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Creative Thesis: RITUALS OF THE NIGHT

**Exegesis: WOMEN OF COLOR AND RELIGIOUS
MYSTICISM IN SOUTHERN GOTHIC**

Masters of Creative Writing (MCW)

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Abstract

The exegesis, *Women of Color and Religious Mysticism in Southern Gothic*, doesn't just frame *Rituals of the Night* but amplifies it, particularly to give silenced voices a chance to speak within the genre. The exegesis explores two major themes present within *Rituals of the Night* from the very first pages of the first draft – the role and lives of women of color and religious mysticism in Southern Gothic. The exegesis is placed before the creative because *Rituals of the Night* is atypical and clarity must be sought before it can be read.

The creative thesis, *Rituals of the Night*, conjures forth a Southern gothic story of Louisa, a young black woman, in the Southern United States in the 1940s. Like a periscope, it peers into different ways of living – as a minority, as a white person, as an outsider, as a worshipper. Infused with haunting elements, it takes on the challenge of finding out just what it means to be a woman of color in the white man's world.

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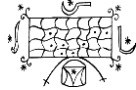
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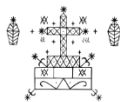




Exegesis: WOMEN OF COLOR AND RELIGIOUS MYSTICISM

An exploration of how *Rituals of the Night* fits within the Southern Gothic genre in America

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature _____

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Ethics

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Dedication

For my husband, Morris, who supports and pushes me to new limits.

For my twin, Amy, who believes in me more than I do myself.

For my family, who stand by me no matter what.

For the Baby, Mocha and Frankie.

**Exegesis: WOMEN OF COLOR AND RELIGIOUS MYSTICISM IN
SOUTHERN GOTHIC**

An exploration of how *Rituals of the Night* fits within the Southern Gothic genre in America.

By

Elizabeth Ho

Introduction

The creative thesis *Rituals of the Night* is an American Southern gothic story set in Miami, Florida in the late 1940s. Complex personal histories, decaying landscapes, the deep heat of the South and closely guarded secrets lie at the heart of the creative thesis. The protagonist, Louisa Bordeaux, lives a double life. Her true life is that of a young black woman, trying to redeem herself after the death of her boyfriend. The other life, pretending to be a white woman so that she can take advantage of a good education, serves as the grotesque. The grotesque comes into play as she experiences white privilege, casual racism and other horrors of what it means to be included in the white community.

The exegesis amplifies *Rituals of the Night* in multiple ways. First by giving insight into the motivation, reasons and inspirations behind the desire to write *Rituals of the Night*. Following motivations, both positioning and repositioning the American Southern gothic genre is given to have a well-rounded view of what the genre entails. Two of the biggest themes in the creative, women of color and religious mysticism, will be explored in greater detail as well, with the conclusion summarizing and giving insight on where the genre may go forward.

Motivation

My motivation for writing *Rituals of the Night* comes from many places. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago meant that my fellow Americans appeared different than the stereotypical white family with a father, mother and two children. My classrooms were filled with students of multiple races and ethnicities – Palestinian, Puerto Rican, African American, just to name a few. Looking back, even at some of my earliest memories, there was this overwhelming casual racism within the white community. While I couldn't identify what exactly that was since I was so young, I knew even then that I disliked it and rejected it. I couldn't comprehend that my friends and classmates were the 'wrong' kind of different based off the color of their skin or religion. I rejected it then and I reject it now. That's not to say that I do not have learned bias, or white privilege, I do. It is only through awareness and action that I might be one day able to reduce its impact on the world. *Rituals of the Night* is part of that action. It is a chance to give silenced voices, the voices of classmates that I grew up with and became friends with, an opportunity to speak.

Synopsis

At one time, Louisa Bordeaux was a powerful Voudou worshipper, but that was before the accident that killed her boyfriend. Since then, she hasn't gone anywhere near Voudou and would rather focus on her upcoming freshman year at the University of Miami School of Medicine. She thinks she'll be able to change into a new version of herself in Miami, and in fact, must take on a new identity – as a white woman. The transition from the black community into the white community is jarring and laden with

both casual and outright racism. Trying to keep away from the ordeals of her past, all that goes out the window when she suspects her landlord, Mr. Gray, is responsible for the recent murders around the city. As he turns his perverse attention on her, Louisa is forced into action, finding comfort in Voodoo once more.

(Re)Positioning Southern Gothic

Rituals of the Night explores genre elements of American Southern Gothic. The Oxford Research Encyclopedia (Bjerre, 2017) gives the most thorough insight into what the genre entails:

Characteristics of Southern Gothic include the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses; grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation... (Southern Gothic) is uniquely rooted in the South's tensions and aberrations. The Southern Gothic brings to light the extent to which the idyllic vision of the pastoral, agrarian South rests on massive repressions of the region's historical realities: slavery, racism, and patriarchy. (paragraph 1).

