



# Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau

*Martha Ward*

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Each year, thousands of pilgrims visit the celebrated New Orleans tomb where Marie Laveau is said to lie. They seek her favors or fear her lingering influence. *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* is the first study of the Laveaus, mother and daughter of the same name. Both were legendary leaders of religious and spiritual traditions many still label as evil.

The Laveaus were free women of color and prominent French-speaking Catholic Creoles. From the 1820s until the 1880s when one died and the other disappeared, gossip, fear, and fierce affection swirled about them. From the heart of the French Quarter, in dance, drumming, song, and spirit possession, they ruled the imagination of New Orleans.

How did the two Maries apply their "magical" powers and uncommon business sense to shift the course of love, luck, and the law? The women understood the real crime--they had pitted their spiritual forces against the slave system of the United States. Moses-like, they led their people out of bondage and offered protection and freedom to the community of color, rich white women, enslaved families, and men condemned to hang.

The curse of the Laveau family, however, followed them. Both loved men they could never marry. Both faced down the press and police who stalked them. Both countered the relentless gossip of curses, evil spirits, murders, and infant sacrifice with acts of benevolence.

The book is also a detective story--who is really buried in the famous tomb in the oldest "city of the dead" in New Orleans? What scandals did the Laveau family intend to keep buried there forever? By what sleight of hand did free people of color lose their cultural identity when Americans purchased Louisiana and imposed racial apartheid upon Creole creativity? *Voodoo Queen* brings the improbable testimonies of saints, spirits, and never-before printed eyewitness accounts of ceremonies and magical crafts together to illuminate the lives of the two Marie Laveaus, leaders of a major, indigenous American religion.

Martha Ward is the author of *Nest in the Wind*, *A World Full of Women*, and *A Sounding of Women: Autobiographies from Unexpected Places*, among other books. She is University Research Professor of Anthropology, Urban Studies, and Women's Studies at the University of New Orleans.

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