



# Consumable City: Race, Ethnicity, and Food in Modern New Orleans

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Consumable City: Race, Ethnicity, and Food in Modern New Orleans

A dissertation presented  
by  
Theresa Ann McCulla  
to  
The Program in American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the subject of  
American Studies

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Consumable City: Race, Ethnicity, and Food in Modern New Orleans

Abstract

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary history of race and ethnicity in 19th- and 20th-century New Orleans, told through the lens of food. It explores the diverse ways in which food functioned as a uniquely powerful, though virtually ignored, medium in enacting the exclusion of people of color. I argue that it was exactly because the consumption of New Orleans's cuisine felt pleasurable and evanescent to locals and visitors that it seemed harmless and ahistorical, incapable of generating savage prejudices. Within the culinary realm, though, racist biases flourished. They inflicted far-reaching social, political, and economic damage on New Orleanians of color, yet their origins escaped notice. To tell this story, I integrate methodologies of history, material culture, and food studies to interpret postcards, stereographs, cookbooks, menus, souvenirs, markets, monuments, and restaurants. Long after the abolition of slavery, and increasingly within the arena of tourism, the Crescent City's food industry continued to collapse person and thing, designating New Orleanians of color as consumable commodities who produced consumable commodities. In exploring how invented public memory became history in New Orleans, I shed light on the persistent inequalities of many American places and the means by which people of color resisted.

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*For Brian*

## Introduction: Setting the Scene in a New Orleans Café

On July 7, 1864, editors of *L'Union* – the South's first black-owned newspaper – published a humorous anecdote for their readers, who were French-speaking New Orleanians of color. Titled, “A Scene in a New Orleans Café,” the tale began with a brief encounter between a coffee house proprietor and a new employee, whom he had hired for the day. The proprietor had a single demand. “I warn you that under no circumstance should you serve a man of color,” he instructed. “Yes, sir!” the waiter answered cheerfully. Yet the day's work would not be as simple as he anticipated:

Immediately after this conversation a man of color enters, but *white* as snow, who goes to the bar and orders: “Jackson Punch.” The waiter serves him, he drinks, and he leaves.

After he leaves, the café owner says to the waiter: “Did I not tell you not to serve men of color? You have just served precisely a *negro*.”

- “Ah! I didn't know, *monsieur*.”

Two minutes later a white man enters, the color of *café au lait*, but in which the *café* prevails. With an urgent tone, the newcomer orders: “*Hé garçon*, a Whiskey punch, quick, I'm in a hurry.” The waiter stares at him a moment and then says: “I can't serve negroes in this café.”

- “What [?]” says the establishment's owner, who knew the fellow, “You insult *Monsieur*, know that he is white and that I have known him as such since....”

- “Eh! *Monsieur*, go to hell with your café. A white man comes in, you tell me he's a negro; a negro comes, you tell me he's a white man.... What do you want me to do!”<sup>1</sup>

The waiter received no answer; the tale concluded there. Readers surely laughed at the hapless employee who spun in circles, caught between his new boss and his customers during his first day on the job. They could easily envision the scene, since the setting was familiar: a café, of which there were hundreds in New Orleans in 1864. Readers recognized themselves, too, in the narrator's efficient portrait of the Crescent City's diverse population. The tale's cast of characters included figures who were light-skinned, dark-skinned, spoke a refined French, as did the

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. “Une Scène dans un Café à la Nlle-Orléans,” *L'Union*, July 7, 1864.

proprietor, or an accented speech, as in the case of the waiter.<sup>2</sup> Yet the anecdote's full appeal went beyond the realm of the physical.

The story's humor rested in the supple space between skin color and racial classification that so baffled the waiter in this New Orleans coffee shop.<sup>3</sup> To him, the café appeared a world turned upside down, where a man of color could be white as snow and a white man appear dark. Yet race seemed to lie not so much in the eye of the beholder as in the assertions of the customer who stood across the bar from him, ordering a whiskey punch, and of his acquaintance. A café-colored patron sought to drink in a café that served coffee (*café*). People, place, and object blended such that the rules of engagement between producer and consumer became thoroughly muddled. The sequence of absurd interactions caused the reader to smile and the waiter to throw up his hands, yet a deeply vexed helplessness underlay his distress. When he declared, "Go to hell with your café," he could have been cursing the business where he worked or, just as possibly, the manager's insistence that skin the color of *café* meant one thing and not another. "What do you want me to do!" he demanded, in this city that insisted on the importance of race as a standard of exclusion, even when the stakes were just a cup of punch, but where race did not align with skin color. A subjective tangle of perceptions, classifications, and proscriptions, measured in degrees of *café* and *café au lait*, impeded the waiter in his labors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The writer rendered the waiter's speech as accented and perhaps a Caribbean French-based creole, indicating that the waiter was likely a man of color. For example, when the proprietor scolded the waiter, he responded, "*Moi ne savais pas mousho*," rather than in the French spoken by the proprietor. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Americans would not understand or define "race" in the terms that contemporary scholars do until at least the mid-twentieth century, but this anecdote nevertheless denoted a clear relationship between skin color and social classification in a way that illustrated the persistently constructed nature of race in America. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *L'Union* began to publish in 1862 and would cease production on July 19, 1864, shortly after this anecdote appeared, but was succeeded immediately by the *New Orleans Tribune*. Mark Charles Roudané, "The *New Orleans Tribune*: An Introduction to America's First Black Daily Newspaper," accessed March 23, 2016, <http://roudanez.com/the-new-orleans-tribune/>.

When this scene appeared in print in July 1864, the editors and subscribers of *L'Union* sensed that they wrote and read on the cusp of a new world, devoid of slavery. White New Orleanians felt this, too, and resented it.<sup>5</sup> The destinies of Louisiana's white citizens, emancipated slaves, and well-educated free people of color, many of them *L'Union* readers, seemed liable to converge or diverge along myriad potential paths. Frequently, these paths met at sites related to the production and consumption of food. Spaces as mundane as the café featured in this anecdote contained the entire range of historical precedents and future potentials for New Orleanians of this moment in time. Coffee houses had long served as the stage for slave auctions, where only a matter of opinion – if a person was white or black, slave or free – could distinguish the man standing on the block from the man sitting in the crowd, who drank and became rich from the other's sale. Yet in the New Orleans of the future a freedman would work for wages or enjoy a cup of coffee as a customer in that same establishment. Thus, "A Scene in a New Orleans Café" appeared at a crossroads in the consequences of color as experienced in food-centric spaces in the Crescent City.