Rooted deep within the history of the Southern United States, the genre is a way for society to explore the South's origins, its present, and where it may be going. It's an opportunity for reflection on the issues that plague the region – violence, the idea of 'outsiders,' poverty, class, gender and race issues.

Literature, TV and film incorporate a range of genre elements, across the varied landscape of the South. In Georgia, the undead exists on the AMC TV show *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010) while in Louisiana it comes as no surprise that there's Voodoo and a lot of it on the FX show *American Horror Story: Coven* (Falchuk & Murphy, 2013). Perhaps more sinisterly and hitting closer to home these days is

pedophilia and dark secrets within the church on HBO's True Detective (Pizzolatto, 2014). These recent, popular examples come to mind easily when thinking of the Southern gothic. Landscape is always present in these stories in some ominous way. *Rituals of the Night* is no different, the groundwork for the haunting landscape is established within the first paragraph of the prologue:

The stagnant bayou stinks terribly of alligator halfway entombed under the boggy water... The wickedly twisted branches burrow into the land, reemerging like tendriled claws in the water to snare any ill-fated soul, whether beast or human, that dares to come its way. (page 2, 2nd draft).

Shockingly, a genre that concerns itself with the history of the South, which is drenched in the blood of black slaves as well as other minorities, is fueled by the stereotypical white male narrative. The lack of black voices is disturbing. White androcentrism¹ dominates media and literature, and perhaps that's why Southern gothic stories exist primarily within white society, only viewing its issues through characters who are white. Black characters, when they are present, are secondary or minor characters, and oftentimes just there to fulfill a specific 'grotesque' role that white people won't, or refuse to take on. Take Bennet's (1994) novel, for example. The protagonist, a white male, moves about in Savannah, Georgia society. White characters are eccentrics with troubled pasts that should elicit sympathy for circumstances they couldn't change; their wild personalities are simply endearing and just part of that 'Southern Charm'. The few times black characters appear isn't to show that African Americans are part of the cream of the crop of Savannah society, but to further add to the odd, strange, and grotesque parts of Savannah. A black trans drag queen, an older black man walking an invisible dog and a Voodoo priestess who performs rituals on top of a grave are minor bits and pieces we get of the so-called black world of Savannah. It's a hard pill to swallow that

¹ The practice of placing a masculine viewpoint at the center of one's world view

1980s Savannah, Georgia didn't have a single wealthy African American who was present in the upper crust of society.

Repositioning the Southern Gothic genre means that grotesque elements in *Rituals of the Night* comes from white characters, especially the antagonist, Mr. Gray. The hauntings of slavery and oppression don't solely exist on plantations, but rather in people, in their opinions, words and actions. He's unabashed about sharing his opinions since he's at the top of the food chain and says shocking, racist things openly:

Used to be a plantation. Had about one hundred niggers under lock and key, milling flour and trawling the waters for catfish and shrimp before most of it was blazed by those Northerners. Shame, ain't it?" Gray says. (page 11, 3rd draft.)

What Mr. Gray says may be shocking to readers or it may come as no surprise. There are thinly veiled as well as openly racist people in every society, it's how we view and react to them that should be more shocking, as some people try to justify or ignore it. Inaction breeds ignorance which breeds injustice.

Unsurprisingly, the major shift away from traditional Southern gothic is with the protagonist. *Rituals of the Night* does not keep to the white male narrative, it repositions the genre so that it can add an even more disturbing element to the already haunting genre by letting the reader into the world of the South's true victim – black women. Black women have been put on the back burner for too long and have been left out of the narrative. It is a tired trope to keep black woman as secondary characters, if they even appear at all. What about their stories? Do they not deserve a place in the very landscape that thrived on their blood, sweat, tears and pure resilience?

By repositioning the Southern gothic, genre specific elements are shown under a different light as it's coming from a different perspective, which can alter the ways that the genre functions within the story. Landscape, familial ties, religion, every genre element has been written from the perspective of a young black woman which means

that *Rituals of the Night* is going to explore these elements in a way that could make the reader uncomfortable and to that I say, “Good,” because if life is uncomfortable for women of color, we should acknowledge it and then educate ourselves so that it can become comfortable.

Women of Color

The South is drenched with the blood of African Americans and their history, yet the Southern gothic genre completely circumnavigates their stories, sometimes erasing them completely. The white narrative in Southern Gothic is prevalent². When black characters do exist, they are secondary characters. As mentioned previously, *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010) has had many black characters who have for the most part all died off. The overwhelming message is clear; survival of the fittest is tailor made for the white man. *Rituals of the Night* brings women of color to the forefront of the genre. Louisa Bordeaux, a black woman, refutes the idea that only white people have interesting stories to tell. Her story tells one of a different society, how ‘back in the day’ wasn’t as idyllic and peachy-keen as people would like to claim.

