AMERICAN MONSTROSITIES: THE RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF MONSTERS IN *AMERICAN HORROR STORY: COVEN*

by

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ABSTRACT

CASEY SHEETZ. American Monstrosities: The Religious Implications of Monsters in *American Horror Story: Coven*.
(Under the direction of DR. ALEXANDRA KALOYANIDES)

This research centers on the television series, *American Horror Story: Coven* released on FX in 2013. The show is filmed and set in New Orleans, Louisiana, with a plot based on European and African-derived witchcraft (also discussed as Voodoo). Only two characters in the show are natives of New Orleans: Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau and the resurrected college student, Kyle. My research focuses on the purpose and presentation of these two characters for the audience as representatives of New Orleans' Ninth Ward. I argue that through these two characters, *Coven*'s showrunners present two extremes of one poverty-stricken community and use their monstrous characteristics for different types of engagement. Together, they present an imagined version of New Orleans that reinforces racist stereotypes of Black and Creole religions while proudly placing the show's representation of whiteness on a pedestal and in a romantic engagement with the audience. I examine the two characters within their context in the show for a side-by-side analysis to demonstrate the stark differences between our idolized and villainized characters. I end with a discussion of the history of Hollywood's involvement in New Orleans from the early 19th century up to the contemporary period. I emphasize the media shifts made after Hurricane Katrina impacted the state in 2005. The research brings attention to the exploitation of diasporic religion and impoverished communities in pop culture, which ultimately leads to wrongful interpretations of outside cultures taught to an American audience as fact.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHS	*American Horror Story*
LMPIA	Louisiana Motion Picture Incentive Act

GLOSSARY

Black	Used in a general and versatile reference to anyone who is African or has African descent.
African-American	Refers specifically to groups of people that have an immediate or close immediate connection to African-born descendants.
Voodoo	Refers to a Creole religion in Louisiana that stems from Catholicism and African spiritual traditions.
Vodou	Refers specifically to the religion identified in Hati as a collection of African practices made into one.
Coven	Refers to the physical and theoretical “home base” for each group of witches. It can be a place or concept of a formally defined group.
Witchcraft	Refers to any magical, spiritual, or physical healing practice. It does not have any distinct foundation or cultural founding.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

After great success with the television series, *Glee*, good friends and coproducers Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk decided to take a drastic thematic turn in their next television series. In 2011, they released the first season of *American Horror Story (AHS)* on FX, titled, *Murder House*. From its title, Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy, along with their remaining production team as showrunners, intended to create a world of horror for American audiences and thus, a placement for their internalized anxieties. The show passed its pilot with massive success and in early 2020, was renewed through season thirteen. Being strictly an *American* horror story, the showrunners pick a new plotline for each season, using a returning cast that plays new parts and new stories. This thesis examines its third and most popular season, *Coven*, aired in 2013. Centered around two covens of European and African-derived forms of witchcraft (the African witchcraft is also referred to as "Voodoo"), the season is set in New Orleans, Louisiana, and displays a particular frame of view around the culture and religion in the "Big Easy." The series is fictional, but often based on historical events. The show's presentation of the city's background is long, complex, and cultivated from attempts to connect the dots between popular historical events around witchcraft and New Orleans religions. While the religious and cultural background that *Coven* presents is not historically accurate, this fantastic vision of New Orleans reveals insights into a pervasive American imagination of the Crescent City as foreign and culturally entangled. Above all, the presentation of its culture and religion is of the Other, and, New Orleans is presented as un-American.

I argue that while the showrunners claim they intend to sensitively represent the nation's minorities and marginalized groups, their presentation of New Orleans in *American Horror Story: Coven* makes a monster of its people, cultures, and religions through its presentations of

monsters. The literal "Frankenzombie" monster, named Kyle, is romanticized and made into a hero, exploiting his Katrina sob story and misrepresenting an entire community of people in the Ninth Ward. He is the embodiment of the showrunners' ideal, imagined, white New Orleans citizen. Meanwhile, the showrunners play on American anxieties about African religions. They villainize and demonize Marie Laveau (a historic Voodoo priestess), her coven of Black witches, Louisiana Voodoo, and the remaining Black population of the Ninth Ward. The presentation of Laveau as the face of Louisiana Voodoo mystifies, exoticizes, and villainizes the show's African-derived religion. Laveau's Black community also chooses to isolate itself from any other social or religious group. This misplaces blame onto them for their social and economic state, rather than encouraging accountability in history and larger social structures. The comparison between Laveau and Kyle reiterates the stark differences in character and religious affiliation between the two primary examples of New Orleans natives, despite both being specifically associated with their home in the Ninth Ward. While *Coven* is a show about many kinds of monsters in New Orleans, we are shown that Kyle was made to be the *right* kind of monster.

1.1. Motivations and Contributions

To our youngest generations and upcoming scholars, the world seems much smaller and thus, much more familiar. We have had the blessing of vast communication anywhere at any time. Another key part of the world's familiarity for this upcoming generation comes from growing up in a lifetime of television and cinema that brings any landscape into our living rooms. Among certain age groups, there are quintessential pieces of film and media that align people into one common group. If someone brings up *Tiger King*, a whole world of people may instantly remember their COVID-19 quarantine of 2020. One standard timepiece that I've

realized over the years among people (mostly women), straddling the line between millennials and Gen Z, is *American Horror Story*.

Although the first season aired in 2011 and its most recent seasons have drastically lost viewership, the series finds its way into every conversation around the horror genre. Frequently a blend between drama, comedy, and horror, *American Horror Story* keeps each season entertaining with new twists on classic American stories and mythologies. Part of the reason for its success, I believe, is because of its ability to introduce its audience to new cultures and religions that are drastically different from their own, within the comfort of their living room. With a nation's religious representation in their hands, the showrunners have a lot of responsibility and power in shaping the minds of Americans to understand religions from every corner of the U.S., aside from the most commonly seen forms of Christianity. Doing so incorrectly means the misrepresentation of already marginalized people, further contributing to systemic oppression by allowing our next generation of leaders to misunderstand the diversity of American cultures.

By the time *Coven* aired as the third season in October of 2013, *American Horror Story* was reaching its peak in popularity and thus, influence. At this point, *Coven* was consistently beating out other favorites like *Duck Dynasty*, *South Park*, and *The Big Bang Theory* in viewership.[1] This was statistically the most popular of the seasons with an average of four million views per episode. Producers anticipated this peak and gave *Coven* air time for thirteen one-hour episodes while the whole series averages about eleven episodes per season.

[1] Sara Bibel, "Wednesday Cable Ratings: 'American Horror Story' Wins Night, 'South Park,' 'Key & Peele,' 'Ghost Hunters," 'Preachers of LA' & More," *TV by the Numbers*, November 2, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20131012225622/http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2013/10/10/wednesday-cable-ratings-duck-dynasty-beats-american-horror-story-coven-mlb-baseball-bad-ink-south-park-more/208047/.

While displaying two opposing covens of European and African-derived witchcraft, the show primarily centers on the white witches who moved to New Orleans from Salem after the Salem Witch Trials. There are arguments between the characters about the origins of their witchcraft, which is where the aspect of Louisiana Voodoo is integrated with an opposing Black coven led by Marie Laveau. For many viewers, this is their first introduction to the world of African diaspora religions as many are either private practices or have simply been integrated into modern forms of Christianity. This thesis is interested in the portrayal of witchcraft in general, but mostly in the choices centered around Louisiana's Voodoo through Marie Laveau.

1.2. Methodologies and Layout

I am approaching this study from two perspectives. One of which is the critique of American standards projected through key characters. I will show how Kyle and Marie Laveau are key figures representing extreme perceptions of New Orleans and the Ninth Ward. I will approach these characters first for individual analysis, then place them next to each other to demonstrate the most stark differences through a comparative analysis. The second perspective is a critique of the environments created in the show. I will offer thick descriptions of the show's set pieces to spotlight details that I deem important to the showrunners' intentions. This includes a close analysis of built environments and filming choices.

Chapters two and three will focus on the "monsterfication" and victimization of Kyle. I divide this analysis into two pieces. The first of which will primarily contain historical background alongside his creation story to generalize a definition of the type of monster he is made to be. I look at his character as associated with two different mythologies–one focused on Frankenstein and the other on zombies. I will place both analyses next to each other to create an understanding of what kind of monster Kyle is and conclude what this means for his intended

placement within the dynamic of New Orleans and the Ninth Ward. In analyzing his victimization, my primary focus of analysis will be his home environment and thick descriptions of his most important scenes for character development. I use literary analysis to round out how Kyle fits into the contemporary horror genre as a sympathetic figure and the function he plays for the audience.

Chapters four and five focus on Marie Laveau, the Black Coven, and religious themes in the show. I look first at the background of Laveau as a real historical figure to make a statement of her placement in New Orleans history as the founder of Louisiana Voodoo. A thick description of the hair salon which serves as a home base for her coven allows the audience to know exactly what the showrunners believe about where Voodoo is and should be found in the city. Finally, I view the interactions of Laveau, the coven, and her religious practices to clarify the imagination that the showrunners have of New Orleans Voodoo, as opposed to what actual representations of the religion may look like.

My final points are regarding the history of film in New Orleans. Using preexisting research in film studies, I look for important shifts in New Orleans history as markers that brought certain traits to the forefront of the city's presentations in media. Referencing contemporary and post-Katrina cinema, I refer directly to some coexisting films to demonstrate the potential for location-based filming in the area, as opposed to the choices made by *AHS*'s production teams. I use film studies alongside historical facts to make arguments about the impact of film, especially *AHS*, on New Orleans and its inhabitants.

1.3. Literature Review

The most apparent preexisting work to consider is any scholarship already done on *American Horror Story*. The show is now over a decade old and widely popular so many scholars have been attracted to the themes across its seasons. While scholars have thoughtfully weighed in on this popular show, most focus on feminism or race theory as isolated topics. This leaves a large territory of important, interdisciplinary, unexplored themes. The few that I will be addressing are Dara Downey's "Tracing Tituba Through *American Horror Story: Coven*," Amy K. King's "A Monstrous(Ly-Feminine) Whiteness," and Meg Lonergan's "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism."[2] These sources are not cited frequently but are most likely used to suggest further references and reading on the show's topics for background. I use these texts, especially, as a baseline to understand the foundational thoughts within scholarship on *American Horror Story*.

My first level of research and background introduced to the audience centers on monster theory. I was first introduced to Sarah J. Lauro's *The Transatlantic Zombie*. I found that her analysis of the modern zombie gives meaningful and relevant traces through the history of the American zombie. She refers to the creation of the zombie throughout her book as a dialectic, meaning that it is constantly being made and remade from its context.[3] Even further, it can change metaphorically depending on each situation. She also identifies at least one general structure of a zombie's creation. Young does something similar with her monsters in *Black*

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[2] Amy K. King, "A Monstrous(Ly-Feminine) Whiteness: Gender, Genre, and the Abject Horror of the Past in *American Horror Story: Coven*," *Women's Studies* 46, no. 6 (2017): 557-73.. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2017.1356302; and Meg Lonergan, "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism: A Critical Analysis of American Horror Story: Coven*," Render: The Carleton Graduate Journal of Art and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2017): 9, https://carleton.ca/aah/wp-content/uploads/Lonergan_WitchesBitchesWhiteFeminism.pdf.