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This dissertation explores the lived experiences of race and ethnicity in one American city from the early nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. More than any other context, the food industry captured the growth of a pervasive, yet subtle system of race-based exclusion that ingrained itself in New Orleans's cultural character. As soon as the United States acquired

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<sup>5</sup> New Orleanians stewed under Union occupation. Famously, the city's white women antagonized Union soldiers in the streets. Still, as of July 7, 1864, much of New Orleans must have continued to look and feel like the antebellum city. Even though Union forces had occupied New Orleans since April 1862 and President Lincoln had emancipated most of the nation's enslaved people with the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, Louisiana slaveholders benefitted from repeated exemptions. Slavery remained legal in Louisiana until December 1864. See Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); and LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, eds., *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).



Louisiana from France in 1803, Americans looked southwest toward New Orleans with an exoticizing gaze, enthralled by a place whose architecture, language, people, and food seemed more European or Caribbean than Anglo-American.<sup>6</sup> This study begins during that era, when New Orleans was America's newest frontier city, yet one threatening already to sink into the Mississippi River.<sup>7</sup> An economy and culture rooted firmly in chattel slavery flourished in Louisiana, as American and European slaveholders, Caribbean refugees, enslaved Afro-Caribbean women, men, and children, and European immigrants settled in and passed through New Orleans. Sugar, cotton, slaves, and the geography that made New Orleans crucial to their trade brought a great wave of antebellum wealth. Enslaved people labored on rural sugarcane and cotton plantations and in urban markets, streets, taverns, and kitchens. Following Emancipation, free Louisianians of color continued to work as the primary producers of New Orleans's increasingly famous – and profitable – food industry, working on the city's sugar levees and in private homes, restaurants, and French Quarter shops.

Denied citizenship, briefly extended its rights, and then robbed of them again, black Louisianians endured and resisted violent oppression, federally mandated segregation, and countless insults of a subtler sort, often in the kitchen or at table. Early and mid-twentieth-century tourism entrepreneurs profited greatly from the cuisine that New Orleanians of color created and a romanticized version of the history that oppressed them. In the era of civil rights

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<sup>6</sup> Joyce Chaplin notes “moralizing abstemiousness” as “a lasting tendency within American food culture,” beginning in colonial times. New Orleanians’ distinct *lack* of culinary asceticism helped feed the city’s reputation as a not quite American place. Joyce E. Chaplin, “Food and the Material Origins of Early America,” in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala, eds. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 156. See also Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe wrote of New Orleans in 1819, “It is a pity...that this is a floating city, floating below the surface of the water on a bed of mud.” Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820*, ed. Samuel Wilson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University, 1951), 67.

and ethnic revival that followed, Crescent City residents found themselves in the midst of profound social and physical transitions. Vietnamese refugees and tourists flowed into the city, middle-class whites and blacks flowed out, and New Orleans sank still, slowly, into the river.<sup>8</sup> Throughout every era of this study, skin color and its contrived social and political manifestations – the nebulous set of ideas that Americans would come to understand as race – inflected every meal.

During this century and a half, New Orleans played a crucial role in the economic and political histories of the nation, as an epicenter of commodity and tourism industries; one of the country’s largest ports for domestic and international trade; a major immigration port of entry, and a magnet for businessmen and bohemians alike. At the same time, and far from unrelated, New Orleans filled a singular niche in America’s cultural consciousness, as an alluring, sub-tropical destination that promised a distinctly sensory form of escape. In particular, the Crescent City gained renown for its cuisine and population: entities that outsiders perceived as entrancingly diverse and, importantly, inextricably entwined. In the public eye, North and South, food and people came to define New Orleans as exceptional among American places.

Located at the intersection of the human and the culinary, this dissertation argues that New Orleans’s food industry served as a critical nexus in which American understandings of race and ethnicity coalesced and spread, often in satisfying, seemingly benign settings of sensory experience. Indeed, it was exactly because the consumption of New Orleans’s cuisine was pleasurable and evanescent that it felt harmless and ahistorical, incapable of holding savage prejudices. Within the arena of the food industry, racist and xenophobic biases penetrated deeply, generating insidious consequences whose origins escaped notice. In a wide variety of public and

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<sup>8</sup> Brett Anderson, “Louisiana Loses Its Boot,” *Matter*, September 8, 2014, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://medium.com/matter/louisiana-loses-its-boot-b55b3bd52d1e#.iz380w1bq>.

private settings, white New Orleanians and visitors exhibited a persistent inclination to treat the black body as consumable and conflate people of color with food. This perspective originated in New Orleans's reliance on chattel slavery and persisted long after America abolished it.

Such an attitude – that people's bodies could be devoured – bore their most literal implications in places of food production and consumption. In public markets, private kitchens, and restaurants, as well as on sugarcane plantations and levees, white New Orleanians and tourists treated people of color as agricultural and industrial tools. Slaveholders graded, valued, bought, and sold the bodies of men, women, and children as they did hogsheds of molasses and sugar. In antebellum cafés and hotels, food and enslaved people could be purchased in the same spaces. But treating the black body as fundamentally edible had more abstract implications too. White slave owners, employers, and travelers forced people of color to make New Orleans's cuisine, first under slavery and later as free people. They were humans treated as consumable who produced consumable commodities. In doing so, these women and men found themselves bound to assist in generating a highly profitable tourism industry that relied on their labor as it simultaneously repudiated their physical presence and sought to appropriate their cultural knowledge. Throughout the course of this history, white consumers hungered for the culinary fruits of black labor even as they sought to repress, segregate, and deny the black body. In every era, workers of color resisted this diabolical pull and push that propelled the Crescent City food industry to an evermore prominent, lucrative scale as it stripped them of their political, social, and cultural rights.