It may come as a surprise to some, but African American and black women don’t live easy lives in the United States, even in this day and age. Feminism in its conventional format leaves out the struggles that women of color face. For women of color, gender and race are not two mutually exclusive traits or identities. The Association for Women’s in Development (Symington, 2004) gives clear insight on intersectionality by stating that “Intersectionality is an analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these

² Examples include O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, Berendet’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story*, Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*.

intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege.” (paragraph 2). Paired together with Crenshaw’s (1989) statement that black women also:

Experience double-discrimination-the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (pp 149).

This accurately sums up the unique way that black women move through society. They tread carefully under scrutinizing eyes who are quick to point out their flaws, weaknesses and label them as ‘other’.

By doing research on what it means to be both black and a woman, *Rituals of the Night* became multilayered. I began to see Louisa, Mama and Nana in a new light as I reflected upon what it would mean to be a black woman before the civil rights movement in the 1950s and the black power movement in the 1960s, as well as before Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote the infamous essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” in 1989 and thus cementing the term ‘intersectionality’. Louisa encounters not only casual and outright racism as a black woman during these times but adding to the bizarre and grotesque are the moments where she’s discriminated against for her gender only when she’s passing as a white woman.

Sorry to burst your bubble sweetheart but I don’t allow you women in my morgue on account of getting all emotional. Getting tired of the ones that like to make a show out of it and faint. Those idiots, as if that’s going to bring back the dead! The morgue doctor snort laughs at his words. (page 181, 3rd draft).

Which needs to be compared to later in the novel, when Francis outs her as a non-white woman, which results in Louisa almost being lynched.

“Baby, she’s half negro³. I would never fuck a black girl,” Francis’s voice cuts through the night.

“I knew it!” shrieks a girl from Louisa’s biology class.

“Throw her out! Whites only!” A voice says over the din of angry students. (3rd draft, page 206).

These moments throughout the creative thesis adds to the multidimensional way that black women experience the world. As a white woman, the sexism Louisa has directed towards her is relatively non-violent but once seen as a black woman, it quickly turns violent. It should come as no surprise, since black woman are one of the most at-risk groups for violence.

Sadly, not only do black women deal with prejudice, discrimination and bias because of their gender and race, they also have severely negative and oftentimes debilitating stereotypes forced upon them.

³ Francis claims Louisa is “half-negro” but this is incorrect. Francis doesn’t know Louisa’s ethnic or racial background, which was purposely done.

Stereotypes

The image of the sexually exotic African woman was extremely important for the creation and maintenance of the political, economic, and social structure of America, particularly during slavery. (Stephens 2003, Morton 1991.)

Extremely negative stereotypes such as the Mammy, Welfare Queen, Angry Black Woman and Jezebel is a way for white society to justify their mistreatment of black women. As a black woman, Louisa will forever be unable to separate her race, gender and sexuality from each other. As the creative thesis was developed, careful consideration was put into her character. White authors writing minorities must take precautions to not further marginalized or stereotype their characters. The central idea that the novel insists on is that everyone is damaged in some way and that insisting that women of color aren't is to undermine their true experiences. Admittedly, this was seriously difficult to undertake while writing within the Southern gothic genre and being a white author. Every effort has been taken to keep Louisa and all characters of color far away from damaging stereotypes while keeping to the genre. People, regardless of color, have flaws, pasts that can haunt them, and difficult choices to make. Louisa's past with her first love, Henry Matignon, has helped to shape her into the woman she is during *Rituals of the Night*. First loves are often filled with raw emotions, turmoil, angst and love. Due to her youth, it's alluded that Louisa accidentally kills Henry when she finds him cheating on her. However, to keep away from stereotypes of the angry black woman or the hypersexual black woman, I wrote it ambiguously to show that it's not clear what happened when Louisa found Henry cheating as I wanted the reader to infer that it was Kalfu, the antagonist, who used Louisa to do his bidding. Louisa's proceeding relationships with Lee Anthony and Francis were given careful

thought so she's not seen as hypersexual. The 1940s and decades after were a great time of sexual exploration, power and awakening for women and my thoughts were that if I denied that to Louisa, it would be harmful to black women because it cuts off them from taking control of their sex lives.

Louisa's history has shaped her into a young woman who uses intimate relationships as an escape from reality. Remembering the love and happy times she experiences with her late boyfriend, she subconsciously tries to recreate it with Lee Anthony. Louisa doesn't realize that the redemption she seeks won't come until she comes to terms with her past and takes ownership of it. When the reader first meets her, she is essentially fleeing her life and past in Louisiana and exchanging it for a new life in Miami.

