and told their daughters stories" (3). Membe's engagement in these practices demonstrates the importance of Black women to survive through spiritual reverence, but survival will only occur if the daughters do not forget how they are connected to their ancestors.

Grandmère's fear of the legacy keeps her from not telling her granddaughter until she is on her deathbed. While living in the rural isolated town of Teche, Marie longs to learn about her absent mother as she begins to resent her grandmother's unwillingness to tell her about the absent woman. Her grandmother's response is to tell her stories about her own history of oppression and sadness. Marie learns that she is of "mixed blood"; more specifically, their lines are from "French royalty," an "African queen," and a "Moskogeian warrior." "Mixed bloods. Our history and power" (16–17). Choosing to overlook her grandmother's insistence that their familial background is equated with power, Marie maintains her desire for tangible connections—ones that she can touch, that can touch her, and give her a place to leave her emotions. Consequently, she is unable to appreciate the idea of history and "lines" from the person who seems intent on keeping her from others. While in Teche, Marie languishes in a state of "loneliness" (16).

It is unknowing partnered with loneliness that compels young Marie to exist more often than not outside of her self as she begins to rely heavily on the voices that she hears around her. In response to her unanswered questions to her grandmother, she is given responses from an unknown source. She has a vision of a fight between two women, which Marie "somehow knew that the two women fighting were Maman and Grandmère" (18). Although her grandmother does not share with her the stories that she desires, i.e., information about her mother and her mother's whereabouts, Grandmère does tell Marie about her self. At the age of nine, Marie's naïveté and youth make her unable to listen carefully to her grandmother. In addition to telling Marie about her familial lineage, she also tells her that she was born with a caul: "She saw herself, bloodied, slipping out of her mother's body, and Grandmère's frantic fingers, ripping the caul away" (18). Marie's astonishing ability to see herself born, sets the foundation for the rest of the novel. Her confusion as to why she is able to see the moment when her life begins and her grandmother's role in protecting her from death begins is pivotal in understanding the significance of Marie and Grandmère's relationship. Marie will later learn that her grandmother moved to Teche from New Orleans to protect her from the villainous conjurer John, a man responsible for the death of Marie's maman. Further, it is the only vision-memory she will have of the three Marie's in the physical world. Her birth secures the passing of Membe's legacy from mother to daughter.

Despite her reasoning, Grandmère cannot keep Marie from her legacy. Following the confusing vision, when Marie is emotionally vulnerable and in search of answers, a “man so black he blended into the skyline” (19) touches her. It is not clear to Marie whether the man is a strange vision or a physical being, but he proceeds by “cupping the valley between her thighs, rubbing her in slow even movements” (19). John's entrance into Teche where Grandmère feels that she has a protective covering over her granddaughter is empowered not so much by his desire to disrupt Grandmère's space as it is by Marie's desire for the unknown. If Marie is sensitive to the spirit-world that appears to reach out to her through visions and whisperings, these spirits also welcome John's presence in the girl's life. As we learn later, her grandmother's plans to marry her to a man who will take her back to Teche are thwarted by the spirits that seem intent on making sure that Marie will practice the ways of her grandmother. Marie's legacy compels her to move forward as the servant of Damballah.

In order to obey her calling, she will need to navigate around the fears of her grandmother. Though motivated by her fears, Grandmère surely knows that she cannot defy the loa. On one hand, Grandmère attempts to distract Marie from the pain of her loneliness by telling Marie about her life as a slave. On the other hand, telling her isolated granddaughter about her family's history provides Marie with a historical identity. More specifically, the lifeline in her diverse ancestral background, according to Grandmère's story of Membe, is her African maternal roots. Rather than to look backwards, however, Grandmère hopes to inspire her granddaughter to look forward. From her own experiences, she clearly hopes that Marie will have an appreciation for her freedom.