For these reasons, this project probes a persistent tension throughout New Orleans's history: white politicians, entrepreneurs, writers, locals, and tourists were invariably eager to sell and experience the Crescent City as a multiethnic "gumbo." Yet they proved time and again their

fundamental discomfort with the social, political, and spatial implications of New Orleans's multiethnic population. The violence they inflicted in this particular history rarely shed blood. Rather, it denigrated the unwritten cultural knowledge and physical intelligence of New Orleanians of color and flattened the city's complicated history. This system was as quiet as it was pleasurable to white consumers. To deny or downplay its power would ignore the cultural crimes it committed and continues to commit. Focusing on the people, places, and tastes associated with New Orleans's food culture shows how an artificial line between black and white came to matter just as much in New Orleans as in other American places, despite the city's longstanding, self-declared exceptionalism as a racially progressive locale. Furthermore, as a longtime crossroads of immigrants, refugees, slaves, businessmen, and tourists, the Crescent City circulated its distinct blend of consumable people, history, and food far beyond its bounds.

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Scholars have explored the histories of New Orleans, its people, and its cuisine, yet none have united all in a cohesive study. Recent histories of the Crescent City and Louisiana have employed a wide geographic lens, situating these places within national and transnational webs of capital and trade.<sup>9</sup> Louisiana's early history, in particular, has beckoned contemporary scholars, for the many contingencies involved in New Orleans's founding and the staggering role that the Louisiana Territory played – and almost did not play – in the expansion of America and, with it, slavery.<sup>10</sup> As New Orleans became an American city it also persisted for a time as a

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<sup>9</sup> Scott P. Marler, *The Merchants' Capital: New Orleans and the Political Economy of the Nineteenth-Century South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014); and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography*

European and Caribbean city. Webs of ideological and human connections among multiple cultures contributed to the Crescent City's famously complicated racial world and its associated vocabulary.<sup>11</sup> Recently, historians have also accorded long overdue attention to the city's experiences of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, episodes virtually absent from popular narratives of the city.<sup>12</sup> Hurricane Katrina, too, spurred a rush of studies on New Orleans's persistent racial and class inequities, which became readily visible to a national viewership under up to twenty feet of water.<sup>13</sup> In sum, contemporary histories of New Orleans have tended to emphasize discrete events or eras that punctuated the city's past with extraordinary consequence.

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of *New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008); and Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth R. Aslakson, *Making Race in the Courtroom: The Legal Construction of Three Races in Early New Orleans* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); and Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Donald E. DeVore, *Defying Jim Crow: African American Community Development and the Struggle for Racial Equality in New Orleans, 1900-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010); Leonard N. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); and Kent Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Weber and Lori Peek, eds., *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Jeremy I. Levitt and Matthew C. Whitaker, eds., *Hurricane Katrina: America's Unnatural Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright, eds., *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009); special issue on Hurricane Katrina, *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (December 2007). Hurricane Katrina also inspired many dissertations, so the trend in published monographs on contemporary New Orleans should continue. See Faustina Marie DuCros, "'And They All Came from New Orleans': Louisiana Migrants in Los Angeles – Interpretations of Race, Place, and Identity" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2013); Jessica Claire Menck, "Recipes of Resolve: Food and Meaning in Post-Diluvian New Orleans" (PhD diss., Antioch University, 2012); and Debra Burns Melican, "Race in the Floodwaters: Deconstructing Theories About White Racial Attitudes and Constructing Television News Coverage of Hurricane Katrina" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009).

This study, in contrast, purposefully takes an extended time frame to track the quiet evolution of subtle concepts – namely, popular understandings of race and ethnicity – over many years. It focuses on a set of sites associated with a single industry in order to ground the project in a unified genre of experience.<sup>14</sup> At the broadest scale, the dissertation unites histories of free and enslaved people of color, white Americans, European immigrants, and Asian refugees, groups that seldom meet in studies with a narrower scope or time frame.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, it argues that food is a crucially unexplored lens in the history of African-American exclusion in the United States. Scholars have told this story – which is America’s story – primarily through political and legal frameworks.<sup>16</sup> Yet as a ubiquitous medium of interaction, exchange, and

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Johnson organized his study of the antebellum slave market around the single event of the slave sale, considered from multiple perspectives. Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). This project’s approach has been influenced particularly by the scholarship of geographer Richard Campanella, who moves effectively between broad and narrow time frames and sites from the very large – the environment of the Mississippi River delta, racial and ethnic distributions throughout neighborhoods over time – to the very local. Most recently, Campanella explored the history of the French Quarter’s most infamous street throughout various historical eras. Campanella, *Bourbon Street: A History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Historian Mae Ngai has championed “[t]he trend toward multigroup studies [in immigration history].” Ngai, “Immigration and Ethnic History,” in *American History Now*, Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 369. However, most studies of New Orleans’s population have tended to consider groups singly. These provide helpful, though individual, pieces of the puzzle. See Laura D. Kelley, *The Irish in New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2014); Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); Irwin Lachoff and Catherine C. Kahn, *The Jewish Community of New Orleans* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2005); and Gilbert C. Din, *The Canary Islanders of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988). Scholarship offering a multi-group focus includes Bruce Boyd Raeburn, “Stars of David and Sons of Sicily: Constellations Beyond the Canon in Early New Orleans Jazz,” *Jazz Perspectives* 3, no. 2 (August 2009): 125-152; Sandra Margaret Frink, “Spectacles of the Street: Performance, Power, and Public Space in Antebellum New Orleans” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2004); Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism, 1892-1923* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> A recent historiographical essay noted that contemporary trends in African-American history have deepened our understanding of the experiences and temporal and physical bounds of slavery, segregation, and the struggle for civil rights. These frames of analysis are specifically legal and political. This project argues, in contrast, for the value of a *medium* – the medium of food – to provide new insights on African-American history and American history. Examples of innovative scholarship on the above themes include Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and*

employment (often forced or compelled) for Americans of color throughout the nation's history, food holds enormous, yet virtually ignored, potential for the generation of destructive, exclusionary attitudes about race. In this way, this study advocates a new channel of inquiry for exploring the continuum of African Americans' experiences in a range of eras and places.