[3] Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (Rutgers University Press, 2015).

Frankenstein. She first identifies guidelines of characteristics that a Frankenstein monster would have. The rest of her book is a discussion of the development of the Frankenstein myth in several contexts, including American pop culture.[4] Both Lauro and Young emphasize the importance of context in creating each individual monster. This contributes greatly to my consideration of Kyle as *the* native New Orleans monster. The concern and sympathy that the audience is encouraged to have for him, as well as his treatment by other characters in the show, are indicators of the showrunners' intentions with him. Lauro and Young's pivotal texts in monster scholarship have guided me to understand these intentions.

Lauro is also the editor of *Zombie Theory: A Reader*.[5] This work features specific case studies that extend from Lauro's ideas in her monograph. Most of the chapters are based on other works unrelated to *American Horror Story*. However, the variety can provide new perspectives and an understanding of the more general world of monsters in pop culture. I use methods from other scholars and certain themes they emphasize in my research. These are all works on monster theory and have little concern for the technicalities of what a monster biologically is.

For my analysis of place and environment, especially regarding the Voodoo coven, I will mostly be using scholarship built on ethnographies of New Orleans communities. The dissertation titled "The Blessed Placemakers" by Rebecca Carter is unique, in that her studies were pivoted during her first-person experiences with the city. Carter found religious events that had been hybridized of various commonly known New Orleans religions, especially Christianity and Voodoo. She looks at this as a contribution to her argument on the solidarity of religious

[4] Elizabeth Young, Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor (New York University Press, 2008).

[5] Sarah Juliet Lauro, ed. *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

groups as a response to trauma.[6] The work demonstrates the solidarity of the city's communities during hardships. This will serve as a scholarly example of New Orleans ethnography while considering the vastly different social structure of *Coven*. This comparison helps to identify more pieces of the imagined New Orleans that contribute to the showrunners' fictionalized city.

Another dissertation, "Playing the Big Easy" by Robert Joseph brings forth ideas concerning the history of Hollywood in the city and how it has contributed to its exploitation. Pieces of this analysis can be applied to ways that *Coven* is made to be their idea of rich cultural immersion. Joseph branches off of this to expand on reasons for the frequent usage of New Orleans as a setting in film and television. His argument discusses tax breaks and cost reductions for filming in the city both before and after Hurricane Katrina and that the exoticized themes from the city were only heightened due to this catastrophic event. The hardship of the city became a place of opportunity for many media companies as they were guaranteed attraction at a low cost.[7] This provides real-world evidence for my arguments about the mystification of the city in the show.

My largest genre of secondary sources consists of scholarship in religious studies and historical background. While many of these may appear frequently throughout my research, some are used as a consideration and evidence of background regarding religions and their religious leaders. In understanding Voodoo in the United States and as seen in *Coven*, I have found that Philip Jenkins, W. Scott Poole, and Danielle N. Boaz (in two of her books) together

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[6] Rebecca L. Carter, "The Blessed Placemakers: Violent Crime, Moral Transformation, and Urban Redevelopment in Post-Katrina New Orleans" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010), https://www.proquest.com/docview/849294924?_oafollow=false&accountid=14605&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses.

[7] Robert Joseph, "Playing the Big Easy: A History of New Orleans in Film and Television" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2018).

provide a comprehensive understanding of the technicalities of Voodoo in the United States today and how it can vary across borders. Boaz provides information concerning its modern, Americanized presentations and biases against them.[8] W. Scott Poole does not directly address Voodoo in his work but does concern grander ideas of America's monsters being made into minority groups.[9] This can refer to Boaz's ideas regarding the "cult-like" associations with the religion proven in law cases that she addresses. Jenkins gives the most influential and basic understanding of why religions are "cultified" in the United States, providing a baseline for understanding other-ing and exoticizing religions.[10]

One part of this research that requires extensive detail is any possible background on Marie Laveau. Laveau is an important historical figure, referred to frequently by scholars including Kodi A. Roberts, whose arguments play a key role in my understanding of how New Orleans becomes fictionalized and exaggerated through myth. The development of Marie Laveau's history mirrors the gradual development of a mystified New Orleans. Roberts and Martha Ward contribute to grasping the very complex history of Laveau. Ward focuses on attempting, at the very minimum, to get some facts straight and understand how so many false stories have developed.[11] Roberts addresses facts but is less concerned with them than Ward. He expands on the way that Laveau has become a figure with fictionalized stories to make arguments for her value to the culture of New Orleans. Laveau's name is claimed constantly in

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[8] Danielle N. Boaz, *Banning Black Gods: Law and Religions of the African Diaspora* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021); and Danielle N. Boaz, *Voodoo: The History of a Racial Slur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[9] W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011).

[10] Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[11] Martha Ward, *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

lineage and used effectively by local businesses. The fictionalization of Laveau as a character, according to Roberts, brings agency and unity to the New Orleans natives.[12] This contributes to larger arguments that I will make on the hurtful presentation of Laveau in *Coven* by the showrunners and the potential ways that it can be harmful to New Orleans' real-world religious groups.

[12] Kodi A. Roberts, *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans, 1881-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

CHAPTER 2. KYLE AS A 'FRANKENZOMBIE'

Monster studies are integrated into even the most ancient texts as we consider religious mythologies. However, the essence of the monster as a sole focus of study has long been neglected and did not start picking up more attention until recently. Within the last century, and arguably the 21st century, scholarship on monsters has grown dramatically across academics. Much of my research stems from a subfield now referred to as "monster studies," but I will utilize only two as constants for defining what our *American Horror Story* monsters are. Elizabeth Young's *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor* and Sarah J Lauro's *Zombie Theory* and *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* give the best background for our first *AHS* character of concern: Kyle.[13] I will use these scholars to draw parallels between their classical monsters and the adapted hybrid monster seen in the show.

I find Kyle's hybridity to be of great importance, functioning as a nod to the extreme hybridities of New Orleans religion and culture throughout history. Intentional or not, the showrunners give the audience a glimpse of the Crescent City's identity conflicts with Kyle as one of their primary characters. He is introduced in the first episode, but not created as a monster until the second. In his introduction, he is presented as a potential romantic partner to one of the witches, Zoe. At a frat party, he met Zoe while other members of his fraternity gang raped Madison Montgomery, another witch who brought Zoe to the party. Kyle and Zoe discovered the rape together and interfered. The rapists dragged Kyle out and back to the bus that they arrived on to avoid him alerting any authorities. While driving away, Madison stumbled out onto the

[13] Young, *Black Frankenstein*; and Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*.

street and used witchcraft to flip the bus, killing almost everyone inside, including Kyle.[14] He is killed as a product of witchcraft and later remade as a monster in the same manner.

In the following episode, appropriately titled "Boy Parts," Madison brings Zoe to the morgue with a resurrection spell to bring Kyle back to life. They are surprised to find the morgue filled with tables of random body parts from the crash.[15] They salvage what they can of his body, complete the rest with body parts chosen from others, and sew him into one piece. They begin the spell, starting with a hair on his head and blood from a cut on Zoe's hand. They continue the spell in the smoke-filled room, chanting loudly in Latin. Initially, they believe that the spell fails, and Madison leaves. Zoe stays in the room with Kyle and kisses him, which the intensifying background music signals completes the spell. A security guard comes in and heads toward Zoe (an obvious trespasser), until Kyle wakes up behind him and immediately starts beating him.[16] The remainder of Kyle's developments as a hybrid monster are gradually introduced throughout the rest of the season.

2.1. Frankenstein's Monster

For Young, the monster has three elements: amalgamation from body parts, reanimation, and later engaging in some sort of revolt against its creator.[17] Kyle meets all three of these elements, being amalgamated of his own and his frat brothers' body parts, reanimated via witchcraft by Madison and Zoe, and engages in a form revolt against all of his creators at some point: Madison, Zoe, Misty (who nurses him into one functioning body), and his mother. Most

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[14] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 1, "Bitchcraft," directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, aired October 9, 2013 on FX, 28:35-36:25.

[15] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 2, "Boy Parts," directed by Michael Rymer, aired October 16, 2013 on FX, 13:00-15:22.

[16] *AHS, "Boy Parts*," 21:08-25:59.

[17] Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 5.

revolts were subtle, with some violence or simple rejection. Like the historical development of monsters in American history, Kyle, himself, undergoes some physical and emotional development in that he meets criteria in gradually increasing levels that attempt to bring his qualities closer to that of a human.

One central theme in much of Young's book revolves around the meaning of "amalgamation" for the American Frankenstein monster. From the 18th and into the 19th century in the U.S., amalgamation was a term used in literature, especially monster lore, symbolizing interracial mixing.[18] While Kyle is a white male, the showrunners make explicit choices to make him identify as a member of the Ninth Ward, a well-known neighborhood in New Orleans that is infamous for suffering the most damage during Hurricane Katrina and having few resources for recovery. In his first dialogue with a main cast member, Zoe, she criticizes him for being a part of a university fraternity. He defends his identity to separate himself from his well-privileged (also white) frat brothers: "I don't mind being reduced to a stereotype, but… I'm on a scholarship. My momma lives down in the Ninth Ward."[19] His identification with the Ninth Ward is placed at the forefront of his identity, making him a part of the lower class in a predominantly Black neighborhood, in which around 95% of the population identified as Black in the 2010 census, only three years before *Coven* was aired.[20] As amalgamation represents the classic American fear of interracial mixing, Kyle is a white member of the population placed in the position to be the first representative for the entirety of the Ninth Ward. It is difficult to decipher what value the showrunners found in using a white representation of the Ninth Ward,

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[18] Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 27.

[19] *AHS*, "Bitchcraft," 31:28.

[20] "Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood," Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, archived June 2012 at *Wayback Machine*, https://web.archive.org/web/20120610045219/http://gnocdc.org/NeighborhoodData/8/LowerNinthWard/index.html.

especially considering that he is verbally associated with the community more than anyone, despite the Black coven being centered in the same location. I will elaborate on this problematization of the social dynamics more closely with a later analysis of the situatedness of Marie Laveau and her Black coven.

Kyle's mixing his Ninth Ward demographics with the white coven of European-based witchcraft and his upper-class frat brothers contributes to the amalgamation of his character long before his physical amalgamation with body parts. His character, like many American monsters, is not stagnant. His qualities continue to develop throughout the season, adding value to his role as a representation of American monstrosities and defining our monster makers. I find that there are characters within this show that fit the role of monster maker. Unsurprisingly, all of these are rejected or outwardly revolted against at one point or another.