Tomorrow, she promises herself. Tomorrow she'll go out and buy some of those fashionable, lightly colored dresses, skirts and blouses, that all the Miami girls are wearing. She'll be a new Louisa. (page 8, 3rd draft).

Naively believing that all it takes to be a new person is a new wardrobe and a change of location, Louisa will eventually find out that change needs to come from within.

Another stereotype that I strayed heavily from is the model minority. The model minority stereotype concerning people of Asian heritage is negative but sinisterly presented as a positive stereotype, where people of a certain ethnic group, typically Asians, are thought and expected to receive or accomplish a higher than normal socioeconomic status, as well as having low rates of criminal activities, stable marriages and good income. Penny Zhang (Siciliano)⁴ breaks that mold early on.

"That's the library. Brand new, finished last week. No one is allowed in until the official start of the school year." Penny says.

⁴ Penny's takes her mother's maiden name, Siciliano, so help her pass as a white Italian.

“I bet it’s beautiful. I wonder if there’s a way we can see it now.”

“There is.” At Louisa’s confused look, Penny throws back her head and laughs.

“I snuck in a couple days ago.” (page 25, 3rd draft).

As the story progresses, it becomes clearer that Penny relishes being an enigma. On the one hand, she is blunt, logical and isn’t afraid of giving her honest opinion. She studies hard each night but there is barely any insight to whether she is an extraordinary student, or merely just another hard worker. On the other hand, Penny loves to sneak around, breaking into places she shouldn’t, doing things that women wouldn’t usually do. She is the first to initiate the talk about having sex before marriage, and hides her secret of passing as white so well that even Louisa can’t tell. But Penny is not without personal history, conflict and trauma. She needs to overcome her resistance to things she can’t understand, like Louisa’s religion, and how to accept rejection.

Women of color make up the core of *Rituals of the Night*, and great detail, sensitivity and attention has been given to tell their stories as honestly and accurately as possible without giving into stereotypes.

Passing as white

Passing as white within the United States meant that non-whites who had features associated with Caucasian heritage such as lighter skin, could potentially pass as white in society and thus benefit from it, such as education or better employment. Oftentimes, the takeaway message with passing as white is that anyone who does so will meet an unfortunate end, whether it be actual death or becoming an outcast from both family and community. This was another form of control since the thought of an ‘outsider,’ or an

‘infiltrator’ in white society was horrendous. *Rituals of the Night* reclaims this trope, and takes the stance that passing as white doesn’t always mean a tragic ending. The ending of *Rituals of the Night* sees Louisa and Penny saying their farewells to each other as they both go off to continue their life journeys. Their endings are hopeful and optimistic, but optimism doesn’t mean that passing as white had only positive effects. They alienated themselves from their communities, were walking in fear everyday of being exposed which often meant horrible violence then inflicted upon them for their lies in the form of lynching, beatings, assaults, sexual assaults, etc. Lovelie, another African American woman in *Rituals of the Night*, gives voice to the opposition from the viewpoint of the black community. “I know all about your kind, girl. Acting white to get a break in the world but black when you need something from us.” (page 156, 3rd draft.) She points out the privilege that Louisa has for being able to pass as white. Of course, this doesn’t sit easily with Louisa. She doubts her own motives, questioning if she is only out for her own personal gain.

As *Rituals of the Night* progresses, we see Louisa use her white identity to call out moments of injustice. Penny and Louisa struggle as they explore what it means to hide their true selves, having to reject and hide their heritage to get ahead in life. These themes play a big role within *Rituals of the Night*. Without showing their struggles, it would be too easily assumed that they desire and wish to be part of white society, or even actually be white women when it’s the opposite. They’re proud of their heritage and wouldn’t change it no matter what. Louisa and Penny struggle, eventually learning how to deal with the guilt and opportunities that their fellow women of color are not privy to.

Understanding Religious Mysticism

Mysticism is defined by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Merkur, 2017) as “The practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them.”

Merriam-Webster (2017) defines mysticism as “The experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics,” and, “The belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience.”

Religion and mysticism are tied together in its journey through supernatural and fantastical elements since being in touch with a ‘higher being,’ ‘God,’ or ‘ultimate reality’ denotes the acceptance that there is *something* and/or *someone* that exists beyond everyday life and that it can be accessed.

Rituals of the Night is about mysticism found in Voudou, which many believe is black magic or witchcraft. But that is far from the truth. Voudou is a religion and as with any other religion there are rituals and customs for accessing the supernatural, which is what Louisa’s spiritual and religious journey is centered on as she gradually reacquaints herself with the supernatural through Voudou.