Marie, unlike her grandmother, was born a free woman. She is the daughter of a White man unknown to her, but her grandmother is the daughter of the White man who owned her and her mother. Living as an enslaved woman necessitated moments of resistance, especially when there were threats to the body. During her time as a slave, Grandmère loved an Indian man who was killed by White men. Following that tragic event, Membe killed the White man, the father of her daughter and master, who wanted to rape her daughter. Membe's resistance, which results in her own death, teaches her daughter that her status as an enslaved person does not obligate her to accept that she cannot define her own value. Grandmère flees the plantation and redefines herself in New Orleans as a free woman. She may have social freedom, but Grandmère is not free from her obligation to Damballah and her people.

Consequently, she does not forget what she has lost. Grandmère's love of that man motivates her, among other reasons, to find a husband for Marie. The elderly woman's desire is to give her granddaughter safety. She, however, is misguided by her fear that Marie will die tragically like Maman. Additionally, she is consumed by her own selfish intent to return to find a husband for Marie and return with the married Marie to Teche. Her belief that she will find a husband for her granddaughter whose single desire is to know the whereabouts of her mother may soothe her fears that she can protect her granddaughter, but that presumption does very little in reality. In

fact, her act of responding to her fears and not her calling leaves both her, her granddaughter, and by extension, the community, vulnerable to destruction.

Grandmère's retreat to Teche and her reliance on Christianity leave her vulnerable to the man she fears the most, John. Christianity's role in the novel is as a religion that provides comfort. It is not an active religion that one can exclusively rely on to change circumstances or outcomes. In Grandmère's case, it veils. Therefore, Grandmère is not stripped of her awareness that change will come, but she does not call Damballah and the gods to provide her with a means to react responsibly to the signs that she receives from the spirits. John is aware of her vulnerability, which is exacerbated by her fear that she will lose Marie to him.

It later becomes clear that Grandmère's roots in the worship of Damballah remain too strong for her to abandon her practices. We are given a glimpse at the strength that she draws from when she and Marie are threatened by Antoine in New Orleans. Marie's cries for help are immediately met with her seeing a grandmother in the process of transformation: "Marie blinked and saw a Grandmère she'd never seen before. Standing atop the wagon, her face contorted, the whites of her eyes visible, Grandmère had personified violence" (49). Her fear that she will sin—a consequence of conversion to Catholicism—by killing a White man as she had done to avenge the death of her lover extinguishes her desire to kill Antoine. Her history of killing White men, slowly, by means of calling on the death gods and enacting certain rituals is a bold act of defiance. At that time, Grandmère was Marie, a young girl in mourning for the man she dared to love and to let love her. Their love had no respect for the man who owned her and other people, who had power, and who used it to make decisions about the enslaved, including his own daughter. Her passionate pleas for the men to stop beating her lover are useless and demonstrate her powerlessness. Her conversion to Catholicism is unconvincing. It was not unusual for those who remained connected to African deities to convert to Catholicism. As established above, Voodoo itself is a religious blending of both European Catholicism and African religious beliefs. While she may not regularly call on Damballah when she is in Teche, her decision to relocate there after she converts and leaves New Orleans strongly suggests that she remains comfortable with having an attachment to the serpent god as we know that Teche is the place of snakes.

Not long after she returns to the New Orleans area, we learn from her nemesis, Nattie, that she has been involved with conjuring. If Grandmère truly did not want to expose her granddaughter to the family's relationship with Damballah, she certainly should not have relocated to the place where people only identify her as a Damballah priestess. Rhodes casts the women as strongest when they openly acknowledge Damballah. Though the details are not provided, evidence exists that Grandmère has been using her African knowledge of healing and not relying simply on Catholic prayers, to administer treatment to the people in her community. Marie becomes aware of this when one of her neighbors makes a statement in reference to practices unknown to Marie: "She make a miracle. She call on the snake, lil Zombi, Dambal—" (71). The faithful man who is thankful for Grandmère's ability to act as midwife/healer/conjurer speaks of practices that Grandmère wishes to keep mysterious, unspoken. But Damballah will not remain hidden.

