

story of a transforming and adopting masculinity is more compelling. His work will reward scholars of gender, of the early twentieth century, and of the ways that popular organizations managed the transition to industrial modernity.

VOODOO, RELIGIOUS CULTURE, AND RACIAL POLITICS IN JIM CROW NEW ORLEANS

ROBERTS, KODI A. *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans 1881–1940*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0807-16050-3.

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During the Reconstruction Era in New Orleans, newspapers run by ex-Confederates regularly ran salacious accounts of Voodoo rituals and ceremonies that took place in the city. Vowing to fight the “Africanization” of New Orleans, white editors opposed to Louisiana’s biracial Reconstruction government used demeaning depictions of Voodoo to malign African Americans and to portray black people as unfit to vote or govern. White supremacists during the Jim Crow Era adopted similar strategies, demonizing Voodoo practitioners, linking their rituals to what they saw as primitive African customs and beliefs, and using Voodoo’s still vibrant presence in New Orleans as evidence of the need for racial segregation.

As Kodi A. Roberts recounts in his important and provocative book *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans 1881–1940*, even those who studied Voodoo with a sympathetic eye, such as novelist and ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston and the 1930s folklorists and sociologists associated with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), saw Voodoo as being part of a distinctive black culture and as a marker of African cultural retentions. Voodoo, those accounts maintained, grew out of African belief systems brought by enslaved people to Haiti. There African practices intertwined with Catholicism to create a syncretic religion (Voudou) that combined worship of Catholic saints with African folk magic. When slave owners fleeing the Haitian Revolution brought their slaves to French-speaking Louisiana at the turn of the nineteenth century, Voudou gained a foothold in New Orleans where it evolved into a distinct religious subculture (Voodoo).

While Roberts does not say this now standard history of Voodoo’s origins is false, he joins those scholars who argue that it rests on a weak evidentiary foundation, that the sources cited to support it are often sensationalized, plagiarized, or otherwise unreliable eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts. The focus on Voodoo’s African and Haitian origins, Roberts continues, has obscured American society’s profound (indeed dominant) influence on Voodoo beliefs and practices. For example, while many observers, past and present, have viewed Voodoo as an intrinsically black phenomenon, Roberts cites substantial evidence, beginning with the earliest documents, of white involvement in Voodoo. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Roberts argues, white people (particularly women) participated in Voodoo ceremonies. Some were full-blown practitioners, offering their services to the public. White people were also clients of black Voodoo priestesses like the famous Marie Laveau. White druggists and pharmacists clandestinely stocked and sold Voodoo paraphernalia. “These people,” Roberts concludes, “were not outliers but cocreators of New Orleans Voodoo” (197).

Voodoo practices, rituals, and ideology, Roberts adds, regularly changed in response to specific social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances in the United States. Because many black and white New Orleanians turned to Voodoo practitioners for help remedying racial, gender, or economic power imbalances, Voodoo practices changed as the causes of those disparities changed over time. Rather than being a “monolithic” set of traditions “handed down from African ancestors,” Roberts writes, the practice of Voodoo represented a dynamic, biracial subculture that consistently incorporated social and economic influences from the wider American culture (6). And although he does so cautiously, Roberts challenges scholars who argue that African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a distinct culture that retained continuities to African cultural forms. He maintains that using racial classifications to distinguish between cultural forms is “folly” and that understanding contemporary “material realities and historical contexts” is more important to understanding Voodoo (and religion and culture in general) than tracing African, Haitian, or ethnic antecedents (11).

At times Roberts relies on fragmentary evidence to support his arguments, but this is a pitfall of the field. Because the police harassed Voodoo practitioners throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Voodoo rituals and ceremonies happened in secret. Even when the spiritual church founded by Mother Leafy Anderson gained mainstream, tax-exempt status in the 1920s, its leaders publicly denied that Voodoo rituals survived there. Some readers might feel that Roberts relies too heavily on the 1930s Works Progress Administration interviews with Voodoo practitioners without fully interrogating the sometimes problematic nature of those oral testimonies. But, overall, his use of the extant evidence is restrained and judicious. He successfully complicates what we know about Voodoo by demonstrating the extent of white involvement in Voodoo culture. He demonstrates convincingly how culture moves across social boundaries. And his conclusion that by the early twentieth century, Voodoo became simultaneously and *indistinguishably* African American culture, New Orleans culture, and American culture, should generate a useful debate.