Madison and Zoe are the first monster makers that the audience is introduced to. They are undoubtedly the primary creators of the monster that Kyle becomes. Their elaborate witchcraft is a product of the white population, made evident in their European-based witchcraft and solidified with the ritual being done exclusively in Latin. Once Kyle reanimates, he is hardly functional, even as a monster. He is grunting and exhibiting extremely forceful movements by hitting himself and banging his head onto the dashboard and door in the passenger seat as Zoe drives back to her coven in a panic.[21] At this point, Misty Day, a witch with the power of resurgence, appears in the back seat and instructs Zoe to drive them to her small cabin in the Louisiana Bayou. In search of a community, Misty offers to keep Kyle in her care, claiming, "I'll heal him."[22] Misty, as a natural healer and literal giver of life, emanates maternal instincts and

[21] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 34:07.
[22] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 37:54.

qualities. Kyle, however, demonstrates that he is attached to Zoe as a caregiver when she turns to leave and is grabbed by a moaning, almost sobbing, Kyle. Seated in a chair, Kyle leans his head into her stomach and grips her hand before the scene cuts.[23]

For Kyle, his creators are given very maternal characteristics by the showrunners–all of whom compete against each other for maternity and, all of whom are rejected by him in some way.[24] Misty is the first figure to be rejected. When Zoe returns to get Kyle, she intends to bring him home to his mother in the Ninth Ward. Misty so proudly shows Zoe how Kyle's scars have healed from her concoction of "Louisiana mud," and we begin to see Kyle developing more basic locomotion as he lifts his hand to gently touch Zoe's hair. Zoe responds, "Misty, I have to take him home. His mother's a wreck. Maybe seeing her will help heal him in some way." Angrily, Misty responds, "I healed him. Me. I… I bathed him, and… and fed him and nursed him to health." When Zoe helps him out of bed to leave, Misty runs up and grabs him by the face. "No. No. No, he's not ready yet. He needs me. We're connected. Kyle, when she abandoned you. I was there. You can't just replace me." To which, Kyle grunts and swats away Misty. Zoe and Kyle leave for his mom with Misty in tears, feeling abandoned and betrayed by her creation.[25]

The mastermind behind bringing Kyle back to life was the careless Madison. She did so out of guilt for Kyle, but primarily for Zoe, who had developed a romantic interest in Kyle. She

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[23] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 38:10.

[24] King, "A Monstrous(Ly-Feminine) Whiteness," 557-73. King's article is one of few quality analyses on major themes in *AHS: Coven*. She contributes greatly to the discussion on poorly demonstrated femininity in the season in ways that this thesis has little space to elaborate on. Her focus is on major feminist themes in the show that are a bit more apparent, but I believe that there is room for further study on the role of motherhood and general gender studies in the show.. This is especially considering the underlying expectations and qualities placed on women in the show regarding maternity and the intertwined eroticism with the monstrous male figure.

[25] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 3, "The Replacements," directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, aired October 23, 2013 on FX, 14:40-17:29.

left Zoe by herself at the morgue and never saw the result of Kyle's resurrection. Madison picked out the pieces of his body to arrange and set up the ritual, instructing Zoe to assist her as needed. For some time, Madison was dead after being killed by Fiona Goode, another witch and the coven's "Supreme" leader.[26] After Zoe and the other student witches from the white coven find her body, Misty, by the request of Zoe, gets to play God once again. More difficult this time, Zoe brings Madison back to life.[27] Madison is left depressed after being dead for days, or possibly weeks, and seeks comfort in Kyle, who likewise knows what happens after death. Madison is left with Kyle alone one day and persists through his yelling and physical violence to build a connection. She gives a brief monologue about her internal conflicts and their similarities, eventually coaxing him to her embrace.[28]

The two girls gradually teach the boy-like monster to speak and read with elementary-level flashcards and videos. Meanwhile, Madison develops an attachment to Kyle and starts a sexual relationship with him. After coaxing Zoe into an agreement, the two girls share Kyle romantically, both physically and emotionally. After some time, Kyle rejects Madison, throwing her off of him when she makes sexual advances and claiming he only loves Zoe.[29] With less certainty, he later attempts to reject his last creator, Zoe, when they plan to leave together to escape the drama and danger of the coven. As part of his character development, similar to many Frankenstein monsters after self-realization, he feels guilt for his violence and lack of emotional

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[26] *AHS: Coven*, "The Replacements," 50:45.

[27] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 6, "The Axeman Cometh," directed by Douglas Petrie, aired November 13, 2013 on FX, 28:18.

[28] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 7, "The Dead," directed by Bradley Buecker, aired November 20, 2013 on FX, 19:30-20:50.

[29] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 11, "Protect the Coven," directed by Bradley Buecker, aired January 15, 2014 on FX, 15:20.

control, and fear for how he may hurt Zoe in the future. He tells Zoe he will not leave with her before she eventually coaxes him into agreeing.[30]

Kyle's storyline implies that he is made a monster at birth, long before the involvement of witchcraft, with his mother as the monster-maker and the upbringing of a white boy in the Ninth Ward as his amalgamation. His rejection of his mother is by far his most extreme revolt, resulting in her death.[31] The physical characteristics he later holds as a monster finalize Kyle's connection to the themes of the American Frankenstein identified by Young. However, qualities from his life prior to his physical amalgamation can apply as well. At the forefront of his identity, he is a product of poverty and social mixing, but racially isolated in a community historically known as predominantly Black. His obstacles extend further as the audience learns in the third episode that he is a victim of sexual assault by his mother.[32] I will elaborate later in the thesis on what this potentially means for his role in the show. Regarding his development as a monster figure, however, the murder of his mother is in revolt against her assaults. This brings a second tier of monstrosity to his character as her actions make her both a new type of monster, as well as a monster-maker that pushes Kyle to violence and forces him to act like the savage monster we see.

2.2. Zombifying Kyle and New Orleans

In Lauro's monograph, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, she can only attempt to identify themes and definitions associated with a zombified monster but is forced to come into some gray areas given the cultural and historical complexities of zombie lore. Frankenstein myths do,

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[30] *AHS*, "Protect the Coven," 43:40-45:27.
[31] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 42:40.
[32] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 25:16.

likewise, share some of the complexities concerning situatedness and contextualization. Frankenstein mythology's development has been much more accessible because of its use stemming from white writers as symbolism for the role of the Black man in society. On the other hand, the home base of zombie lore is debated, at best. What is more likely is that the first encounter and development of a zombie myth is impossible to find. The history of zombies, as noted in her title, is beyond transatlantic. Many scholars trace zombies to Haitian religious practices and folklore due to their prevalence throughout Haitian Vodou and their pivotal role in inspiring the Haitian Revolution and other rebellions.[33] Zombies have then accompanied the enslaved across their diaspora, being picked up, moved, reinvented, and sometimes forgotten.

Lauro is forced to acknowledge these complexities in her creation of a generalized structure of the zombie's creation myth. With much more nuance than Young's Frankenstein monster, Lauro defines the zombie as: "A person dies or appears to die, or is infected/affected by cure, chemical, or contagion. He subsequently reanimates or transforms. Though it retains the same basic physical shape, the zombie is essentially emptied of its former self, leaving only a body on autopilot with the capacity to follow order, thus making it an ideal slave, or with the most primal instincts, such as to feed or to transmit infection."[34] With the discussion of Young's Frankenstein, we've already walked through Kyle's zombie creation process. To reiterate key elements of his creation that match Lauro's definition of zombie: we see Kyle die in a bus accident; he both transforms and reanimates with the resurrection spell done by Madison and Zoe

[33] Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Davis's book is one of the most common studies on the Haitian zombie. It is still widely referenced by scholars regarding research on zombies and Haitian Vodou. It traces the practice of zombification to a modified pufferfish venom, which was proven to paralyze and "zombify" a person, making them seemingly mindless. This is the most commonly known practice and the most direct trace of influence from American cinema.

[34] Lauro, *Transatlantic Zombie*, 15.

along with other gradual developments done by other witches to "improve" his function as a monster; and he is left a body that does remember his past, but now functions as a primal, savage creation that responds instinctively with rage alone.

Kyle's development as a zombie is perhaps most evident in the function that he can serve for the house and the coven. We've seen the numerous hands or "monster makers" that have contributed to the creation of the monster. Additionally, there was one more contributor that perfected Kyle as a "guard dog," but does not take on the maternal creator role like the others. Fiona Goode, the coven's Supreme, is the leader of the coven (presumably, the white Coven), and naturally holds the most power of all of the witches. After numerous attacks on their coven, Fiona had gotten a trained German Shepherd for protection. The same day, the dog begins scratching on the door to one of the bedrooms, leading Fiona to Kyle listening to children's instructional videos on a laptop. The dog starts licking Kyle and he pets her, seemingly happy and child-like, before he snaps her neck from not knowing his own strength.[35] The girls later return and find Kyle playing cards with Fiona, holding a conversation. The girls, visibly confused, ask "What did you do to him?" to which Fiona responds, "I took the liberty of sprucing up your boy… just a touch." She continues, "What we need is a guard dog. One who will attack on command."[36] With this scene, the writers make Kyle a very literal replacement for a guard dog. His murder of the dog shows his animal-like instincts, which reduce him to something primal and inhumane. Fiona's work is unlike the other woman in that she intends to train him to act, as Lauro would suggest, like a slave to the coven.

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[35] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 9, "Head," directed by Howard Deutch, aired December 11, 2013 on FX, 31:20-32:46..

[36] *AHS*, "Head," 36:23-37:08.

The connection between zombies and slavery is made evident throughout Lauro's book, especially considering the Haitian zombie as opposed to the American zombie. In studying the religious association of the monster, the Haitian zombie often becomes the tradition most evident in a cultural connection. The Haitian zombie is generally "an allegory for slavery, as the houngan or mambo retains power over the soulless, revivified corpse and forces it to labor for his or her profit."[37] However, this is distinct from much of contemporary American zombie films. Lauro identifies a pre- and post-Romero culture around zombies in American film. The director George Romero and those that followed him in the zombie movie genre ran with inspiration from monsters similar to Shelley's Frankenstein, and turned the zombie into a creation of man by consequence or accident, rather than an intentional creation for the purpose of control and enslavement. Before Romero, the primary method of the zombie's reanimation was ritualistic, and generally associated with Haitian Vodou or a similar form of the religion.[38]

Lauro turns, however, to *American Horror Story: Coven* as an example of deviation from this post-Romero pattern. Citing interviews done by the showrunners including staff writer John Gray, she confirms that the showrunners intend with their horror to return the show to its religious connections with Voodoo, ultimately leading them to a correlation with Haitian Vodou.[39] The presence of Louisiana Voodoo is evident throughout the show given that one of the primary characters is Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen, herself. In Lauro's research of the intended culture to be communicated by *AHS* showrunners, she finds Gray expanding on a particular ritual in the show in which Marie Laveau, in an act of revenge, raises an army of the dead to attack the coven. The starting ritual for the attack shows Laveau drawing the Veve of

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[37] Lauro, *Then Transatlantic Zombie*, 109.
[38] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 93-99.
[39] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 106.