An extensive temporal scope, too, allows the project to trace connections between New Orleans's cultural, social, and political worlds that might otherwise remain disjointed. For example, city residents of the 1970s celebrated the so-called exoticism of the farmers' market built by Vietnamese refugees in strikingly similar terms to descriptions of the 1830s French Market. Cultural and social arenas functioned often as the testing grounds for ideas that would enter ahistorical realms of politics and collective memory. A broad time frame still permits more targeted interventions, too, to place episodes experienced as local events in much broader context. For example, attempts to refurbish the French Market in the early twentieth century placed white women reformers in New Orleans squarely within national trends of Progressivism. The housewives' efforts to improve the hygiene, technology, and food offerings of the city's public markets revolved very publicly around race, a factor frequently cloaked by other aims of the movement.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, French Market renovations also charted a direct link between

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*Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). See Kevin Gaines, "African-American History," in *American History Now*, 400-420.

<sup>17</sup> On connections between gender, race, and Progressivism see Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of

Progressivism and the New Deal, as the women's visions became reality only with federal funding during the Depression.

Tracing a broad arc of racial and ethnic experience, this project speaks to several specific bodies of literature. The first comprises scholarship focusing on historical memory and identity in the South. Recent studies have emphasized the coordination between postbellum northerners and southerners to rehabilitate or romanticize the South in the popular imagination. They argue against notions of southern exceptionalism, especially in modernizing business ties and increasingly pervasive ideas about race and segregation that did not respect the shadow of the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>18</sup> Many seek to understand how Americans remembered, forgot, and imagined the antebellum South and the tangible manifestations of such efforts in popular culture sources such as film, music, and literature, as well as consumer spaces like historic sites, souvenir stands, and, to a far lesser extent, restaurants.<sup>19</sup> Others insist on the South's persistently distinctive qualities as it entered the twentieth century, as a region to be exploited, improved,

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North Carolina Press, 1992); and Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Reiko Hillyer, *Designing Dixie: Tourism, Memory, and Urban Space in the New South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Rebecca Cawood McIntyre, *Souvenirs of the Old South: Northern Tourism and Southern Mythology* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Martyn Bone, Brian Ward, and William A. Link, eds., *Creating and Consuming the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015); James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); and Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).



fetishized, or avoided.<sup>20</sup> This project adheres to a combination of these themes, finding evidence for a truly national obsession with New Orleans's history and culture. Yet it asserts the neglected importance of the food industry to this scholarship. This study shows how insiders *and* outsiders collaborated to ensure that New Orleans's cultural mystique persisted as a living thing, well beyond the commonly identified era of nostalgia for the Old South. They did this in restaurants, kitchens, and food markets: places that allowed white consumers to commemorate and re-create history to a uniquely embodied degree. Moreover, even as many scholars argue for analytical frames other than exceptionalism, this study finds evidence of a truly singular fascination with New Orleans's consumable history – not even Natchez, Charleston, or Richmond could compete – that originated in its appealing cuisine.<sup>21</sup> Food and the places and people associated with it functioned as uniquely powerful repositories of memory and nostalgia in the Crescent City, as will be shown in the cases of signature treats like pralines, gumbo, and Creole coffee.

Studies of memory and regional identity bleed easily into histories of southern tourism. Newer arguments can be made here, where analyses of travelers' encounters with southern foodways, especially with regard to the agency of southerners of color, are nearly nonexistent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Natalie J. Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000). On affinities for popular culture representations of the American South in British culture, see Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Culture Through a Transatlantic Lens* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> On celebrations of history and ethnic heritage in other public realms, see Terence Schoone-Jongen, *The Dutch American Identity: Staging Memory and Ethnicity in Community Celebrations* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008); Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Steven Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 3 (2003): 657-686; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Though a reviewer criticized the virtual absence of race in the following collection, a handful of articles do consider southern food in the context of tourism. Anthony J. Stanonis, ed., *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways,*

Historical and sociological studies of New Orleans tourism have located the industry's most significant eras in the interwar or postwar periods of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Yet postbellum municipal politicians and business leaders built on a hungry fascination with New Orleans's food, people, and history that had firmly antebellum roots and a very modern infrastructure to support it. A roaring leisure industry of taverns, coffee houses, restaurants, brothels, dance halls, opera houses, and bowling and billiard houses served the tens of thousands of businessmen who traveled from northeastern cities to New Orleans during the early nineteenth century. They learned to enjoy New Orleans as a place where everything – slaves, land, punch, a meal – was for sale. Such consumptive experiences helped anchor the Crescent City firmly at the crossroads of history, fantasy, and myth even before the Civil War. This extended periodization revises the common chronology of the history of tourism in New Orleans. More broadly, it shows the success of American media in circulating ideas and images to a national audience, even in the midst of sectional divisions and long before the era of mass communications.

Whereas many contemporary scholars of southern history, economy, and culture have sought to resist designations of regional exceptionalism, historians of southern food embrace it,

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*and Consumer Culture in the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008). On southern tourism, see Richard D. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010); Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); and Rodger Lyle Brown, *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit: The Culture of Festivals in the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997). For regional comparisons, see David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long, eds., *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998); and Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). For the review of *Dixie Emporium*, see Jennifer Jensen Wallach, "The Marketing of Southern Identity," in *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 295-299.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Mark J. Souther, *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); and Anthony J. Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). An exception is a new study that privileges the voices of New Orleanians of color. See Lynnell L. Thomas, *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

to the extent that some insist on a unique methodology for the study of southern foodways.<sup>24</sup> Such insistence on southern exceptionalism has helped studies of southern food flourish in recent years. Academic centers dedicated to the study of southern culture, such as the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi, have bolstered such work.<sup>25</sup> Scholars have claimed that the region's persistently unique gastronomic identity derives from the flora and fauna of its environment and its bifurcated legacy of great poverty and great wealth. Accordingly, many of these projects focus on rural settings and the ingredients found there.<sup>26</sup> A small but increasing number, including this dissertation, attend specifically to the relationships between food, race, and ethnicity in the southern urban context, placing actors of color at the focus.<sup>27</sup> Cities allow for a particularly richly textured array of public and private sites related to the food industry, including markets, streets, levees, souvenir shops, kitchens, and the pages of local newspapers. Sit-ins at lunch counters, for example, counted as distinctly urban, food-centric events where activists could challenge race-based inequities in front of a national viewership as they could not in a rural locale. Relatedly, this project emphasizes the restaurant as an understudied urban institution with its own set of historical texts – menus, travel guides, and

