

• Book Reviews •

Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans, 1881-1940. By Kodi A. Roberts (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. X + pp. 197, introduction, notes, bibliography, index).

Kodi A. Roberts' book starts with a simple enough premise: what people commonly call "Voodoo" in the New Orleans area is too often seen only as a remnant of African religious roots, and not as a multicultural phenomenon that both was shaped by and helped to shape the culture of the Crescent City. Roberts argues that the practice of Voodoo in the area always incorporated non-Black members of society, and that the impact of Voodoo on New Orleans resulted in a permanent affiliation of the religion with the city. Additionally, he sees Voodoo as a form of religious commerce that followed two models: one based on the life and legend of notorious Voodoo "queen" Marie Laveau, and one based more on the later Spiritual Church model of Leafy Anderson. Roberts supports his use of so many interpretive lenses by insisting that Voodoo in New Orleans was all about *power*, a term that remains nebulous and seems to indicate everything from economic advantages to legal status to racial dominance and subversion. Similarly, Roberts repeatedly hedges his claims, indicating that his sources only "likely" indicate a particular fact, or that he "wonders whether" a particular example is dependent upon information "not mentioned" by the informants involved (93). This inchoate focus hampers a book with a great deal of potential and some truly remarkable historical research, and ultimately *Voodoo and Power* seems to falter because of imprecision far more than due to any of its central arguments.

Roberts begins the book by describing a pair of 2013 Super Bowl beer advertisements, one of which featured Stevie Wonder in a signified performance of a "white-suit-and-top-hat adorned" Voodoo priest. The descriptions of these advertisements is extensive, but Roberts is invested in showing just how tightly linked the imagery of Voodoo is with New Orleans culture. Roberts freely uses the

term “Voodoo” to represent myriad practices found within New Orleans culture, including folk magic, ancestral reverence, Catholic and pseudo-Catholic religious participation, religious performance within the Spiritual Church, and even occasionally Haitian Vodou. The amalgamated definition seems designed to mirror the highly syncretic spiritual and religious environment of New Orleans, and Roberts makes the case that some of these terminological distinctions were unknown to those who actually practiced them, saying “practitioners frequently employed the term [Voodoo] and used it interchangeably with terms like hoodoo, and I employ it here in an attempt to foreground the perspectives of the practitioners” (9). Other scholars such as Jeffery Anderson and Yvonne Chireau—both of whom Roberts cites while questioning their emphasis on African origins—have explored the difference of terminology as one of emic/etic friction, with insiders understanding the differences but using a generic term when speaking to outsiders. The vocabulary of the book, however, remains secondary to the historical arguments it presents.

In the first part of *Voodoo and Power*, Roberts explores the legacy of two key influential figures and their impact on the practice of Voodoo in New Orleans. Chapter One follows Marie Laveau, with special emphasis on the way the communities around her understood and developed her image in association with themselves. Some practitioners referenced her with awe, even while disavowing her alleged practices. Most saw her as a sort of godmother to all subsequent Voodoo in New Orleans, one who did not create the religion herself but who acted as “an innovator who added certain forms to the practice of Voodoo or broadened its appeal” (39). Roberts leaves biography largely to other scholars like Carolyn Morrow Long, instead focusing on how many people drew connections between their own practices and Laveau’s. Oddly, he entirely ignores the legends of Laveau’s daughter, sometimes seen as her second incarnation or as the direct inheritor of her powers and practices. Many of the accounts and references he incorporates—

sometimes disparaging them as “folklore,” a term he uses as equivalent with popular fallacy—seem to be about the second Laveau, which leaves some gaps in both argument and understanding. In Chapter Two, however, Roberts more thoroughly traces the origins of the Spiritual Church through the arrival of Leafy Anderson. Anderson, he says, brought a veneer of institutional respectability to Voodoo practices—again, many of which are hoodoo folk magic rather than entirely religious rituals. Roberts shows how the Spiritual Church provided a “legitimate church” cover that could deflect legal entanglements and offer practitioners and patrons of Voodoo workers a place to operate without excessive fear of police intrusion (45). Strangely, Roberts never explains why the Spiritual Church had greater success as a “legitimate” church than the Catholic Church, despite the obvious institutional forms of both.

The second portion of *Voodoo and Power*, which Roberts calls “The Work,” focuses on the different cultural impacts that Voodoo had on subsections of the population. In Chapter Three, Roberts looks at the intersection of race and Voodoo, with particular attention to the Jim Crow era policies and sociability. He argues—without specifically citing any particular “academics and ethnographers”—that previous scholars have put undue emphasis on the African origins of Voodoo and have, in doing so, “drawn firm social and cultural lines between whites and African Americans” and further “abetted this process by studying Voodoo and other aspects of African American culture in a vacuum” (70). Roberts’ corrective is to use a mixture of interviews done by the Louisiana Writers Project (LWP) and the somewhat more dubious accounts taken from newspapers and sources like Robert Tallant. Chapter Four addresses the role of gender in Voodoo practice and social politics, ably noting how Voodoo could both subvert gender norms by elevating women to power and reinforce them by supporting patriarchal relationship structures in which women were economically and socially dependent on men. Chapters Five and Six excel in their exploration of Voodoo as an economic system,

one which responded to the financial needs of its followers by shifting emphasis to spells to find jobs and rituals to gain fiscal stability, especially during the Depression years. Astoundingly, Roberts completely ignores the African American community lotteries or “policy players” games, which frequently involved the use of dream interpretation and magical practices to win.

Roberts concludes his book in an epilogue entitled “The Worst Kind of Religion,” in which he restates the importance of Voodoo to the New Orleans community—Black and white—as a symbol and a heritage of power and class struggle. He makes a final argument that while he believes African American religion exists, Voodoo does not belong in its fold, for unlike groups like the Nation of Islam or Rastafarians, whose “theologies make explicit statements about [Black] identity,” Voodoo seems “to have made no such claims in the early twentieth century” (196). Yet in so many of his examples, Roberts has cited individuals who very clearly see Voodoo as a product of Black experience, even if they do not see it as exclusively Black in performance. Similarly, such an argument makes little sense, as it seems to indicate that only religious expressions which are highly exclusive can claim cultural relevance in the Black community, thus ignoring the experience of the African American Baptist Church movement or the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The book’s historical examination of Voodoo, particularly in the context of cultural studies, remains useful, even if its arguments—like its terminology—remain underdeveloped.

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