Voudou Religion

As with most things that are foreign and different, Hollywood movies, *White Zombie* (Halperin, 1933), *Black Moon* (Neill, 1934) and white American society has taken Voudou and made it into something sinister. *White Zombie* uses hypnosis, zombies and the white damsel in distress trope to accomplish the grotesque, horror-filled parts of the movie. Voodoo dolls, shrunken heads, zombies, tarot cards, people of color from ‘exotic’ places like Haiti and the Caribbean are the stereotypical people and things that perpetually shows up whenever ‘Voodoo’ is present. These things are gross misinterpretations of what Voudou actually is, and that’s due to a long, torrid history of when Caribbean, Haitian and other African slaves were brought over to the Southern United States of America. Slaves had their religions, which varied vastly by region and it should come as no surprise that America, which was supposedly found on religious freedom, wasn’t interested in allowing religious freedom to its slaves. Religious warfare was waged as many slaves were forced to practice Christianity or Catholicism. Eventually, with enough force and as new generations of slaves were born, they started to leave their religions behind as they adopted Christianity or Catholicism. Hollywood, seeing an opportunity in the early 1900s to capitalize on the mysteriousness ‘other’ and ‘exoticness’ to Voodoo religion, did just that by creating media to further perpetrate the idea that African religions are sinister and full of black magic. ‘Voodoo’ in its commonly spelled form appears not even once in *Rituals of the Night*, because the spelling is associated with Hollywood tropes or other negative assumptions. Instead, a nonmainstream spelling was used, ‘Voudou’ to keep to its similar pronunciation while inviting the reader to take a moment and pause to consider what actual Voudou might entail. To supplement my knowledge of Voudou, resources from both the traditional

and nontraditional means were used. Literature from the early 1900s, such as *The Magic Island* (Seabrook, 1929) were typically written by outsiders, that is to say, by people who did not worship Voudou but instead wanted to exploit it as something savage or exotic. Blogs, research papers, videos and other resources were used to give a rounded sense of what Voudou is and isn't. I chose to look directly at what average people were saying and writing about the religion.

Since Voudou is a religion, religious mysticism exists with it. But *Rituals of the Night* aims to show that Voudou has rites, ceremonies and prayers just like Christianity or Islam and that it's not concentrated on the supernatural, 'black magic' like Hollywood and mainstream media would like people to believe. Instead, the religious mysticism found in Voudou exists from different aspects of contacting the *loa*, or spirits, from attending *fêtes*, which are religious ceremonies similar to mass or church services as well as drawing on other aspects of the religion.

Voudou Privilege

The Southern States are known for being more religious, so it comes as no surprise that religion plays a major role in every aspect of life in those states. Yet America as a whole has another problem with privileges besides just white privilege; There is a lesser known, unspoken "Christian Privilege" to American life which bleeds into everything from politics to education to culture, and unsurprisingly, Southern Gothic literature. Christian privilege, which is the belief or presumption that Christian beliefs are a social and cultural norm, leads to a marginalization of non-Christians. We can trace Christian fears throughout American history. Currently focused on Muslims, before that was a time where Christians feared atheists and agnostics, and before that period the focus was on African religions. Some of the very first research on Voudou religion to enrich *Rituals of the Night* proved early on that Christianity was everywhere, and that anytime

other religions showed up, especially Voudou or Islam, they are the fire and brimstone end-all to Christianity. *Rituals of the Night* aims to educate its readers that Voudou is a religion, while also aiming to substitute Christian privilege with ‘Voudou Privilege’. Voudou privilege isn’t written into the creative thesis as the expectation that *characters* will know Voudou practices and beliefs, it’s written so that Voudou privilege is the hidden, invisible layer to the creative that the *reader* encounters. Essentially, Voudou privilege comes into play as a lack of outright or over explanation of rituals, fêtes, praying, the origins of *loa* and other aspects of the religion that wouldn’t be provided with Christianity, since Christian Privilege means that there’s an expectation that everyone is, or should be familiar with what the religion entails and by purposely not explaining any of these things, readers will be able to see what privilege feels like. *Rituals of the Night* makes the reader question their privileges and biases with the comparison between Voudou and Christianity.

Christianity vs. Voudou

In the Southern gothic genre, there are negative ideas associated with the church with themes such as pedophilia, death, and corruption, but going hand-in-hand with this is the widespread assumption of Christianity and/or Catholicism being the dominant or *only* religion. Voudou as the dominant religion in *Rituals of the Night* is to show that African religions and ‘other’ religions aren’t evil, black magic or full of witches. I stayed away from making Voudou part of the grotesque, instead choosing to write the overt way that Mr. Gray tries to force Christianity on Louisa as the grotesque. Christian churches are depicted as decaying, vacated, its worshippers turning away from the church and leaving. The first time a proper fête is shown is at The Haitian Church for Lost Souls, which is a dilapidated church deep in the swamps of Florida. Though not

alluded to in the creative, The Haitian Church is meant to show the gradual decline of Christianity, how even its worshippers who are very hung up on their religion as superior, have ironically left the church to fall apart. The Haitian Church masquerades as a Christian church, fitting the bill when it needs to but is used by a Mambo named Ertha, as a place of worship for Voudou. Voudou is shown as flourishing and strong while Christianity is depicted as weak, falling apart, riddled in scandal as more of its worshippers become hypocritical preachers than devoted followers.