Maman Brigitte, a common lwa, or spirit, in African diasporic religions stemming from Haitian Vodou.[40] She drapes a large snake across the back of her shoulders, which is a reference to le Grand Zombi, a well-known practice of Laveau's according to mythologies about her and a known incarnation of the lwa Damballah Ouedou.[41] She finally slits a much smaller snake open as a blood sacrifice and harshly manipulates a rope tied into a noose. The scene accompanies brief cuts to another location in which decayed, growling zombies are ascending from the ground.[42]

Lauro has a brief but well-executed analysis of this scene and the proceeding zombie attack in her book, so I will not elaborate heavily on it here.[43] What I find most valuable is the reveal that the writer, John Gray, very much intends for this scene to be a reference to Haitian Vodou and its related Afro-Caribbean religions. In the scene, the showrunners include an arrangement of objects to the left of Laveau while seated on the floor during the ritual, shown very briefly from a bird's-eye-view perspective.[44] Gray confirms that these objects are representations of those who have wronged her, making the army of corpses not accidental, but explicitly chosen and aligning with the original functions of the zombie: both a slave as a representation of disempowerment and a simultaneous embodiment of rebellion.[45] I will elaborate later on the complications of this choice on the showrunners' behalf, but the currently relevant value of this is understanding the showrunners' intentions of making Kyle and New Orleans zombified through a connection to Haitian Vodou, which we may find is not necessarily

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[40] Kerry Noonan, "Gran Brijit: Haitian Vodou Guardian of the Cemetery," in *Goddesses in World Culture: Volume 3 Australia and the Americas*, ed. Patricia Monaghan (Denver, Colorado: Praeger, 2011), 123-32.

[41] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 63; Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 35.

[42] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 4, "Fearful Pranks Ensue," directed by Michael Uppendahl, aired October 30, 2013 on FX, 37:56-38:39.

[43] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 105-107.

[44] *AHS*, "Fearful Pranks Ensue," 38:35.

[45] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 31 and 106.

applicable to the religions we should see represented in the show. In doing so, New Orleans becomes something to its audience that is associated with monsters found in Haitian and other Afro-Caribbean religions, rather than the American New Orleans that we might see today.

2.3. Hybrid Monsters

Kyle's monsterness pulls together pieces from different traditions because the showrunners have created a confused identity for the character. Young and Lauro both refer to their specific monster as *the* most "American" monster.[46] Young refers to the "closest symbolic descendants of Frankenstein in antebellum America" as "illegitimate black sons, debased from their white paternal foundations."[47] I argue that the placement of him in the Ninth Ward is a reaching effort to make him a representative for the community, despite us knowing that the vast majority of the population is Black. The symbolism of Frankenstein displays how the showrunners encourage the audience to see Kyle as a community member and to see further what life appears to be like for those in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. Kyle's process also aligns with Lauro's defined zombification process, as previously stated. However, his identity is complicated by the historical placement of zombies in the United States. Lauro claims that the zombie is the most "American" monster, arguing that the most American qualities are those that come "from elsewhere, and it is distinctively informed by slavery, colonialism, and occupation."[48] Kyle's race restricts him from being the most genuine American monster, but this becomes a matter of perspective.

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[46] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 13; and Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 26.
[47] Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 24.
[48] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 23.

The showrunner's choice of Marie Laveau's zombies is indicative of their perception of the most American monster. These zombies, despite lacking evidence of the folklore's historical relevance in New Orleans, are made as a product of what *should* be Louisiana Voodoo. Instead, they make the explicit choice to incorporate elements of Haitian Vodou and create a religion more foreign and mystified–one that aligns with Lauro's idea of the American zombie. The distinction between the two lies in perspective. It is the reception of Frankenstein throughout history that has made an inevitable link between dead bodies and slavery.[49] Neither Kyle nor the zombie attack mob are ever identified specifically as zombies. The mob is referred to sarcastically as "those things outside" and "the Army of Darkness."[50] This is potentially the product of the post-Romero zombie. Romero had first intended the creatures to be "ghouls," but the audiences collectively identified the monsters as "zombies" after the film's release.[51] For our purposes, we should recognize and understand the implications of these monsters being included in the film, especially as one hybridized American monster. However, the identity of these monsters can be decided by their audiences. The showrunners have created examples of these monsters based on the perception of zombies over history. They made the zombies exist for the American audience and in the way that the audience has imagined zombies to be. The next, and arguably most important step in the process lies in what the audience will learn from the presentation.

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[49] Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 38.

[50] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 5, "Burn, Witch, Burn!" directed by Jeremy Podeswa, aired November 6, 2013 on FX, 8:07.

[51] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 97.

CHAPTER 3. FROM VICTIM TO HERO

Kyle goes through extensive character development between the first and last episodes of season three. He attempts to help the innocent (considering his intervention to help Madison) but fails and quite literally gets killed in the crossfire. One trait remains consistent: Kyle wants to be a hero. The showrunners go through an extensive process to show Kyle's desire to be a hero in both life and the afterlife, but he does not succeed until much later. In the meantime, the showrunners were building the audience's emotional connection to Kyle. Kyle is a blubbering monster at first, moaning in Zoe's belly so she does not leave him. He finishes the season owning his strength and aggression, making claims like "I'm coven guard dog. I'll kill him."[52] What does this do? Shouldn't our primary romance characters be *romantic*?

Romance and monsters have been tied together for centuries, but experienced a recent resurfacing in the 20th century and extending into today. In medieval literature, the stories can be tied to coinciding laws that reflect anxieties of mixing social classes, wealth, and the possibility of disfigurement.[53] With the resurgence of the monster romance in the late twentieth century, the motivation for the monster romance has changed. The book-to-film franchise, *Twilight*, has gained substantial attention considering some of the changes in literary techniques.[54] The highly successful author, Stephenie Meyer, grasped the attention of a (mostly) female audience for her books. The 3.3 billion-dollar grossing film series still holds high viewership in streaming

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[52] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 12, "Go to Hell" directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, aired January 22, 2014 on FX, 38:30..

[53] Lara Klaber, "Taming the Perfect Beast: The Monster as Romantic Hero in Contemporary Fiction" (Master's thesis, Cleveland State University, 2013), 17-8.

[54] Stephenie Meyer, *The Twilight Saga* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2011); and *Twilight*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke (Summit Distribution, 2008), DVD.

services years later.[55] This story features a highly wealthy family of vampires, one of which reluctantly comes into a romantic relationship with the human protagonist, Bella Swan. For Meyer, she prioritized giving a vague description of Bella, our protagonist and narrator, so her readers could more easily see themselves in her character. The character becomes less about telling someone else's story, but more about including flaws and disfigurements that draw in the audience to relate to the awkward, and even monstrous, characters.[56] Along with a booming amount of other romance media, *Coven* uses the romantic plot between Kyle and Zoe to include the audience so that they can relate to the characters. They are made so the audience can project their personal fears of appearance and poverty levels onto the characters. Kyle becomes a hero of evolution for the audience, away from the poverty and disfigurements that the audience might fear within themselves. In this way, Kyle is still a representation of societal anxieties but is no longer connected to the culture of the Ninth Ward. Instead, he is made into a part of the fantasy for the average American viewer who sees their Ninth Ward hero made in the image of whiteness.

3.1. Sympathizing with the Monster

It is not until after Kyle's death that the audience is gradually introduced to Kyle's backstory. Zoe takes an immediate interest in his story, researching his achievements and newspaper features, and later bringing the audience to his childhood home with his mother. His mother, very open about her difficulties grieving, is shown with unkempt hair and a lip piercing, offering marijuana to Zoe during her visit. Despite the numerous nods to poverty and direct

[55] Scott Mendelson, "*Twilight* Occupies All 5 Top Spots Among Netflix's Most-Watched Movies, Forbes, last modified July 21, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2021/07/21/twilight-occupies-all-5-top-spots-among-netflixs-most-watched-movies/?sh=b4af17d10ca8.

[56] Klaber, "Taming the Perfect Beast," 68-76.

associations made by Kyle, the set design fails to make it apparent. Kyle's home is shown with neatly organized picture frames and memorabilia. The home is small but with high ceilings and thorough details in architecture through vaulted door frames, an intricate fireplace mantle, and a small chandelier tying together the living space. The furniture is all clean and well-kept, including well-stocked bookshelves, curtains, and antique furniture.[57] Outside of her unkempt hair and single lip piercing, his mother would blend perfectly well in an upper-class community with only a few wardrobe changes. Even her language style indicates either high or average education, which does not correspond with most poverty-stricken communities.

Despite the poor execution of the environment's alignment with Kyle's claimed backstory, the writers continue to reiterate his qualities that developed from the barriers he faced growing up in poverty. His mother continues to praise Kyle, saying "When his father left he became the man of this house. He worked part-time as an SAT tutor. He did repairs. People said that's a lot of pressure to put on a boy. He was just a… he was a natural gentleman in his bones." She proceeds to share with Zoe how her phone call interrupted her in the process of hanging herself. She decided, only at the last minute, to step down to answer the phone.[58] The whole world thinks highly of Kyle, making his death a tragedy for everyone including Zoe, his mother, and the audience.

As though reiterating multiple times that Kyle grew up in poverty was not enough, the writers decided to include a genuine tragedy in his backstory. This story makes his mother both a monster and monster-maker, finalizing the audience's sympathies for Kyle. Later in this episode, Zoe takes Kyle from Misty's care and returns him to his mother's house. That night, we see his

[57] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 7:03-9:46.
[58] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 8:00.

mom enter his room while he is lying in bed awake. His mom gets in bed with him, recounting how she saw him in the shower earlier that day to give him a towel. Oddly, she looked closely at her adult son's naked body in the shower and told him that night, "You're a different person. Your body. You look like someone else. I don't understand what's happening. But that–that doesn't matter, doesn't it? You're still my beautiful boy. We're together again." The audience sees her start to kiss Kyle on the lips and run her hands down his body under the blanket, while she says "Let it all go. I'm here now."[59] Kyle, visibly upset, shows no shock or fight against her actions, indicating that this rape is a repeated offense that he has struggled with at home for a long period now. I argue that this sexual assault is included in the plot for two reasons. First, other than Kyle's claims that associate himself with the "Ninth Ward," there is little evidence that Kyle experiences disadvantages like other members of the community.[60] His home environment as a contribution was weak evidence, and the tragic rape plot gives undeniable trauma to the character who was made to be successful "despite circumstances."

The second reason is that it strengthens Kyle's filial revolt as a monster, making him fit so nicely into the contemporary "monster romance" genre, and gives a reason for him to abandon his home and further his primary romance plot. Before his death, the writers give his mother a monologue in which she compares herself to his romantic interest. She enters Kyle's room to tell him that she invited Zoe over for dinner. When Kyle remains nonverbal, she falls into an angry monologue, screaming "Why won't you talk to me?! What's happened to you?" She continues to repeat the sexual assault, kissing him and saying "No one knows you like I do. Not even that girl.

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[59] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 25:06-27:24.

[60] Giving credit where it is due, I believe the showrunners make a brave choice including the story of sexual assault on a man. While my argument stance indicates that the story is used to elevate Kyle's role in the show, sexual assault on men is often disregarded if not ignored entirely. No current scholarship addresses this topic in the show. I would encourage scholars to think more about the presentation of sexual assault on men (or lack of) in *American Horror Story* and the rest of contemporary media.