Finally, Grandmère becomes exposed when Nattie announces that Grandmère's lack of obedience to Damballah has caused the death and deformity of a baby, a potential member of the community. Her inability to bring forth a fully-developed baby on the day that her granddaughter has married marks the end to Grandmère's place of respect in the community. It will be up to Marie to reconnect with Damballah and follow the legacy of her African great-grandmother.

Grandmère's power remains in Membe's legacy. When Grandmère finally tells her daughter's story to her granddaughter, it is just after she tells her the powerful story of Membe. It is then that Marie learns that Nattie and John have been lying to her to protect themselves and to manipulate her. For example, she learns that Nattie introduced her grandmother to John and her Maman, though she was told that Maman made the introductions. She also learns that it was John's idea for Maman to perform the public conjuring ceremony in front of the St. Louis Cathedral and not her Maman. Maman was vulnerable only when she was with John; yet, she was also her most powerful. As a consequence of bold and blatant defiance of Catholicism and White authority, Maman is killed. Notably, however, her obedience to Damballah as a servant to his followers prepared them for Marie and what she had to offer them. With Grandmère limited by her fears that her granddaughter will suffer a similar fate, the community must wait for Marie to find her path to them.

Until she finds her place, John and Nattie's self-serving desires endanger the community. Nattie wonders why she was not chosen by Damballah to serve him. John wonders why Damballah favors women. Their jealousy and envy confirms the need for Membe's "daughters." Their cruel intentions also confirm that the power is in the knowing. And, there is no other way for Marie to know who she is, but for the story to have been told to her about her mother and great-grandmother by the woman who knew it best, her Grandmère. On her deathbed, after she has lost her granddaughter to John, she realizes her error in judgment and feels compelled to empower her granddaughter with the story of the obedient and fearless woman, Membe. Grandmère's silence has made it possible for the voice of others to prevail through manipulation. When she speaks, she redeems herself and makes possible the advancement of those who are most in need of what the loa has to offer. This can only occur if Marie understands her role. Knowledge is the beginning of understanding.

Marie is now empowered by the truth. She knows for sure that Nattie is a liar. Nattie's greatest power has been in her manipulation of orality. When she first confronts Grandmère about her abandonment of Damballah, she knows that Marie is listening at the door. She chooses that time to answer all the questions that the vulnerable girl has about why she is having visions and her legacy about Voodoo. She later manipulates the truth about Maman's death. Nattie leads Marie to believe that her mother was an unpredictable woman who brought John into the lives of the Laveau women, when in fact, Nattie introduces John to the unsuspecting mother and daughter. Nattie also leaves out the fact that her affair with John motivates Maman to have an affair with a White man who impregnates her with Marie. Nattie's convenient manipulation of the truth to suit her own need to receive the attention of the abusive John and to have the blessings of Damballah,

are only revealed when Grandmère tells the story of the birth and death of the three women. While there are never any answers to the “what ifs”—what if Grandmère had never trusted Nattie? what if Maman had not acted so recklessly?—Nattie is clearly at the center of all disruptions and Marie has to make a decision how to react. Ultimately, the women define themselves through the decisions they make. This is as true for Nattie as it is for Marie.

Marie's own story is one that unfolds in various ways. Rhodes's novel is not historically factual, but the facts are sketchy. Scholars remain baffled by who Marie Laveau was. In fact, there is some discrepancy about whether or not her father was a White planter or a free Black in New Orleans. Nevertheless, there is no indication that she left behind a diary or a memoir. To account for the fact that she is mostly known by written historical texts—newspapers, early nineteenth century novels, and WPA interviews, Rhodes introduces interviews given by an elderly Marie to a White reporter, Louis, who was enamored by her beauty. For the most part, the narrator knows Marie intimately. From the narrator, we know what she feels when she is possessed by Damballah and when she is not possessed, what she's thinking, and what she does in response to her environment. We know her fears, her passions, and her desires.