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<sup>24</sup> John T. Edge, Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby, eds., *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> The Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) publishes a quarterly journal, *Gravy*; archives original films and oral histories created with a variety of southern food personalities on its website; organizes symposia that bring together academics and culinary professionals; and collaborates with the University of Georgia Press to publish an academic series on southern food. For example, in 2014 SFA reissued Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoe Cake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> See David S. Shields, *Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); and Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Angela Jill Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2015); and Dave Hoekstra, *The People's Place: Soul Food Restaurants and Reminiscences from the Civil Rights Era to Today* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015).

restaurant design – that recorded complex, performative hierarchies between producers and consumers.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while a judicious embrace of exceptionalism has helpfully encouraged the study of southern foodways, this project indicates the arenas that remain to be explored and the bigger arguments that can be made there.

Working Americans of color stood at the center of all of these places of production and consumption, even if academic and popular writers have not always acknowledged their presence. Scholars of African-American history, anthropology, and literature have worked the hardest to track people of color and their associated culinary knowledge as powerful entities constantly in motion within the American South and the broader Atlantic world.<sup>29</sup> The circulation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people throughout the South certainly distinguished this region from others in the United States, influencing the kinds of foods grown in kitchen gardens and the methods with which they were prepared. Recovering the histories of people of color as culinary laborers is a challenging task, however, considering the dearth of

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<sup>28</sup> Most historians of American restaurants focus exclusively on New York City. Despite New Orleans's longstanding reputation as a gastronomic destination, its restaurants remain essentially unexplored. See Paul Freedman, "Restaurants," in *Food in Time and Place*, 253-275; Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Andrew Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Christine Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies and Grog Shops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and David Beriss and David Sutton, eds., *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Jessica B. Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011); Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Psyche Williams-Forsion, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Harris, *Beyond Gumbo: Creole Fusion Food from the Atlantic Rim* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Karen Hess, *The Carolina Rice Kitchen* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); John Egerton, *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History* (New York: Knopf, 1987); and Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998, repr. 1937).

memoirs, cookbooks, and recipes they authored and the menial nature attributed to their work.<sup>30</sup> Only recently have scholars begun to assemble bibliographies of African-American authored cookbooks and chronicle the narratives of women of color who labored in the kitchens and homes of white families.<sup>31</sup> This project joins such efforts by focusing on people in the contexts of the specific sites where they labored, an approach that allows for the voices of food producers of color to emerge in a variety of unexpected sources, such as municipal permits issued to peddlers and city directories. By focusing on the stories of African Americans as workers, this history becomes one of production, not just consumption. In doing so, this project shows how New Orleanians of color were not just slaves or manual laborers, though they often appear as such in histories of these eras. Rather, they were also culinary experts, business proprietors, and the guardians and transmitters of unique cultural knowledge.

Among these burgeoning literatures of southern food in connection with Americans of color, a mere few scholarly works have concentrated on New Orleans. No scholarly monograph exists on the New Orleans food industry, its producers, and its associated culture.<sup>32</sup> Instead,

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<sup>30</sup> This history benefits from several important sources authored by culinary professionals of color in New Orleans, including Leah Chase, *And Still I Cook* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2003); Leah Chase, *The Dooky Chase Cookbook* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1990); Nathaniel Burton and Rudy Lombard, *Creole Feast: 15 Master Chefs of New Orleans Reveal Their Secrets* (New York: Random House, 1978); and Lena Richard, *Lena Richard's Cook Book* (New Orleans: 1939).

<sup>31</sup> Of crucial significance is Toni Tipton-Martin, *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015). Earlier efforts to assemble such bibliographies can be found in Witt, *Black Hunger*; and Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003). For workers' histories, see Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson III, and Charletta Sudduth, *The Maid Narratives: Black Domestic Workers and White Families in the Jim Crow South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Scholars can look forward to Justin Nystrom, *Creole Italian: How Sicilian Immigrants Shaped the Culture of America's Most Interesting Food Town* (forthcoming). Historians have looked elsewhere in Louisiana, however, in works such as C. Paige Gutierrez, *Cajun Foodways* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992); and Jean Ann Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes: Recruitment, Labor Conditions, and Community Relations, 1880-1910* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

historians have offered a handful of articles or edited collections, many organized by dish or drink, with chapters on the sazerac cocktail, the sno-ball, and red beans and rice, for example.<sup>33</sup> Such a structure emphasizes ingredients over people and gives intriguing, though narrow, slices of a much larger story. Historians have explored more faithfully the connections between cuisine, ethnicity, and race in other cities.<sup>34</sup> In New Orleans, implications of the city's diverse demographics resound in studies on jazz and Mardi Gras traditions.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, deep racial and class divides, stories of conflict and collaboration, and debates over cultural authenticity and belonging were embedded in processes of making and eating food in nineteenth- and twentieth-century New Orleans. They demand a sustained, critical gaze from historians.