She doesn't know how to please you." It is through the comparison between herself and Zoe that Kyle finally reaches his limit and pushes his mother off of him, screaming. He takes a childhood trophy off of a nearby desk and beats his mother to death with it, showing an intense display of blood splattering across his face.[61] Kyle's breaking point was with the comparison between his mom and Zoe, his romantic interest. Zoe later finds Kyle with his dead mother when she comes over for dinner. Quite literally replacing his mother as his monster-maker, Kyle is released of his mother's evils and can continue his romantic relationship with Zoe, later Madison, and then Zoe again.

3.2. Whiteness in a Savior-Complex

Kyle repeatedly attempts to save others who are more fragile than him, especially his romantic partners. About halfway through the season, the writers include a flashback that indicates how far his savior complex extends. As he slowly regains memories of his human past, the nonverbal Kyle rediscovers a memory of visiting a tattoo shop with his frat brothers. Kyle's peers attempt to persuade him to get a tattoo like the rest of them, and he repeatedly refuses.[62] This and the choice to be the only frat brother not engaging in the rape of Madison Montgomery were the two instances in which the showrunners separate him from the choices of others in his demographic. Explaining his refusal, he delves into a tangent: "I got plans. I'm not gonna grow up and work for daddy or sell pot to undergrads all my life. You guys know why the levees broke during Katrina?" Another frat member, obviously not caring much about his story, jokes, "Cause the little Dutch boy ran out of fingers?" Despite the comment, Kyle continued:

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[61] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 41:09-42:58.
[62] *AHS*, "The Dead," 0:01-2:18.

> The levees were built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. But they built them for shit. And where I'm from still hasn't recovered, and probably never will… I'm going to be an engineer. And I'm going to make sure shit like that never happens again. I don't want to walk into some big meeting with a mayor or governor, and roll up my sleeves and have a little Saints logo or a … or a Wile E. Coyote or anything that's gonna make him think that I'm anything other than his knight in shining armor. I got one life, and I'm not wasting it.[63]

Kyle places an obvious importance on appearance and professionalism. More significantly, it maintains the appearance of whiteness: no tattoos, no piercings, and no cultural distractions.

The European standards for appearance have long been the baseline for professionalism. Along with tattoos, many physical characteristics like piercings, dreadlocks, and other symbols descending from cultures outside Europe (especially those tied to the African diaspora) have been discouraged and often banned in education and the workplace. There was no ban on any natural hair discrimination until 2019 with the "CROWN Act" in California, around five years after the air date of *Coven*'s first episode.[64] Kyle is not creating new expectations, but he is reinforcing standards that have been prominent in the U.S. since its founding. He gives the dominant example of whiteness, which is "the default setting for 'human': everything else is deviant and requires explanation."[65] He associates his hero story with only one image, which removes the possibility of anyone (especially from the Black coven) also fitting that role.

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[63] *AHS*, "The Dead," 1:20-2:06.

[64] Boaz, *Banning Black Gods*, 95-6.

[65] Steve Garner, *Racisms: An Introduction* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2010), 119. Racism is a difficult topic with a very complicated history. I would refer to Garner's book for a general discussion of racism and how it contributes to any context, including this research on AHS. His eighth chapter, "Whiteness," offers meaningful elaboration on the word "whiteness," its history, and its placement in the contemporary period as a definer of power relationships, and a frame for understanding social dynamics (defining the self and the Other).

The scene cuts back to the present day. As Kyle's body was reassembled, it was done with the body parts of his tattooed frat brothers. He looks down at his arms and legs to see two tattoos on his body. After killing his mother, he was chained up as Zoe saw him as dangerous. Still nonverbal, Kyle was crying and moaning at the sight of the tattoos and burst randomly into short fits of rage.[66] His anger was at the thought of not being able to help the public like he had previously intended to do as a civil engineer. The backstory brings the audience to see Kyle as a potential hero figure. For the romantics, Zoe and the audience's female gaze sees Kyle as a monster, but a misunderstood monster. They sympathize with the 'Frankenzombie' for the hand that he had been dealt, knowing how much he wants to be an upright American citizen who helps the unfortunate in the Ninth Ward and beyond.

Making the hero complex dependent on the tattoos brings the audience to the same understanding that Kyle has about professionalism. This perspective demonizes diversity in appearances and, thus, the cultures that the diversity represents. In *Coven*, the showrunners display many efforts to make an inclusive, adaptable environment with feminism at the forefront of the show's social themes. Yet, their most obvious American hero is one from the "Ninth Ward," whose struggles are only proven by the inclusion of a tragic story of familial sexual assault. Despite being 95% Black in population, The Ninth Ward's hero comes out assimilated to the standards of whiteness. As a part of the season's primary love story, contemporary audiences may be blinded by the possibilities of error in this presentation of "hero" which excludes the majority population within this poverty-stricken community. Furthermore, the choice to elevate the role of Kyle, alone, into the love story with the Ninth Ward keeps away the potential for the

[66] *AHS*, "The Dead," 2:08-2:49.

mixing of African-derived religion and European-based witchcraft. With this choice, the white coven and the audience are eased in their maintained social, racial, and religious hegemony.

CHAPTER 4. THE SITUATEDNESS OF LAVEAU AND NEW ORLEANS

Coven does not approach the season with an attempt to recreate genuine historical events. Instead, the showrunners reference true history and make it into an imaginary world. However, for much of the audience, this becomes real. Marie Laveau, a real historical figure, makes an important entrance into the show as the representation of Louisiana Voodoo, the Ninth Ward, and the rest of Black New Orleans (especially considering they are the only Black natives to New Orleans that are even shown). For this chapter, I will analyze the portrayal of Marie Laveau as the face of Voodoo and her coven, as well as the role that the Black Coven is given as a part of the Ninth Ward. This will be compared to historical and recent ethnographic work done in the city to understand the ways that the showrunners have skewed the portrayal of the Marie Laveau, Voodoo, and the Ninth Ward to fit their own idea of what their place *should* be in the makeup of New Orleans.

4.1. Laveau's Legacy

To first understand what the showrunners have done with the Black Coven, I believe it is crucial to understand the historical implications of using an actual figure in New Orleans' history. Her history in New Orleans is widely debated, much of which stems from alterations in her stories or the confusion between Marie Laveau the First and her daughter, Marie Laveau the Second. In most oral retellings over time, the two became one historical person. For the Louisiana native and historian Kodi A. Roberts, the certainty of inaccuracies in her stories is less important than her impact on New Orleans culture and religion, especially, Voodoo. The city is famously home to the beginning of Creole culture, which developed from mixing French,

African, and indigenous people. Alongside music, food, and general culture, religious practices underwent great changes as a part of this mixing.

Given the disadvantages that Afro-American, Black, and mixed-race people experienced in the United States throughout history and into today, there was a large population of people struggling to gain empowerment under enslavement, Jim Crow laws, and general poverty. Roberts argues that practicing New Orleans Voodoo, whether blended with Catholicism or not, has been a claim to empowerment for its practitioners.[67] The mythology of Marie Laveau is an extension of the fluidity of New Orleans Voodoo and a further tool for empowerment. Many citizens of New Orleans, even today, may claim to be descendants of hers or that their ancestors held some association with her work because it may give them a degree of credibility. Molding stories of her history mirrors what is distinctive about the fluidity of New Orleans Voodoo, making Laveau and the religion intrinsically tied to one another.[68]

Her power extends to actual political strength in the city's history. With strict religious persecution over history, both during and after the Code Noir, it was extremely dangerous for people to practice religions other than Christianity, especially in public.[69] Laveau made an association with Catholicism and hybridized her religion. She made affiliations with white politicians by granting them favors, often using Voodoo practices to do so. As a result of her Catholic affiliation and political protections, Laveau was able to practice Voodoo mostly

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[67] Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 7-8.

[68] Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 19-20.

[69] "(1724) Louisiana's Code Noir" Blackpast, accessed April 10, 2024, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/louisianas-code-noir-1724/. Louisiana's Code Noir was largely based on the French Code Noir (Black Code) of French Caribbean colonies in 1685. Introduced in 1724, the code regulated the religious affiliation and practice allowance of all people in the colony, including and especially the enslaved. The code expelled all Jews, required Roman Catholic baptism, forbade certain interracial mixing, and more regulations targeted at the enslaved and free Black people. These codes were often made in fear of rebellion that started developing across the Caribbean and southern United States.

untouched by police officials.[70] With affiliations she made with white politicians, Laveau was able to fix prison sentences and arrange pardons for members of her community.[71] Laveau was an example of successfully using her religion to leverage power into the city, which is important to note while considering the fictional Laveau's social status in *AHS*.

Given her historical significance and placement as a primary character in *AHS: Coven*, it is safe to say that *Coven*'s Laveau maintains a position as the founder of the New Orleans Voodoo religion and surrounding community that we see in the show. However, the showrunners have put in much more work to associate Kyle as the representative for New Orleans' Ninth Ward. The showrunners mistake this New Orleans dynamic massively. The religious and racial dynamic is falsely divided, indicating their own imposed ideas on what the dynamic of New Orleans *should* be, rather than what it is.

4.2. The Full Ninth Ward: Crescent City Hair Salon

Outside of Kyle's home, we see a very different Ninth Ward as we're introduced to the Black coven. We see it first in the second episode, just after Kyle's reanimation in the morgue. It is short and sweet, but it does not need much introduction. The Black coven's home base is Marie Laveau's hair salon. The audience is not given a very wide frame of the building, but certain ideas indicate the location. Fiona Goode, the white Supreme, visits the salon to ask a favor from Laveau. While seated in a chair receiving a hair service from a stylist, Fiona lets out a small cry in pain and comments, "You're not used to having a white woman in your chair, are you?" The stylist responds, "I'm not used to having a white woman in this neighborhood." There's a short scene where one of the stylists turns on hip-hop music from a boombox and the

[70] Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 41.
[71] Ward, *Voodoo Queen*, 126-7.

rest of the stylists start dancing before Laveau interrupts.[72] The episode later returns to Laveau styling Fiona's hair. Here, Fiona makes the only comment throughout the entire series about the exact location of the salon. In reference to the tourists visiting Laveau's tombstone at St. Louis Number 1, Fiona states, "Little do they know, all they have to do to get their wishes granted was come down here to the Ninth Ward and get their hair braided."[73] It is evident from these brief scenes that the Black coven needs little introduction. Unlike Kyle's home, it hardly needs any reference to its actual location in the Ninth Ward. The audience is assumed to know its location from the demographics and environment alone.

The development of the Black coven's dynamics against the rest of New Orleans, I believe, is best shown in interactions with outsiders. The first of which is the previously mentioned Fiona. Fiona is an antagonist in the season from beginning to end. The audience is not encouraged to sympathize with her or have any concern for her safety. The second is Fiona's daughter and the academy's headmistress, Cordelia Foxx. When Cordelia and her husband are having issues conceiving and fertility doctors are no help, she seeks the help of Laveau shortly after Fiona. Cordelia is a likable character in the series, so her treatment in the salon shows drastic differences from her mother's experience.