We also hear the voices that guide her. Marie's first possession finds her sharing her body with both the mother who is lost to her and the god that is unknown to her. In the novel, Rhodes focuses mostly on Marie's ability to communicate with spirits and avoids situations related to casting spells. In these possession passages, Marie transforms. During the first, her transformation controls her rather than she controlling it. She feels the presence of her mother and Damballah. She knows, without knowing how, that she is mimicking a snake and is able to impart wisdom to the people around her through this form. Marie's transformation appears both physical and spiritual. It is noted that “Marie slithered down from her chair. She moved through forests, crawled, and felt the earth tremble between her belly” (121). We must recall that this is not only the first time she connects to Damballah and, therefore, has made a major step in fulfilling her chosen legacy as Membe's granddaughter, but she is only sixteen years old. Marie has an awareness that other women her age, particularly during the nineteenth century, would not have had. Much of this is due to her race. She witnesses the hardships that are distinct to free people of color in Haben's Heaven, a small cramped community of working class people of African descent and mixed blood, but this does not prepare her for the load Damballah wants her to carry.

As a daughter of Damballah, she is expected to give comfort to those who are in need, most of whom are slaves. Rhodes emphasizes the historical fact that many of the people who come to her are slaves. They are so desperate for the comforts of Damballah as Marie shares them that they steal from their White owners—a crime that could bring heinous consequences—to pay for access to the advice she imparts. Her connection to Damballah places her in a position of power that is recognized by the people of the Black communities and feared by John, her manipulative lover. To the free people of color and the slaves, she relieves the suffering placed upon them as

the children of Africa in the New World. Ultimately, she gives them hope that they will all meet again in Guinea—heaven or Africa—where their spirits will be in peace.

Marie must mature into her position as the peoples' spiritual guide. Unfortunately, she contends with the interference of her jealous mother and lover. To meet the needs of the people, her body must submit to forces she does not know. During her first ceremony, after Damballah leaves her, Marie contends with her Maman's possession. Accordingly, “Maman dove inside her, possessing, fitting neatly into sinews, bones, and blood” (123). Maman's possession of Marie's body is attractive to John, Maman's former lover. Intoxicated by her mother's sexual presence and desires, Marie, who has only been with one other man on only one other occasion, has an exhilarating night with John. At some point she realizes that his desire for her has been motivated by his knowledge that his Marie has co-inhabited the body of her sixteen-year-old daughter. Having been isolated for most of her life in Teche, Marie is even more susceptible to John's cunning. She will need to learn the difference between the motivations of John's self-centered possessiveness and Damballah's spiritual possessions.

John enjoys the possession of bodies, and the younger the better. John is a controller and his ability to control is not mental as much as it is bodily. The first time he has contact with Marie is when he massages her vagina in Teche. She is young, impressionable, and lonely. She does not know who the man is or even how she can feel his presence, but his touch in the right place makes her eager to go to him when the opportunity presents itself. Knowing her vulnerability, he moves from a touch to sexual intercourse. While he, a man who has seduced young girls before, knows that he is engaged with the body of a confused teenager possessed by her mother's spirit, the facts do not dissuade him from moving forth. In fact, it becomes clear that this will be a pattern of calculating behavior for him.

John's control of Marie's body moves from sexual manipulation to life-threatening physical violence. As is common with abuse, he sets parameters in regards to her movements. She is not allowed to leave the house, and when she does Ribaud must accompany her. It is his job to report to John where Marie goes and whom she speaks with. In one significant scene, John rapes Marie. Later, after she walks on water, he feels humiliated by her growing power and almost chokes her to death. Of him, Rhodes remarks, “He's the puppet master, and that's why he's threatened whenever Marie does anything that seems beyond his control. He needs to have control” (Interview par 43). It is not until Nattie tells him that Marie is pregnant, that he relinquishes her from his grasp. John has achieved the ultimate control over her body. He knows that Marie will do what she can to bring the baby to full term and when the baby is born, he will have access to Damballah through his daughter. His plan, then, is to control the baby as he has Marie and her mother. More specifically, to commodify his daughter's body for the purpose of making money and to boost his ego. As the baby grows, so do Marie's knowledge and maturity, as well as her need to resist the control of her enemies.