Accessing Religious Mysticism **The ‘God-like’ part**

Literature with elements outside the normal scope such as magic or fantasy often begs need an explanation of why certain individuals are the ‘chosen’ ones. Harry Potter’s (Rowling, J.K. 1997) status of being the chosen one is because of his mother’s love for him since she sacrificed herself so that he could live. Dorothy in *The Wizard of OZ* (Baum, F. L. 1900) explores OZ because of her vivid imagination that can help others in need. It is Louisa’s story and journey in *Rituals of the Night* that shows the reader that she is the chosen one but an important question that needs answering is *why her?* Spurgeon (1913) answers this:

Further, if unity lies at the root of things, man must have some share of the nature of God, for he is a spark of the divine. Consequently, man is capable of knowing God through this godlike part of his own nature, that is, through his soul or spirit. (Chapter 1, paragraph 8).

This ‘God-like’ is the first part to answering the question. Louisa is a spark of the divine, she isn’t just *capable* of knowing God or Higher-Beings, but actually *knows* them, as well as knowing that the God-like part exists, not as flesh or bone, but as the quote says, ‘through soul or spirit’. Soul and spirit act as the vehicle to access the God-like part, and Louisa and Nana often use their spirit and souls to call down *loa*. In later chapters, Louisa transcends to into the spirit realm via her soul.

It should come as no surprise that other religions, such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism for example, have similar concepts regarding the soul and spirit of a person. A counterpoint to Louisa practicing Voudou came in through Mama, as she's Christian. The difference between Voudou and Christianity is that in Christianity, the soul is judged off the life the person lived on Earth and that there is no other place for the soul or spirit to explore or exist besides Earth, Heaven or Hell. The choice to have Louisa speak to the *loa* and encounter their realm came after careful thought. I didn't want to convey the idea that Voudou is supernatural, fantastical or make-belief. I drew upon a major aspect to worshipping Voudou and that is when *loa* 'ride' worshippers at fêtes. 'Riding' can mean many different things depending on who is asked, but commonly it means that the *loa* will possess the worshipper for a short period while at a fête. *Rituals of the Night* keeps to this aspect of Voudou religion, most notably during Ertha's fête where Louisa sees worshippers being ridden by the *loa*. Later, at the same fête Louisa also experiences 'riding' but the reader gets to see what it entails as she is transported to a midway point between where human and *loa* exist so that she may speak to the *loa*. Other times, when Louisa speaks to the *loa* outside of fêtes, it should be noted that those are either moments that the *loa* are riding her or that she has been transported to the *loa* realm, via her soul.

Christians strive to live in God's image, and were created by Him. Louisa reflects on Mama's words about the soul:

“We were saved by the Lord but your Nana will burn in Hell unless she repents and God saves her soul, that's if He chooses to do so. He is forgiving, child, but some souls are too immersed in evil to save.” (pg. 17, 2nd draft).

Mama's Christian beliefs means the God-like part in her has a different purpose, which for her it's to be judged in the afterlife. Her Christian beliefs obviously refuses Voudou beliefs, and therefore she's not privy to access the supernatural in the same way or manner that Louisa and Nana can.

Throughout *Rituals of the Night*, Louisa accesses the spirit realm, interacts with the *loa* and generally does other things that is outside of the normal scope. Popular stories nowadays love having the hero who will save the world, but Southern gothic is about human flaws, an entirely different beast than fantasy and supernatural genres where the likes of Harry Potter and Frodo exist. Moments within the story allude to Louisa being powerful or strong, especially in regards to Kalfu who wants Louisa's power. Yet other girls across the city are being killed as well, which serves as a counterpoint that Louisa is the absolute savoir or chosen one because later its revealed that Kalfu 'ate' those girls for their power.

Mambos, or priestess, play a large role in the creative. The only times readers can infer other Mambos experiences is with Ertha or Nana. A major moment comes when Louisa attends Ertha's fête, where Louisa is ridden by a *loa*. Louisa is transported to a different realm where she speaks with the *loa* but Ertha is still at the fête and Louisa is left wondering if other strong, devote worshippers can see what she's experiencing.

“On the other side of the blanket, Ertha appears and looks around curiously, her eyes glittering. Louisa doesn't know how much the Mambo can actually see...”
(page 163, 3rd draft)

Although Louisa's journey is not about saving the world, it is the God-like part to her that provides the opportunity to interact with her religion and save her personal world.