Cordelia's scene opens at the salon with a shot of the street and the lively activities of its community. The audience sees a vintage car and a group of men advertising car washes done by hand. Cordelia steps out of a minivan across the street and heads for the salon entrance, noticeably out of place as the only visible white person in the neighborhood. We hear cars honking, dogs barking, and police sirens nearby, despite there being little traffic. The salon's

[72] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 26:15-27:06.
[73] *AHS*, "Boy parts," 30:21.

building is older–two stories high with faded wood siding and signage. All of the windows and the front door are protected by metal gates and accompanied by green shutters. As Cordelia enters the building, the upward angle of the camera shows the high ceilings, but also flags hanging from entryways and pieces of the ceiling missing, exposing the wooden beams of the second story's floor.[74] Within one minute of this introduction with Cordelia, the audience sees more of the Black coven's Ninth Ward than the entire conversation between Laveau and Fiona.

Cordelia is escorted through a dark hallway to the back of the building, where Marie Laveau is seated on a large throne, barefoot, with a leg draped over one of the throne's arms and the opposite foot resting on a large skull placed on the ground. I say "throne" instead of chair because it is elevated onto a platform accessible by stairs and decorated thoroughly with bones and pelts. Empty bottles, glasses, shells, skulls, and candles surround Laveau and the rest of the room. Cordelia is given a small stool to sit on across from her.[75]

This angle and approach taken by the showrunners in Cordelia's introduction to the salon does more than demonstrate her discomfort. The wide angle gives the audience a perspective in which they see Cordelia's vulnerability in approaching the salon. Alone, one of the show's protagonists is surrounded by a strange, uncomfortable, and implied unsafe environment. In traveling through the building, everything is seen from a low upward angle. Once Cordelia is seated, the audience sees Laveau from Cordelia's perspective, looking upward at her on her throne. Laveau's relaxed and carefree stature while draped across the chair indicates superiority and control over the situation. This is not only different for Cordelia, who is stiff and visibly nervous while asking for a request, but it is also a drastic change from Fiona's experience. Fiona

[74] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 27:28-28:02.
[75] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 28:15-28:46.

had little introduction to the building and was already seated in her chair, making demands, by the time Laveau arrived. Laveau was standing, servicing Fiona's hair while Fiona was sitting comfortably. The hierarchy is clear from these dynamics. Fiona is an antagonist, disrespecting Laveau and her salon. Laveau, however, acts threatening and disrespectful to Cordelia, a character already established as well-liked in the show.

Because of this, both Laveau and the salon are placed into the category of antagonists along with Fiona. Fiona is placed there by her own actions. She is visibly narcissistic, entitled, and antagonistic to her truce with the Black coven that had been set in place decades before. Laveau and her Coven are made antagonists by association, particularly with that of the white protagonist. Aside from the embellished character that develops later in the season, Laveau is intended to be unwelcoming and threatening, alongside the environment and coven that she represents, from her initial introduction. Meanwhile, there is a specific social hierarchy that is created for the show, drastically unlike the one that New Orleans had experienced historically. Roberts' research of the city indicates that New Orleans society had developed by interacting *with* each other, not into divided social and racial groups. The twentieth-century Jim Crow laws plunged New Orleans and much of the United States into more harshly divided territories, which would lead to slightly more segregation than the earlier communities that Roberts studied. However, recent ethnographic work indicates that the nature of New Orleans and its religious practices are still widely open and in constant re-development in response to the city's hardships, including Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Voodoo today is often blended with Catholicism, but its demonstrations are reemerging and open to the public, encouraging the education of the city's unique traditions among its inhabitants and outsiders.[76] It is a diverse and open environment,

[76] Carter, "The Blessed Placemakers."

drastically different from the one seen in *Coven*. *AHS* places the Black coven into a small corner of the city's Ninth Ward, openly avoiding interaction and collaboration with any groups outside of their circle.

CHAPTER 5. THE FACE OF EVIL: LAVEAU'S EMBODIMENT OF WHITE FEARS

Coven's showrunners make great efforts to make the season strongly feminist. It is empowering and engaging for its audience that resonates with their primary characters and protagonists. Outside of this group of white witches (and Kyle), religions and minority groups are marginalized. They are made into small, cult-like groups that threaten the innocent and attempt to poison the remaining population with their exoticism. With Marie Laveau as the face of the Black Coven, she is threatening to the show's main protagonists, reinforcing centuries-old ideas about the erotic threat that Black people, especially men, pose to white women. The showrunners finally demonstrate through the incorporation of the African deity, Papa Legba, that they are viewing Louisiana Voodoo and all African religions through a Christian lens. This does more than villainize the group. It *demonizes* Laveau and her religion, making it the embodiment of white fears in a nation dominated by Christianity.

5.1. Fearing the "African Infection"

I wish to return to the interaction between Laveau and Cordelia to demonstrate that Laveau is made an enemy when the showrunners choose specifically *whom* she poses a threat to. Cordelia, as the headmistress of Miss Robicheaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies, is the mother figure for all of the emerging women in the show. She cares for them like her own. For much of the audience, Cordelia becomes a representation of feminist change (the showrunners are well aware of their female-dominated audience).[77] In the last episode, she ascends to the position of Supreme after the death of her mother, Fiona Goode, and the audience

[77] Lonergan, "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism," 9.

sees how she enacts structural changes to expand the numbers and strength of the coven.[78] Her motives are to teach young witches to be proud of their gifts, and she hopes to help them embrace and perfect their powers. A character that insults or harms a protagonist, is made to be an enemy of the audience that has grown attached to their main characters. In her introduction, Laveau is immediately placed as a threat to the innocent but is outdone even as an antagonist. Given her interaction with Fiona, Laveau attempts to stand her ground but backs off once Fiona displays her dominance by setting the salon's nearby wigs on fire.[79] This discredits her against our white antagonist, making her weaker and less powerful. Not even given the credit she deserves as an antagonist, Laveau is no more than a tool used to advance the main plot line that surrounds the white coven.

A primary importance of this dynamic is the victimization of the innocent. In this instance, the innocent is made to be the headmistress of the white coven, while the antagonizer is the leader of the Black witches. In the history of the Haitian zombie, we've established that the monster is often a representation of the enslaved and an inspiration for rebellion.[80] For American adaptations of these stories, the Black monster represents the fear of cultural "infection." For a white, Western audience, the real horror is "the risk that the white protagonists–especially the *female* protagonists–might turn into zombies (i.e., slaves), themselves… The clichéd markers of 'primitive' culture–tribal drums, ecstatic dancing, crude totems, 'voodoo' dolls–do not merely symbolize the primitiveness of non-Western culture but demonstrate something of the mimetic and decisively repetitive nature of anti-imperial power."[81] This anxiety has been projected in

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[78] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 13, "The Seven Wonders," directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, aired January 29, 2014 on FX, 27:34-29:41.

[79] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 30:40-31:42.

[80] Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie,* 51.

[81] Edward P. Comentale, "Zombie Race," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah J. Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 193.

cinema since its earliest possibilities, including *King Kong* in 1933, which hypersexualized the Black man and placed the safety and purity of the white female in the beast's hand–literally.[82] The film is still relevant in modern pop culture considering its remake in 2005.[83] The theme is also mentioned by Young who expands on stories of black monstrosity that spread fear of white women being raped by Black men and, ultimately, the fear of racial amalgamation.[84]

In *Coven*, the fear is made real since the reason that Cordelia approaches Laveau is, in fact, to use her magic. After having some difficulty conceiving a child with her husband, she approaches Laveau for her fertility spell, titled, "the Pochaut Medecine." After the request, we start to hear the sound of drums and Cordelia looks behind her to see a gate and door to a courtyard opening.[85] Laveau is providing a glimpse of what the spell ritual consists of and for the audience, an enactment of the ritual that she subsequently declines to do for Cordelia. The hypothetical ritual begins with Cordelia, whose facial expressions indicate unease and fear, being escorted into the courtyard by two Black (shirtless) men. Cordelia meets Laveau and a group of her "workers," dressed in all white and formed into a circle.[86] Someone hands Laveau a mason jar who, while narrating, says that the ritual centers on a collection of her husband's semen. The women dance with fans and beads as Laveau throws the mason jar onto the fire. Laveau eats a guinea pepper roasted on the fire, accepting it off a metal tool with her tongue stretched out. She

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[82] *King Kong*, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B Schoedsack (RKO Radio Pictures, 1933), https://play.max.com/movie/4c48f961-7978-4b70-b5c9-25a7f9bcb27a; Poole, *Monsters in America*. In his book, Poole includes one of the most recent analyses of historical horror films and their racist implications. He extends this conversation into the twenty-first century, making his book a valuable resource for many brief references that may expand on ideas from Young, Lauro, and other scholars alike.

[83] *King Kong*, directed by Peter Jackson (Universal Pictures, 2005), https://www.netflix.com/title/70021664.

[84] Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 40-1.

[85] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 28:58.

[86] The term "worker" is often used in reference to participants in a Voodoo ritual or the practitioners of the religion. Any members of the Black coven would be considered "workers" as much as they are "witches" to the show. It is quite indicative of the business-like treatment that the practice was given in New Orleans history.

dances with the group and they lay Cordelia on the ground. Cordelia lifts her dress, exposing her undergarments and bare stomach, and they slaughter a goat in the air, letting it bleed out onto her bare stomach. Cordelia rubs the blood into her stomach and Laveau ends the vision saying, "When it's over, I sleep for four days and four nights." Cordelia responds, "How soon can we do it?"[87]

Despite the intensity of the ritual, Cordelia is more than obliged to do the ritual and pay fifty thousand dollars in advance for the service, only stopped by Laveau's rejection.[88] Additionally, given the rejection, the ritual never happens in the *Coven* storyline. Regardless, the showrunners choose to show the ritual as a hypothetical scenario. Why? The ritual is hypersexualized, not only of the shirtless men and Laveau with her open-mouthed acceptance of the guinea pepper but of Cordelia, as well. Cordelia, placed on the ground beneath the entire Black coven, is naked and visibly uneasy with the experience. The advertised "one-hundred-percent success rate" appeals to the white, innocent protagonist who searches out Laveau when at her most desperate. The ritual is, most importantly, a spell for fertility, giving Cordelia the tale-as-old-as-time, birth from an African source, if not a mixed-race child. It is the spread of the Black coven's power and "seed" that makes this ritual appealing for the show to include. They can exoticize the fertility ritual as much as possible, spreading fear of the contagion of African culture in the United States. The possibility of Cordelia becoming "infected" by Laveau and her religion is reflective of the underlying American concern for this contagion reaching our young, white women.

[87] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 29:19-31:27.
[88] *AHS*, "The Replacements," 31:29.

5.2. The Cult of Voodoo

African diasporic religions made their way into the U.S. through the Transatlantic slave trade. The variety of diasporic religions was maximized with the inheritance of New Orleans through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The nature of the religions has been forced to hold great adaptability. From the start, they experienced various levels of cultural mixing as Africans were captured and brought to the Americas, then forced into the standards of their masters with legislation like the Black Code. Some traditions that developed from these interactions are Obeah, a general term for Caribbean spiritual healing, or Vodou, a similar collection of African practices that settled distinctively in Haiti.[89] The traditions continuously develop and experience more grand-scaled changes after emancipation, as their freedom allows for further movement, interaction, and shared recollections of customs that bring new levels of synchrony to the practices and their accompanying belief systems, which can be understood generally as "Creole."[90] The series of developments continue as integral to contemporary Creole religions as they mold into new functions for each environment.