Her resistance begins with her efforts to befriend Ribaud. The older man's role in the ceremonies is to help them to call on Papa Legba to open the door to the spirit world where Damballah resides. His belief in Damballah makes him more likely to follow the wishes of Marie rather than John's. Nattie reveals that the only reason why he is in service to John is because he wishes to pay a sort of penitence for the act of trying to control his daughter by forbidding her to date a man she had chosen. As a result of his stubbornness, the woman dies. Ribaud has grown fond of the young Marie who needs a loyal friend and protector from Nattie and John. If we recall that Damballah chooses the Maries to keep the children of Africa in touch with their cultural practices, it stands to reason that Ribaud, who has sincere reverence for Damballah, would bond with the loa's priestess. By extension, his and Marie's bond with the snake that John purchases with hope that it will frighten Marie while impressing their followers consummates their relationship. Neither Marie nor Ribaud are afraid of the snake. Marie sees it as a manifestation of the snake god and Ribaud honors it with rodents. The snake, conveniently, also strikes fear in John. He cannot control the snake anymore than he can control Damballah. His fear is also, clearly, the result of his lack of respect for Damballah. Once Marie realizes this, she knows that John's only tangible fear can be to her advantage. Her realization gives meaning to the words her grandmother shared when she was a child: "Mixed bloods. Our history and power" (17).

It would be easy to surmise that Marie's life-long communications with the spirit world eases any fears that she might have of death. In fact, she is her strongest when she enters into the spirit world; those are the times when she is invincible. At the point when Antoine, the rich privileged White man, attacks her, her act of killing him serves the purpose of empowering her. When we first meet Antoine, he threatens Marie with physical violence in a public place. To save her Jacques intervenes and offers himself for the beating. Neither Jacques nor Marie are enslaved, but their status as free people of African descent make them vulnerable to all White men as it is unlawful for Blacks to strike back. She is liberated by his murder for at least two reasons. First, she is able to stop him from killing her and his cousin, Louis, who has fallen in love with her. Marie knows that he is a vile man who has been having a sexual relationship with his twin sister since childhood. She also knows that he has impregnated his sister and that Bridgette feels tortured about her condition as her brother's scandalous mistress.

Secondly, there is power in her ownership of his death. After killing him, she deliberately screams that she is responsible for killing him. Her public proclamation is yet another act of bold defiance in early nineteenth century Louisiana for an African American woman. Rhodes's characterization of Marie Laveau as a feminist emerges from the myth of Laveau. There are no records that Laveau, though publicly identified as the Queen of Voodoo, was ever arrested. According to some of the city's citizens, there were strong beliefs that she was well respected by government officials who probably sought her services on occasions. This relationship gave her the power to have officials fired and people hired. In the novel, Marie is arrested and jailed for a number of weeks. Her act of resistance is thought to have incited other acts of resistance by Blacks. In an effort to restore order, many are arrested. Consequently, many die in jail. Marie

learns that her communication with the spirit world does not provide her with absolute power to control all circumstances. This revelation is disconcerting to the young girl.

For the first time since she has been servant to Damballah, Marie questions her role as a prominent figure among her people. While in jail, fellow prisoners ask her for help that she does not feel that she can provide. To make matters worse, there is a naysayer who challenges her ability to help anyone since those around them are dying. Marie's position in the jail with the suffering parallels that of her great-grandmother Membe and the woman's journey through the Middle Passage. Membe cannot stop the slave trade from taking place, but she has not been called to do so. Her job is to carry the message of Damballah to the "children of Africa." In her moments of despair, Marie gives hope to the people in their last hours. She tells them that they will be saved. Part of deliverance is the idea that there will be a return to Guinea. Salvation is not of this world, but Marie has not yet reached the point where she can reason what she knows intimately. She is still in the process of growth.