With a source base involving menus, cookbooks, travel guides, postcards, stereographs, and souvenirs, this project also intervenes in historiographies related to visual, material, and popular culture representations of people of color in America. The period of this dissertation

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<sup>33</sup> Articles on New Orleans food culture and dining include Rien T. Fertel, "'Everybody Seemed Willing to Help': *The Picayune Creole Cook Book* as Battleground, 1900-2008," and Justin A. Nystrom, "Italian New Orleans and the Business of Food in the Immigrant City: There's More to the Muffuletta Than Meets the Eye," both in *The Larder*; Paul Freedman, "American Restaurants and Cuisine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *New England Quarterly* 84 (2011): 5-59; and Daniel H. Usner, Jr., "Food Marketing and Interethnic Exchange in the Eighteenth Century Lower Mississippi Valley," *Food and Foodways* 1 (1986): 279-310. For books on New Orleans cuisine published by academic presses, see Olive Leonhardt and Hilda Phelps Hammon, *Shaking Up Prohibition in New Orleans: Authentic Vintage Cocktails from A to Z*, ed. Gay Leonhardt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); and Susan Tucker, ed., *New Orleans Cuisine: Fourteen Signature Dishes and Their Histories* (Jackson: University of Press of Mississippi, 2009). Helpful collections of oral histories and recipes include Zella Palmer Cuadra, *New Orleans con sabor latino: The History and Passion of Latin Cooking* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013) and Elsa Hahne, *You Are Where You Eat: Stories and Recipes from the Neighborhoods of New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Prominent histories of food and ethnicity, in addition to those on African-American cooking cited above, include Simone Cinotto, *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Jeffrey Pilcher, *Que Vivan los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> On jazz and the Crescent City's diverse neighborhoods, see Raeburn, "Stars of David"; and Gary Boulard, "Blacks, Italians, and the Making of New Orleans Jazz," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 53-66. Studies of Mardi Gras and race include Roger D. Abrahams, et al., *Blues for New Orleans: Mardi Gras and America's Creole Soul* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); and Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

encompasses eras of slavery, war, Reconstruction, segregation, Civil Rights, and ethnic revival. Such social and political events overlapped with massive advances in print, visual, and photographic technologies, which enabled a corresponding expansion in Americans' consumer world. Throughout these eras, enslaved and free people of color appeared as the frequent subjects of visual and material representations. Scientists and politicians manipulated imagery of people of African descent to justify their enslavement, whereas abolitionists employed a different set of evocations to convince the public of slavery's evil.<sup>36</sup> Photographic postcards of lynchings circulated alongside stereographic views of southern industry, purporting to demonstrate the persistently successful suppression of African Americans.<sup>37</sup> Recently, scholars have explored how people of color harnessed the power of photography, in particular, to defend their communities as educated, refined, and secure.<sup>38</sup> In the realm of food, the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century public became most familiar with representations of women of color, such as

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<sup>36</sup> Marcus Wood, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Maurie McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Kay Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (London: Routledge, 1999); Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990); and Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> Marcus Wood, "Valency and Abjection in the Lynching Postcard: A Test Case in the Reclamation of Black Visual Culture," *Slavery and Abolition* 34, no. 2 (2013): 202-222; Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Enduring Truths: Sojourner's Shadows and Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photographs and the Making of African-American Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art in association with University of Washington Press, 2006); and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

Aunt Jemima, selling packaged products or protecting the contents of a cookie jar. Racist nostalgia for the cooking, nurturing “mammy” of the antebellum South generated a surge of domestic objects that one scholar has termed “contemptible collectibles.”<sup>39</sup> In surveying such a broad range of images and things, this dissertation disproves the notion of a single era of “symbolic slavery,” when white consumers across the nation gobbled up disparaging depictions of African Americans who were no longer slaves yet still not fully free.<sup>40</sup> Rather, the objects, texts, and places associated with the New Orleans food industry demonstrated that casting people of color as consumable subjects was always good business, in the nineteenth century as in the mid to late twentieth. Furthermore, this project joins the work of scholars who have exposed literary tropes of the enslaved black body as specifically edible.<sup>41</sup> As illuminated by New Orleans’s food culture, this violent perspective was a historical phenomenon, too.

Histories of American racial and ethnic formation and multiculturalism comprise a final body of scholarship with which this project engages. In a study focusing on New Orleans, it is uniquely possible to explore all of these processes via the history of the identifier “Creole,” a term that has been as disputed within New Orleans as it has been perplexing to observers outside

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<sup>39</sup> Patricia Turner called items such as mammy-shaped salt and pepper shakers “contemptible collectibles....one of the most deplorable and least well documented impulses in American consumer history.” Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 11. See also Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Maurice M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); and Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008); Psyche Williams-Forsion, *Building Houses*; and Steven Dubin, “Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture,” *Social Problems* 34, no. 2 (April 1987): 122-140.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*, Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); and Tompkins, “‘Everything ‘Cept Eat Us’: The Antebellum Black Body Portrayed as Edible Body,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 201-224.



it.<sup>42</sup> The use of “Creole” in Louisiana originated in the colonial era to describe the children born on New World soil.<sup>43</sup> Prosperous, well-educated, and free New Orleanians of color, many clustered in the Tremé quarter of the city, identified as “Creoles of color” beginning in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, white New Orleanians attempted to impose an exclusive, racially *white* association to the term after the Civil War, when Louisiana’s legal and political worlds narrowed to white and black. In the early and mid-twentieth century, whites reinvigorated efforts to claim that only so-called purely white New Orleanians could be Creole, as the adjective came to modify the increasingly profitable places and products of the city’s tourism industry. Describing a food as Creole – such as Creole coffee, for example – communicated that it was genuinely of New Orleans and worthy of its price tag. Still, many New Orleanians of color clung tenaciously to the moniker, as it certified that they, too, claimed an equally historic stake in the city and its culture. Only in the era of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power did a younger generation of New Orleanians of color prefer to identify as black, for the term’s ability to link them to more expansive histories of African Americans beyond New Orleans.<sup>44</sup> In every era