Religious diversity was a concern for many Americans long before the introduction of diasporic Creole religions. The issue can stem back to the initial landings of protestants on Native American soil. There have been many measures taken, like the previously mentioned Black Code, used to restrain African-American and indigenous people from their freedom of religion and assimilate them into Christianity throughout the Caribbean. The word "cult," dating to the nineteenth century, is originally used to refer to small, marginal religious groups, usually

[89] Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction, From Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, third edition (New York University Press, 2011), 25.

[90] Fernández Olmos, Creole Religions, 32.

outside of mainstream Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism.[91] In the contemporary context, cults have developed an association with fraud, sexual extortion, and general manipulation of their congregants. Research suggests, however, that these themes are common among most religions, leaving the only factors specific to the modern "cult" as social tension and unlikability. This change developed greatly in the twentieth century, with the increased accessibility to media as a major contributor to this shift.[92]

The cult of "Voodoo" emerged mostly during the Civil War, which is unsurprising given the extreme racial tensions and pro-slavery propaganda of the time.[93] As the modern usage of the word "cult" developed in the twentieth century, media which added to the social tensions around religion portrayed Haitian Vodou (spelled as Voodoo) as an extremely hierarchical tradition, engaging in human sacrifice and Cannibalism. This idea of Voodoo expanded to other African-derived Creole religions, including Louisiana Voodoo.[94] Outside of an appropriate and authentic context that refers to Louisiana Voodoo, the term "voodoo," has since been used and molded into a racist narrative that displays Afro-American and African religions as superstitious and barbaric devil-worship.[95] With time, these ideas have hardly receded from the average American. The demonic narrative was reiterated in 2010 when a magnitude 7.0 earthquake left Haiti in catastrophe. Many conservative Christians including Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, spread the notion that the earthquake was a punishment to the Haitians by God for making a "pact with the devil." This anti-voodoo idea was commonly used to deny immigrants and refugees from entering the United States after the disaster, as well as refusing to

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[91] Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 4-5.
[92] Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 17-20.
[93] Boaz, *Voodoo*, 14-7.
[94] Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 115-120.
[95] Boaz, *Voodoo*, 135.

send any aid. Many groups that did engage in aid on the island did so on the condition that the groups they aided were to convert to Christianity.[96] Only three years before the release of *Coven*, the showrunners were salting fresh wounds by attributing so much of Louisiana's Voodoo to Haitian Vodou, confirming for millions of viewers that the religions are one and the same.

For *Coven*, not only are all variations of Voodoo the same, but they are also reinforcing ideas about excessive animal and human sacrifice. Marie Laveau, our face of Louisiana Voodoo, was visited by Papa Legba toward the end of the show.[97] Legba comes from the trickers Eshu from the Yoruba kingdom and Legba from the Fon kingdom, making up today's Benin and Nigeria. When the cultures reached Haiti, they merged into one deity: Papa Legba. Papa Legba was also heavily influenced by Catholicism in Haiti under French rule, which reduced the severity of his trickster characteristics. While Louisiana Voodoo has strayed greatly from these practices, Papa Legba is a key deity as the guardian of the crossroads and connection between the spirit and human worlds.[98] Because of this, he likely remains present in certain Louisiana Voodoo practices. *Coven*'s Legba, however, looks much more like that of the Christian extremist groups that associate African religions with devil worship.

On Legba's first visit to Laveau that we see, he appears in a top hat with small skulls lining the base, a white painted face, and a cane. This is not too far from the traditional Legba, often seen as an old man with a cane, but his appearance varies slightly across traditions. When Laveau wakes, Papa Legba demands, "Tonight's the night you pay me my due." Visibly

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[96] Boaz, *Voodoo*, 115-6.

[97] *American Horror Story*, season 3, episode 10, "The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks," directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, aired January 8, 2014 on FX, 1:42.

[98] Emily Zobel Marshall, "Anansi, Eshu, and Legba: Slave Resistance and the West African Trickster," in *Human Bondage in the Cultural Contact Zone: Transdisciplinary Perspective on Slavery and Its Discourses, volume 2*, ed. Gesa Mackenthun (New York: Waxmann, 2010), 177-84.

distressed and unhappy about the demand, Laveau pushes back a bit before Legba repeats his demand one last time and fades away with a maniacal laugh.[99] The following scene shows Laveau walking through a hospital and ends at a room of crying children. The first frame showing the room also shows the display of stained glass, picturing an image of the Virgin Mary holding a child, appearing to be looking over the children. Laveau demands entrance past the guarding employee after blowing a white powder into her face, likely a part of her witchcraft. She picks up a baby and briskly walks out of the building. She is stopped at gunpoint by police, clearly notified about the kidnapping, and told to put down the baby. She refuses, saying "Don't mess with me, I need this baby!" The police double down, and she responds, "I warned you," before throwing her head back and going into a brief trance. Her eyes go completely white and she lets out a high-pitched ululation, prompting the two police officers to turn and shoot each other at once.[100]

The audience is unaware of how exactly Laveau's conversation with Papa Legba is related to the kidnapping until later in the episode, while Fiona is persistently asking Laveau where she got her immortality. Laveau finally answers, explaining, " I sold my soul… to Papa Legba." She refers back to the time of her change in the early nineteenth century when she was young and almost died during birth: "I was pregnant, and did not accept the idea of death. I was *invincible*… Papa must've heard me. Showed up one night, said 'You can have eternal life, Marie. I come to you once a year, and you give me what I want…' I thought he meant some kind of sexual favors…I wished for it, it came true. Unknowingly, I made a deal forged in hell." In a flashback, we see that Papa Legba returned one year later and she was nursing her baby. He says,

[99] *AHS*, "The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks," 1:51-2:55.
[100] *AHS*, "The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks," 3:03-4:59.

"You'd make a beautiful mother. But… unfortunately, children ain't in the cards for you." She realizes his request was for her child–an innocent soul. She pleads with him to retract the immortality, but he refuses and walks away with her child. Returning to the contemporary period, Laveau explains to Fiona that Legba comes back every year to collect one innocent soul that Laveau brings to him.[101] The baby that Laveau kidnapped from the hospital was, in fact, a sacrifice for Legba on the terms of her immortality.

This portrayal is, perhaps, the most unfortunate representation of Louisiana Voodoo or Haitian Vodou throughout the show. As the showrunners claim their attempts at a respectful and culturally sensitive presentation of religions, native to Louisiana or not, their crude presentation of an important African and Haitian deity reinforces Christian extremist ideas that have persisted in America over centuries proven from antebellum pro-slavery propaganda to anti-immigration propaganda after Haiti's earthquake in 2010. It is an unfortunate character who is willing to "sell her soul," which, alone, is terminology generally exclusive to Christian theology. This presentation makes Laveau into, not just *any* monster, but a *demonic* one. It is clear from this point that the showrunners are viewing witchcraft, African religions, and Louisiana Voodoo from the Christian lens, reinforcing religious hegemony for its white American audience, eroticizing and villainizing Laveau, the Black Coven, and practitioners of Louisiana Voodoo.

[101] *AHS*, "The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks," 21:48-24:30.

CHAPTER 6. THE TENACITY OF STORYTELLING

American Horror Story is not the only production worth mentioning when it comes to harmful presentations of New Orleans. Throughout history, various interest points of the "Big Easy" have been exploited by Hollywood including the French Quarter, Bourbon Street, Creole cuisine, music, and, more recently, Hurricane Katrina as a sob story. The city's officials have attempted to maximize the tourist attraction of the area, all the while declining aid to its inhabitants. While the city has been profiting from cinema throughout the twentieth century and doubled its attraction with legislation in 2002, countless New Orleans citizens were abandoned from aid after the tragedy that was Hurricane Katrina. Utilizing research from a film study on New Orleans history, I consider the application of *American Horror Story* to the waves of production teams that flock to the city not only for easy profits and tax cuts, but to capitalize on exoticizing the people, their culture, and their religions as something for entertainment, but never engagement.

6.1. Hollywood's Impact on the "Big Easy"

Media encapsulating New Orleans has undergone many changes since its beginnings in the early twentieth century. Many cinematic themes that have already been described were shared and extended to New Orleans, especially representations of American fears, such as racial mixing. For New Orleans in classic Hollywood, it was more difficult to represent, considering the unique makeup of the New Orleans population that lingered after French and Spanish ownership of Louisiana. With this complication, representation of the New Orleans essence was a primary concern from the beginning. Between the early and mid-nineteenth century, filmmakers learned that filming on-site in New Orleans both eased and complicated this issue.

Amidst and following the Great Depression, it became more cost-effective to film on-site, bringing filmmakers around the country and utilizing more young, new actors who would accept lower pay for the work. However, the French Quarter was not as attractive to the classic audience as modern, lively street life. From this point, the filmmakers gradually introduced the city to the nation, creating the famous image of the ironwork across the French Quarter, but emphasized more modern areas with brightly lit signs, like Bourbon Street.[102] Early on, the unmistakable image of New Orleans and some of its most famous communities were made popular as a product of convenience, especially financial convenience. Up to the start of the twentieth century, these more lavish neighborhoods were displayed frequently across American media, but not quite cognizant of many of the neighborhoods that made up the majority of New Orleans natives and still do today.[103]

In 2002, Louisiana legislators acted on the long-reigning attraction of New Orleans for tourism and made efforts to further outsider spending with the Louisiana Motion Picture Incentive Act (LMPIA). The law "allotted for 30% credit on in-state motion picture/TV expenditures, with no cap on how much could be spent."[104] New Orleans benefitted the most from this law, with productions in many categories doubling by 2004.[105] The showrunners of *American Horror Story* took advantage of this law and moved their production to Louisiana before it was capped in 2014. Given *Coven*'s great success and the potential savings from their tax cuts in production, the showrunners made the right financial decision to bring their third season to New Orleans, making substantial profits off of the area just before the law was capped.

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[102] Joseph, "Playing the Big Easy," 39-43.
[103] Joseph, "Playing the Big Easy," 102-3.
[104] Joseph, "Playing the Big Easy," 153.
[105] Joseph, "Playing the Big Easy," 155.

After Katrina, production teams had one of two options to use in approaching telling stories in New Orleans. Some teams utilized the opportunity to demonstrate the real story of New Orleans post-Katrina, exposing the tourist-centered city seen on television as a façade. Two different films that do so are *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* in 2006 and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* in 2012. Both films show the story from the lens of the common Louisiana inhabitant. *When the Levees Broke* is a four-part series following news footage from the storm's initial contact to the levees breaking, and to the aftermath on the city's inhabitants for weeks passing.[106] For Lee's film, one of the notable details is the music composition and development throughout the series. He chose Terence Blanchard, a resident of the Garden District, as the film's composer and featured him in the film. In the second part of the documentary, the showrunners brought the documentary into a brief discussion on the history of New Orleans music and culture. They, then, address the ways that the disaster has negatively impacted the founders of this unique culture so catastrophically. After the discussion, Blanchard was filmed walking down the street in his childhood neighborhood, playing the trumpet. His music continues in the background during interviews with residents who returned to see the aftermath.[107]

Beasts of the Southern Wild is a fictional story that pulls pieces of common hardship including chronic illness, food insecurity, climate change, and natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.[108] An example of a less direct film, it centers primarily from the perspective of a young child named Hushpuppy. It follows her and her local community in what they call "The Bathtub"

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[106] *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, directed by Spike Lee (HBO, 2006), https://play.max.com/show/0efe1317-8a8e-413f-b66c-ee87672012f9.