Marie has certainly been in the process of maturing during the time she leaves her grandmother to live with John. Her steps in maturation are marked by moments when she gains significant knowledge; much of that knowledge is gained through acts of resistance. After her first encounter with Damballah, which leaves her vulnerable to the possession of her mother, she refuses to let Damballah enter her again. Her decision leaves her open to constant attacks by John who can only profit when Marie is under the command of Damballah. Further, his deepest sexual desires are met when he feels the presence of the more experienced Maman. Marie is willing to entrust her body to Damballah who has chosen her to help her people remain connected to Africa and to find peace with the ancestors, but she refuses the presence of her mother. Marie's Maman has other reasons to possess her daughter. Surely she can become alive through Marie when she is with John, but she can also feel empowered by resuming her position as Voodoo Queen. Marie's decision to resist the control of her mother is a significant step towards defining her own identity as it relates to her relationship to John and as she emerges as a Voodoo Priestess.

It is also significant to note that Marie's body is only under the control of Damballah when she calls him. The ceremony requires the drummer to assist in calling Papa Legba to open the doors. If the call is not made, Damballah does not simply appear and enter. This is a significant fact when considering feminist scholarship dealing with Christianity and women's bodies. Mary, for example, was not asked by God to carry Jesus, she was told that she was pregnant and that she must carry out the prophecy. Marie is chosen by legacy, but it is a legacy that she willingly accepts, even seeks. Notably, her great-grandmother, Membe, accepts her calling as well, even when it means giving up her freedom in Africa to become a slave woman in America. Based on some historical facts, Rhodes constructs a story that challenges pre-conceived notions of how religious women become empowered. Marie's actions work in defiance of expectations that others may have of her. As such, her relationship with the spirit world motivates her way of thinking: she has no sense of boundaries.

Her ability to move beyond boundaries of both time and space becomes apparent when she walks on water.⁶ Marie thinks that she has to “fight her way to spirituality” to keep her life from “corruption” (303). Her fight finds peace in the response of Damballah. In her fervent prayer for Damballah to come to her during the ceremony and while consumed by her fear that he will not, she is drawn to the lake. Her spectators, including John, Ribaud, and Nattie, believe that she is dead. Gone. However, some of the enslaved see her as having transformed into the next state. To, in a sense, open the gates to the next world, they begin to sing spirituals: “My Soul Walks Free. Death Awaits Me.” Death in the Christian sense does not allow for a belief that one is completely gone, but that the dead will live on in a different form. However, for those who are in attendance, this also means that Marie is not there to provide them with the service they wish, whether it is to see a spectacular performance, to keep them connected with their ancestors, or to solve one of their problems. Marie is unconcerned with these people and their wishes. She sees herself as called by Damballah and is in the process of communicating with him in ways that she has not previously. He conveys to her in an African dialect she has heard newly arrived enslaved persons speaking, “You belong to me. You always have and always will” (306). During her time in the water, she receives his blessing as he shows her her purpose and reward for worship and service. Marie sees herself centered among a circle of the women who have come before her. The circle is a barrier of protection for Marie who is under the threat of a corruptible man who has no respect for Damballah or Marie. Within this circle, she feels the presence of those who are no longer with her in the physical world. There she learns that she is the heart of the women's legacy and that their home is Africa and what it represents. Africa is the place of the origin. At the origin, those who return gain a sense of knowing that has been corrupted by leaving the homeplace. If we recall that she longed for the love of the mother who seemingly abandoned her, she becomes overwhelmed with love when she “returns” to Africa: “Love was in the lush foliage, the cawing of birds” (306). Her reemergence is possible because her spirit has been relieved of her fears that Damballah may have abandoned her. With a lightened spirit, she is able to walk on water “as if it were earth” (307). If her other possessions did not allow for a renewal on some level, this “journey” to Africa by crossing the barrier of water certainly allows for a rebirth. Damballah's claim on her as his certainly releases her from John and feelings she has regarding the absence of her mother.