Symbols, Rituals, and Other Tools

Fêtes, veves, singing, drumming, gris-gris and many more tools and rituals encompasses just a tiny fraction of what it's like to be a worshipper of Voudou. Complicated rituals, symbols, practices and beliefs are present in every religion, yet *Rituals of the Night* couldn't realistically explore everything about Voudou. Somethings had to be left out.

For example, drumming is a central part of fêtes and is typically done by men but since Louisa wasn't part of that aspect of Voudou, drumming only plays a minor role to add mood and sensory details. Religion is complicated yet fluid. Warms, Garber & McGee (2009) state that:

Although there are many sources of religious change, perhaps the most important causes are social and economic change. Invasions, revolutions, conquests, and enslavement have always been fertile generations of religious change. This has been particularly true in the past five hundred years, a period when today's wealthy nations, largely centered in Europe and North America, spread their influence across the globe... (XVI, paragraph 2).

It's important to note this, as the debate of how to worship is sometimes tied to personal ways of worshipping as well as social, cultural, etc. Everyone has a different way of practicing their religion, some Muslims, for instance, choose to pray to Mecca five times a day while others don't pray at all or only once a day. Religion is fluid, depending entirely on the worshipper. *Rituals of the Night* strives to meet the fundamental beliefs of Voudou, but there are many things that as I'm sure I've missed, given too much emphasis on or didn't put enough emphasis on. *Rituals of the Night* isn't the book to get a well-rounded or complete view of Voudou; after nearly a year of studying and researching it myself, I'm still unsure if I've written things accurately and with sensitivity. Even for my own religion and religions I've very familiar with, writing a story about it would prove difficult, especially trying to pinpoint and nail everything as accurately as possible.

Fêtes are when worshippers come together under the guidance of a Mambo or Houngan, which are priestesses and priests. To call upon the *loa*, Mambos and Houngans offer specific food, dance, sing, drum, and draw veves. It's not only wise but appropriate to bring a small donation for the Mambo or Houngan as well, since they are the ones

covering the expenses of the fête. Accordingly, certain *loa* will be called upon in a specific order, Legba is always called and saluted first. Some fêtes call upon only one *loa*, or *loa* of the same family or all the *loa* at once. After the opening prayer, *Priye Ginen*, the dancing, drumming and singing begin. Fêtes last many hours.

Calling upon the *loa* requires a bit of effort on the Mambos and Houngans part. Specific food, veves, clothing, songs and colors help their chances of a *loa* answering their calls. Erzulie likes champagne and the color pink, while Ibo Lele's favorite food is generally unknown so it may take a variety of food to call upon him, hoping he takes to something. Louisa offers food many times throughout *Rituals of the Night*, ranging from rum to candied sweets. At Ertha's fête, there are many offerings of roasted corn, yams, even fishhooks. *Loa* have the option of refusing or ignoring offerings. Nothing is certain to call them down, as evidenced when Louisa tries to recall a *loa* that doesn't answer and she is eventually made to force the *loa* to reappear. Food and veves are huge components to *Rituals of the Night* and coincide together. Veves are symbols, also specific to each *loa*. Legba's symbol is of the crossroads and appears on the title page of *Rituals of the Night*, a sign of respect to him since he is the first *loa* called upon. The keeper of the cemetery, Papa Ghede and Baron Samedi's veve is a cross upon a tomb. Veves act as a beacon for the *loa* and often will serve as their stand-in during *fêtes*. Using cornmeal, gunpowder, chalk or other materials depends on the branch of Voodoo as well as what is available to the Mambo or Houngan, what *loa* is being called upon and the purpose of the call.

When the *loa* appear, they come down and 'ride' worshippers, which entails taking over the worshipper's body for a brief time. Different *loa* will exhibit different characteristics. Erzulie, the *loa* of women and femininity, will enact elaborate toiletry preparations, such as combing her hair. But she will also begin to weep at the end of riding a worshipper, since she is attuned to the sorrows of the world. Allowing the spirits to

inhabit your body is to allow the supernatural into your very existence. Louisa allows a *loa* to overtake her body while at the Mambo Ertha's fête. Wanting to find answers for why the spirit she called upon earlier isn't keeping to his⁵ end of their bargain, Louisa calls upon him at the fête and allows him to ride her.

“Closing her eyes, Louisa throws her head back and lifts her hands up, concentrating on the beat of the drums. It pulses through her, rushes through her blood and her fingers begin to tingle in the familiar rush of power. At last the sun slips under the horizon and Louisa cries out at the feeling of someone inside her skin, sitting next to her.