[107] *When the Levees Broke*, 42:40-44:42.

[108] *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, directed by Benh Zeitlin (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012), https://www.hulu.com/movie/5fc8de64-f40a-4a83-a2ce-83ab56a259ff.

which sits just south of the levees. They suffer through a terrible storm, which alludes to Katrina. The child's perspective brings fantastical elements as she pictures approaching an apocalypse of giant imaginary animals as she encounters these real-life nightmares. While bringing entertainment with fantasy, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* chooses the most thoughtful perspective which is that of the actual Louisiana native. Their lifestyle is different than the average person and the goal of the film is to bring the audience into the perspective of someone new, rather than projecting the common American perspective onto this outlying community.

Most production teams, including *American Horror Story*, decided to return to the gaze of New Orleans cinema pre-Katrina. Instead of addressing the hardships of the city fully and intentionally, teams are "opting instead for marginalizing Katrina's impact on the city, exploiting the storm's effects for an unrelated narrative, or co-opting the storm into narratives of hope and overcoming that often fly in the face of post-Katrina struggles… The superficiality of these representations can often be attributed to the last-minute incorporation of Katrina in the narrative."[109] I argue that *Coven*'s showrunners have done the same with New Orleans in their show. I see Kyle, our romanticized monster, as the most digestible option for presenting the hardships of the city, especially after Katrina. Kyle is used to tiptoe around the subject while the showrunners can still take advantage of the tax write-offs from the LMPIA. His story is tragic, but it does not make him a representative for the Ninth Ward or a survivor of Katrina. Since Kyle is a protagonist, but only a piece of the story, the showrunners escaped without any grand political statements and kept the focus of the show on the surface-level tourist attractions of the city. The attention of Katrina should be paid, instead, to Laveau and her Coven. Instead of being

[109] Joseph, "Playing the Big Easy," 150-1.

given respect and empathy for enduring such hardships, Laveau and her Coven are criticized and degraded as a "shithole salon," bringing the audience along to believe it.[110]

6.2. Pushing Out New Orleans

In an attempt to connect broad historical events, *Coven*'s writers attempt to piece together Salem's Witch Trials of the late seventeenth century, including the story of Tituba, and African-derived religions leading to Lousiana Voodoo. This cannot be pieced together well (scholars have tried), but it allows the writers a reason for both European and African-based witchcraft to end up in New Orleans.[111] The show's reconstructed history begins with, Zoe, the first witch we are introduced to, and she learns the history of witchcraft after she discovers her powers and is sent to New Orleans. She narrates what she learns for the audience: "The real witches were cunning and careful not to be caught… They fled. As far south as they could."[112] Remaining in the United States, the witches fleeing persecution for witchcraft head to New Orleans. Given that New Orleans was not a part of the colonies at the time of the trials in the later 17th century, crossing boundaries into French Louisiana meant there were much farther possibilities for sanctuary than the border between French and British territories. While bringing witchcraft to a place already ingrained in African and Catholic religious practices, the choice in the narrative for

[110] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 31:30.

[111] Dara Downey, "Tracing Tituba through *American Horror Story: Coven*," *European Journal of American Studies* 38, no. 1 (2019): 15-27, doi:10.1386/ejac.38.1.15_1. Dara Downey does many scholars of *American Horror Story* a service. She pieces together historical facts that could lead *Coven*'s writers to understand how Tituba could ever be connected to Louisiana Voodoo and how European witchcraft practiced by the white witches is either included with or differentiates from that type of practice. She concludes that the lines are impossible to connect and, if made possible, it is unlikely that they do connect. The showrunners choose to discuss this lineage on only two occasions, making it entirely possible that they are aware of the potential plot hole in their mythology.

[112] *AHS*, "Bitchcraft," 8:18.

witches to settle in New Orleans gives justification for the showrunners to utilize the tax cuts of *today*'s New Orleans.

The discussion on Tituba is mentioned by only one student at the academy, Queenie, who is the only Black witch in their coven. Originally from Detroit, she explains her backstory: "I grew up on white girl shit like *Charmed* and *Sabrina the Teenage Cracker*. I didn't know that there even *were* Black witches. But as it turns out, I'm an heir to Tituba… So, technically, I'm part of your tribe."[113] Tituba's lineage is mentioned only one more time during the conversation between Laveau and Fiona, in which Fiona begins, "Tituba… Voodoo slave girl who graced us with her black magic. She couldn't tell a love potion from a recipe for chocolate chip cookies if she had to read it." Laveau, clearly upset, responds, "*You* made her a slave. Before that, she came from a great tribe–the Arawak. She learned the secrets of the other side from a 2,000-year-old line of shamans. Necromancy–she gave it to your girls of Salem. A gift repaid with betrayal."[114] Given the geography and research done by other scholars of the show, it is clear that the meshing of European and African-based witchcraft was not exactly natural. The only commonality that is clear between the two would be their religious structure stemming from somewhat polytheistic or, pagan, practices. Lumped together under one category of witchcraft, all polytheistic practices were labeled as either Voodoo or witchcraft. This indicates most importantly that they are *not* monotheistic and thus, *not* Christian.

The show makes frequent, broad references to anything that does not fall under the monotheistic category. Between the Haitian zombies resurrected by Laveau, the Arawak traces of Voodoo lineage through Tituba, and the European (pagan) witches from Salem, the entire plot

[113] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 7:02.
[114] *AHS*, "Boy Parts," 29:10-29:42.

of the show is dependent on groups outside the category of American and Christian. On top of the countless reasons that the showrunners have to base the season in New Orleans, it is also the most appropriate place for all outsiders to be put in one safe, controllable box for its audience. Continuing to generalize, especially with millions of watchers as an audience, has proven to generate fear among Americans that diasporic religions will infect the United States and invite demonic practices into our country.[115] As long as cinema (including *American Horror Story* and all production teams taking advantage of the LMPIA) continues to display New Orleans as nothing more than a freak show of religion and tourist attraction, it reinforces racist ideas that continue to marginalize its inhabitants, portraying them as something other than American and thus, not worth our concern or aid.

[115] Boaz, *Voodoo*, 142.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

In a panel interview with most of *Coven*'s cast, one question was brought up about the current role of horror in the American lifestyle. An audience member asked, "The horror genre was something that used to be kind of exclusively in movie theaters and outside of people's homes. So now that you're bringing it *into* people's homes, and you're kind of responsible for that fear all the time, how does that feel to be a part of something that is really getting into the heart of people?" A co-creator, Brad Falchuk, provides one response to that question: "I think we've always approached the horror genre as something that exists in people's lives and they need boogeymen to represent their own anxiety and fear. And obviously now, I think people expect it to be right in front of them all the time. They don't expect to have to leave the house to get stimulation. They want it right there. I think that we're just providing an opportunity for imagery for people that are a little anxious right now."[116] I find this incredibly telling of the mindset of the showrunners while approaching the film. While they intend to simply tell good stories and maybe represent the social issues of some groups, the chaotic and reaching mythologies that portray real American histories allow these anxieties to be misplaced onto real people.

The audience's engagement is exactly what makes Kyle the perfect character for our hero. The American consensus has proven itself time and time again to be hostile toward diasporic cultures. While attempting in every way to sympathize with those in need, they do not deserve help unless they exhibit the right Western social standards of their created whiteness.

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[116] Bryan Falchuk, "*American Horror Story* – Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk On the Horror Genre," The Paley Center for Media, posted October 6, 2014, YouTube video, 4:18-4:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAjSmHAb8jU.

Kyle, while representing many American anxieties of racial amalgamation, develops into a well-mannered guard dog and hero, making him the perfect example of the desired product of New Orleans' Ninth Ward. It is for this reason that he is plastered over again throughout the season as the "boy from the Ninth Ward," despite the existence of an entire group of characters that also reside there. Kyle ends the show as an aid to the academy. In the last episode, we see him spending the rest of his time assisting the girls with their witchcraft.[117] As he abandons the traditional hero story, he becomes a monster servicing the white coven and the characters that resonate with the show's intended audience. Their priority with Kyle is reinstating the ideas that encapsulate the frame of the audience, which frames the New Orleans mythology around whiteness.

Laveau's ending sees a very different fate. Her last appearance is in the penultimate episode. An enemy of hers (Delphine LaLaurie) spikes her drink with Benadryl, just enough to get her passed out. Because she cannot kill the immortal Laveau, LaLaurie cuts her up into small pieces. Since Laveau can no longer physically fulfill her deal with Papa Legba, he revokes her immortality and sends her to "hell" which is personalized for her specifically. In her hell, she spends eternity torturing the daughters of her enemy on a loop.[118] Her afterlife paints her as, more than anything, evil. She is, unfortunately, made into a caricature of what the average American imagines African-derived religion to be. The show's presentation of Laveau, her coven, and her religion, villainizes the Black community in New Orleans' Ninth Ward and all practitioners of African diaspora religions. *Coven* reinforces Satanic and demonic associations of

[117] *AHS*, "The Seven Wonders," 46:36.
[118] *AHS*, "Go to Hell," 41:20.

the religion and justifies the countless ways that those religious groups have been marginalized for centuries and deemed "un-American."

I use Joseph's dissertation, "Playing the Big Easy" to expose how *AHS* has contributed to a long-standing tradition of exploitation in the city. They align with the most common route in New Orleans cinema to handle Katrina and the city's history as a point of hope through Kyle's fixation on it. Aside from the "light at the end of the tunnel," there is no actual discussion or presentation of the possible damage it has done to the city and its inhabitants. Unfortunately, mediums of storytelling like *AHS* are the most common and notably outweigh the most appropriate and careful presentations like *When the Levees Broke*. These harmful mythologies, unless interrupted, will continue to push out anti-religious propaganda against African-derived religions and downplay the lives of *real* communities in the United States. With *American Horror Story: Coven* and the abundance of media with similar presentations of New Orleans, we will, unfortunately, see it presented as only one thing: a tourist destination.

I fear that many scholars in religious studies stray away from the value that this not-quite "high-brow" media contributes to the world's understanding of religion. I find that the most common media like *American Horror Story: Coven* is not quintessentially changing but provides significant syntheses of their audiences' preexisting ideas. Falchuk's interview response proves exactly this. While we cannot commend the showrunners for an extensive understanding of religious practice in New Orleans, they've created a work that scholars and educators can use to see how their potential students, family, friends, and colleagues see and imagine religion in New Orleans. This research brings attention to *Coven* and other pop culture that engage in similar storytelling tactics so that we may learn from their mistakes, educate the audiences, and participate in more thoughtful ways to communicate these stories.

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