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<sup>42</sup> Celebrity chef Paul Prudhomme brought Cajun cuisine to New Orleans in the late 1970s, ensuring everlasting confusion for tourists who would arrive in the Crescent City and find restaurants and souvenir shops selling Cajun and Creole tastes and trinkets as a seemingly conjoined pair. Historically, residents of rural, southwestern Louisiana, descendants of the Acadians expelled from Canada in the mid-eighteenth century, claimed a Cajun identity. Though French-speaking and Roman Catholic like the Creoles of New Orleans, they originated in a different strain of the French diaspora. Christopher Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth-Century History* (New York: Oxford University Press; 2012); Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: A Primer on Francophone Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and Paul Prudhomme, *Chef Paul Prudhomme’s Louisiana Kitchen* (New York: Morrow, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> Geographer Richard Campanella argues, “New Orleans is the only American city that can reasonably claim to have rendered its own ethnicity. Creole is a place-based ethnicity.” Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 161. The term “creole” has a history much broader than its application in Louisiana. See Ralph Bauer and José Antonio Mazzotti, eds., *Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas: Empires, Texts, Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2009); and Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> On the history of the Creole identity in Louisiana, see Thompson, *Exiles at Home*; Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma*; Sybil Kein, ed., *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans:*

under study, this dissertation probes the ways in which the changing definitions of “Creole” as experienced in the food industry shed light on evolving meanings of whiteness, blackness, and notions of cultural authenticity and ownership. New Orleans’s increasing reliance on tourism placed a concrete, dollar value – who made that Creole praline? where is the best restaurant to get a bowl of Creole gumbo? – on otherwise nebulous concepts.

Appropriately, this project concludes in the era of the ethnic revival, when a broad swath of Americans became interested in the meanings of race and ethnicity.<sup>45</sup> In sites as disparate as Hollywood, the college classroom, and the neighborhood community center, Americans explored their newly “multiethnic” and “multicultural” pasts and presents.<sup>46</sup> New Orleanians, however, claimed that such ideas had been intrinsic to their city’s fabric since its founding. In fact, amateur local historians and the authors of travel guides and cookbooks had long used an indigenous culinary metaphor to characterize New Orleans’s creole society. The Crescent City was a “gumbo,” they claimed, rather than the archetypal “melting pot,” meaning that it was a blend of

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*Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); and Virginia R. Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>45</sup> Essential histories of racial formation include David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Barbara Fields, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 0, no. 181 (May-June 1990): 95-118; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); and Ron Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> Essential studies of the ethnic revival and multiculturalism include Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Hirsch and Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans*; Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta, eds., *America and the New Ethnicity* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1979); John Cooke, ed., *Perspectives on Ethnicity in New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Committee on Ethnicity in New Orleans, 1979); John Cooke, ed., *New Orleans Ethnic Cultures: A Publication of the Committee on Ethnicity in New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Department of English, University of New Orleans, 1978); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); and Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963).

many different kinds of people who had retained their distinctive cultural identities.<sup>47</sup> Such a cheerful metaphor hid deep inaccuracies and long histories of very unexceptional American racial prejudice, however. Importantly, the very existence of battles over who could be called “Creole” acknowledged the constructed and contingent nature of race and ethnicity, even if many tried to argue in opposite terms. Ultimately, then, this history shows how New Orleans society previewed an American brand of multiculturalism – with all its racial and class inequities – long before the nation’s late twentieth-century ethnic revival.

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Since its founding, New Orleans enjoyed or suffered from a lengthy history of exceptionalism, much of it self-proclaimed.<sup>48</sup> In 1835, northern visitor Joseph Holt Ingraham described New Orleans as a “city of anomalies.”<sup>49</sup> It stood apart from other American places for its shameful predominance in the slave trade and its variegated racial world, at least prior to the Civil War. Certainly other metropolises such as New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles ultimately featured larger, denser, more thoroughly diverse populations. Yet New Orleans is

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<sup>47</sup> The introduction to the sixth edition of the *Picayune Creole Cook Book*, published in 1922, featured a passage praising the many varieties of seafood found in New Orleans. The writer used different kinds of fish as metaphors to describe the city’s distinct ethnic groups, such that he wrote about people and food as synonymous. Fertel, “Everybody Seemed Willing,” in *The Larder*, 21-22. English writer Israel Zangwill introduced the metaphor of the melting pot to describe the ethnic and racial blending that America enacted on immigrants. Zangwill, *The Melting Pot, Drama in Four Acts* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909).

<sup>48</sup> In 1978, historian and native New Orleanian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., wrote critically of his city’s self-absorption, “New Orleans has always been an entity unto itself – *in* but not entirely *of* the South, nor indeed of the state or the nation. It is a truly narcissistic city, ever ready to lose itself in contemplation of those attributes and charms, those customs and landmarks which its people sense as reflections of their own deepest and most personal commitment to a particular engagement with life. The true New Orleanian finds it utterly incomprehensible that his own infatuation with this inamorata is not the universal response of all those who come to know her.” In public and academic forums, Tregle argued tirelessly against racist voices that sought to define “Creole” as “white.” Foreword, Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, ed. Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978, repr. 1895). Also see Richard Campanella, “The Seduction of Exceptionalism,” *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* (Summer 2014): 24-25.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West, by a Yankee. In Two Volumes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 185.

uniquely useful for this study because of its dual role as a crossroads and crucible of people and food. This is essentially a local history, yet an atypical one. New Orleans's position as a colonial frontier town, a Caribbean port city, an immigration port of entry, and a popular tourist destination expanded the city's reach well beyond that of the focus of a more conventional local study. People arrived in, departed from, and passed through New Orleans during every era. Even the untold many who never set foot in the French Quarter gained a feeling of proximity, affection, or fascination for the Crescent City thanks to its highly exportable culture. In the nineteenth century or the twentieth, texts, objects, and even products like canned gumbo and boxed beignet mix transported the tastes of New Orleans to faraway destinations. The city's consumer culture functioned as a prism that broadcast the spectrum of its culinary brand – and its conjoined dynamics of race and ethnicity – to hungry consumers across the nation.