Marie has been spoken to by Damballah and reveals, “I know who I am” (307). Barbara Christian notes, “Self-knowledge [is] critical if Black women [are] to develop the inner resources they ... need in order to cope with larger social forces” (237). Her understanding about her self, as revealed to her not by her grandmother, who will later fill in the gaps when she tells her the story of Membe, and not by John or Nattie, is what she requires to move closer towards independence from her oppressors. Nattie's death is a long-time coming. She has manipulated three generations of Maries to get closer to a god that has not called her. Her last heinous act of killing Grandmère, a woman who was her friend, to avenge Marie's “arrogance,” proves that she will remain a constant threat to Marie and to her newborn daughter (406). As a form of protection and to eliminate threats to keeping Damballah and Voodoo accessible to the people,

Nattie must die. Marie is deliberate and intentional in making the decision to tell John that Nattie is trying to take the baby's caul. By having John kill Nattie, not only is the blood on his hands, but also a moment of completion has occurred. During Marie's confrontation of Nattie, Marie asks why she did not kill the man who threatened Damballah when he came between Grandmère and Maman, intent on controlling Maman for his selfish purposes. If she had not succumb to her passion for John,

Grandmère never would have run off to the bayou. She would have quietly practiced the faith here in New Orleans, and taught her daughter the joy of Damballah and then her daughter and grand-daughter... . Thousands of people would've been touched by the spirit. (408)

Since she did not kill him—an act that would have redeemed her and gained favor with Damballah—then John, whose favor she craved at the expense of the children of Africa, kills her. He does this in response to Marie strategically screaming to him that Nattie is trying to take their baby's caul (casting a spell with the caul could cause problems for the baby as she matures). Marie is responsible for killing Nattie, and by extension, she gives the community a chance to follow Damballah and remain connected to Africa without Nattie's interference.

The last threat to Marie and her legacy is John. As she knows, John is a corruptible man whose only power is in controlling others by inflicting bodily harm. Although Grandmère has told Marie not to kill John, Marie reacts as a mother. John's threat to his daughter by caressing her body in a way that is perceived as inappropriate to Marie leaves her with few choices. She can either remain with him and hope for the best or she can eliminate him as a threat to her daughter—the legacy of the chosen. John has only one tangible fear—the pet python. While he clearly believes in the existence and power of Damballah, the serpent god, John is unable to submit to the god. He is angered by the fact that “Damballah favored women” and that he had to rely on a “child” to get wealth (127). John's thinking reveals that he feels powerless as he is dependent on Marie and a god that favors her and not him. This feeling is a formidable motivation to take power by any means. Given his past behavior and his admission that he now has some claim to Damballah through his daughter, there is no doubt that he will use his own daughter to achieve power through wealth. It is only a matter of time when he will conclude that Marie is of little value to him and dispense of her as he has Nattie. Marie's decision to use the python—a symbol of the god he has disrespected in many ways—to kill John puts an end to the threat against the woman called to be a leader among those displaced from Africa.

Christian remarks, “The development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many instances, a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in this country” (234). If Christian was issuing a call, then Jewell Parker Rhodes attempts to answer it. Rhodes's Marie Laveau uses Voodoo as a form of empowerment in an effort to stand strong against sexism and racism. Laveau's relationship with Damballah challenges Christian traditions and formally places a woman of African descent, though of mixed blood, in the position to restore a

community of people to their spiritual origins. Once she becomes aware of cultural practices and family history, Marie is able to find her own place despite those who desire to oppress her and to, in effect, strip her of her power. Marie makes conscious decisions to resist oppression. Marie Laveau, Voodoo feminist.

Notes

1The spelling of Laveau varies. Fandrich spells it “Laveaux.” When referencing the novel's character, I will use Rhodes's spelling, which does not make use of the silent “x.”

2The character Marie Laveau, her mother, and her grandmother are named Marie. To make distinctions, I use the family titles of Maman (Marie Laveau's mother) and Grandmère (Marie Laveau's grandmother).

3For example, Mama Day often goes off to the “other place” and what she does there is not shared with readers.

4Gris-gris is a word derived from the Mende language of Senegambia, referring to magical practices.

5For historical debates about the identity of Marie Laveau and the history of voodoo, please see Carolyn Morrow Long and Ina Fandrich books on Marie Laveaux.

6It is recorded that her nephew, Luke Turner, witnessed the historic Laveaux emerge from water at the beginning of her ceremonies at Lake Pontchartrain (Fandrich 199–200).

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