The loa has returned.” (page 170, 2nd draft)

Riding falls under the description set forth in *Sacred Realms* (Warms, Garber & McGee, 2009) which is a “religious technique to alter states of consciousness,” since “In every religion at least some people have experiences that they understand as direct contact with the nonempirical. For these individuals, these experiences generally verify the central truths of their beliefs – the existence of God, spirits, ancestors, powers, enlightenment, and so on.” (p. XV). There are other altered states of consciousness that Louisa experiences and one such example is dreams.

Dreams are a tool for Louisa's subconscious to access the godlike part without restriction. She receives warnings, clues, visions and views alternate realities while dreaming, yet whether she fully realizes they aren't just dreams is left a mystery, but nevertheless they do affect her. The first dream she has while living under Gray's house is significant, as she dreams about her father and grandfather for the first time since their deaths.

⁵ *Rituals of the Night* takes the firm stance that *loa* do not actually have any gender, but rather take on human characteristics, such as gender, so that humans can understand them.

“Outside, outside, outside,” her father whispered over and over again. The taste of cherries and pig flesh filled her mouth. . . . frost crept over his face and trailed down his body, entombing him. Louisa tried to fight again at the dead weight that overpowered her body but it was useless.” (page 16, 2nd draft).

Dreams are the only area that Louisa has no control over, for the most part she can control which *loa* will respond to her call but while dreaming she is utterly left to the will of her subconscious. Dreams also add another element of foreboding, which keeps well with the genre. Assailed both awake and asleep, Louisa is constantly pressed from every side to show that she is under pressure from every which way.

Besides altered states of consciousness, another important aspect to the Voodoo religion are tools of access. Gris-gris are the first point for Louisa to access and interact with the supernatural. Gris-gris come in many shapes and sizes. Louisa prefers to wear hers like a necklace, situated between her womb and heart. In the creative thesis, the gris-gris satchels are made from leather or wood, filled with everyday ingredients. “Voodoo” in media portrays gris-gris as strange pouches, typically filled with horrifying ingredients like chicken blood, the liver of an animal and so on. *Rituals of the Night* counteracts that with its portrayal of the gris-gris, as there’s no grotesque elements about them. No chicken blood, body parts, or anything of that nature. Lavender, orange peel, sage, wood, appear in the gris-gris depending on its purpose. Louisa’s are typically for protection and the ingredients correlate to soothing, protective plants, flowers and edibles.

Hollywood perpetuated the tired voodoo stereotypes and tropes we have today, namely sticking pins into a replica of someone, blood sacrifices, and play up the ‘exotic’ looking women with dark skin who dance sexually, often with a snake. These tropes and stereotypes are harmful to African religions, and those who practice said religions. As stated early on in this exegesis, *Rituals of the Night* focuses on the grotesque in

white society, not once is Voudou or its worshippers stated or alluded to being part of that grotesque.

Personal Pitfalls

When I first started writing *Rituals of the Night*, I did what most young writers do, I modelled the protagonist after myself. Louisa was originally a white woman who practiced Voudou. As I studied more and more about intersectionality, women of color and racism, I questioned myself – Does Louisa *have* to be white? Voudou is an African religion, why would a white woman suddenly be ‘better’ and ‘more powerful’ than African and African American woman who practice it? Am I not just a slightly altered version of the Going Native Trope⁶? With these questions ping-ponging, I knew Louisa must change. In my head, I rewrote her as half black, where Nana’s father was one of the last plantation owners (a white man) and her mother one of the former slaves. I intended for Mama to be divided over this, constantly nagging Louisa to accept her whiteness and to pass as white. But even this did not sit well with me as I realized it was another easy excuse to justify Louisa being able to pass as white. So once again I rewrote it, both in my head and on paper to where Louisa, Mama and Nana are all proud to be African American. As a white woman writing women of color, my aim is to be respectful. I admit my own inherent biases and privileges, and sincerely hope that *Rituals of the Night* is free from damaging stereotypes and themes but acknowledge that some may exist within the text, which are from ignorance, not hate nor malice.

Assuming white identities shouldn’t be seen as something easy or a free pass for Louisa and Penny, it’s the opposite. Hiding their true identities to pass as white affects them in many ways, oftentimes out of sight.

⁶ Going Native Trope refers to when a character is put into a new land vastly different than their own and eventually begin to be better than the native people at their own culture and ways of life.

Conclusion

At first glance, the creative thesis is the typical heroine's journey set within 1947 Miami. Upon closer inspection, *Rituals of the Night* makes a hefty contribution to the Southern gothic genre – that of a young, black female protagonist. But as the protagonist hero, it doesn't mean that Louisa is excluded from being part of the damaged South, in fact the start of her story is Louisa trying to run away from it. It's my hope the *Rituals of the Night* can start something where more people of color are given the opportunity to tell stories and be protagonists instead of just supporting characters, or adding to the grotesque.

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