And if New Orleans, why food? Food is frequently used to define the character of a place; nowhere is this truer than in New Orleans. Because food frequently constitutes the labor of women and minorities and because its evanescent qualities have the potential to resist historicization, it has suffered from inadequate attention by historians.<sup>50</sup> Yet food functions as a tangible record of migration and exchange to an extent that even people, music, and architecture cannot. In 1788 and 1794, fires burned much of New Orleans's French Quarter, nearly obliterating the structural record of French presence there. Spanish colonial forces rebuilt the sector, such that the French Quarter became the Spanish Quarter or the Caribbean Quarter, at least architecturally, a fact unremarked by most tourists. Even after such an erasure as fire,

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<sup>50</sup> Anthropologists, in contrast, have long recognized the value of studying food. See Freedman, "Preface," in *Food in Time and Place*, xii. Historians' recent attention to the senses holds promise for the increasing prominence of food in history. See special issue on the senses, *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (April 2011); Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

however, the seeds of vegetables and fruits brought from far away – okra, lemons, oranges, watermelon, figs, sugarcane, yams, rice – would continue to blossom in gardens and fill New Orleans tables, prepared by the hands of those who came to Louisiana willingly or by force.

Moreover, actions of food production, preparation, and consumption centered around the essentially corporal process of eating, which persistently revealed anxieties about race. The perverse world of slavery and its segregated aftermath dictated food-centric relationships between white consumers and black producers that held deeply conflicted potentials for intimacy, violence, trust, and distrust. White families required enslaved women to labor as wet nurses, feeding their children with their breast milk, yet they simultaneously feared the idea that the same women might poison the meals they made in the kitchen. Notions of nostalgia, hygiene, pleasure, and safety all revolved uniquely around food. The material qualities of the specific foods considered in this study mattered, too. As has been noted, the ingredients in a New Orleans gumbo came to embody quite literally the people of the city. Coffee functioned as a dark and stimulating tropical product that antebellum visitors learned to equate with the women of color who sold it in public markets. Pralines composed of sugar and pecans represented an Old World sweet made with New World ingredients. They generated a confectionary industry associated almost exclusively with women vendors of color. Thus, food allows a unique entrance into histories of people and place in New Orleans like no other medium.

To understand such stories, this study considers how locals and visitors made race and ethnicity tangible in a variety of urban spaces in the Crescent City, from the mundane to the monumental. Chapter one uses city directories, travel permits issued to people of color, and narratives of white businessmen to argue that deeply problematic associations between race and food culture originated during antebellum decades, when enslaved people and coffee could be

purchased in the same spaces. The second chapter charts the transformation of the French Market, the city's central food market, from an exoticized, multilingual "Babel" in the mid-nineteenth century to a modern, sanitized, whitened marketplace in the 1930s. Chapter three focuses on the riverfront sugar levees after the Civil War. It argues that objects of visual culture related to the city's growing tourism industry fueled perceptions that former slaves were unproductive workers and unfit to be citizens in modern America. The fourth chapter revolves around a souvenir set of wax dolls that commemorated nineteenth-century food vendors of color and encouraged nostalgia for pre-modern systems of labor during years of rapid change in the city. It argues that the dolls' commodification emphasized the extent to which food, people, and things circulated within New Orleans's tourism industry as a conjoined, consumable unit. Chapter five shows how mid-century culinary texts, such as cookbooks, menus, and recipes, became a crucially important vehicle in prolonging the myth of a whitened "Creole" past during years when the social and political privileges associated with whiteness were eroding. The final chapter analyzes food-centric public spaces constructed by Italian Americans and Vietnamese refugees in order to understand how New Orleanians differently experienced the ethnic revival. Despite celebratory language that trumpeted the city's diversity, African Americans knew the ethnic revival as an era of *placelessness*, as they found themselves displaced from the few neighborhoods that had historically belonged to them.

In exploring how invented public memory became history in New Orleans, this project sheds light on the roots of racial and social inequalities inherent to the culture and tourism industries of many American places; the persistent, pernicious legacies of slavery; and the means by which people of color continually resisted. The texts, objects, and spaces of New Orleans's consumer world balanced constantly between representation and reality. Relationships between

storytelling, history, privilege, and consumption were tangled problems of New Orleans's recent and distant pasts. This project seeks to untangle them.

Chapter One: Building a Consumable City: Buying and Selling Food and People in Antebellum New Orleans

On September 26, 1807, an advertisement in the New Orleans newspaper *Le Moniteur* for a new pastry shop on Royal Street evoked a city and its residents in transition. Jean Gaston, “cook and pastry chef, newly arrived in this city,” invited New Orleanians to his establishment to discover “all sorts of pastries, sweets for desserts of all kinds,” gelatins, and sugary creations to decorate the dining table. Gaston’s expertise extended to the savory realm, too. His homemade pâté, sausages, and smoked ham and beef could all feed travelers in need of provisions, he noted.<sup>1</sup> Gaston intended his food for consumption both in New Orleans and beyond because he cooked for residents of a frontier town, recently of Spain and France and now of the young and growing United States. The advertisement alluded to New Orleans as both a destination and origin point for people in motion. Gaston had settled there recently, perhaps after fleeing a hometown made turbulent by the wake of the French Revolution. Some of his prospective customers, in contrast, departed from New Orleans, very likely by boat via the Mississippi River. The fact that Gaston created sugar work for purposes of ornament, rather than consumption, however, also pointed to a degree of stable wealth and refinement that distinguished New Orleans from other far-flung outposts. In sum, this short ad delineated a cosmopolitan, prosperous city, many of whose residents and visitors were on the move.

The advertisement’s final sentence added a crucial detail that further characterized Gaston’s business as uniquely of New Orleans. He noted that he would “take one or two negro apprentices” to help him in his work.<sup>2</sup> In newly American New Orleans, people of color were already enrolled in the work of food production in kitchens like Gaston’s, in urban streets and

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. “AVIS,” *Le Moniteur*, September 26, 1807.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



markets, and on upriver plantations. While some, like Gaston's apprentices, perhaps, worked for wages, most did not. People of color in antebellum Louisiana produced all manner of consumable commodities, such as sugar, cotton, and the meals that had already begun to make New Orleans's cuisine famous. That people of color worked in the food industry did not make New Orleans unique. Rather, the enormous cultural and financial prominence that "Creole" cuisine would come to play in New Orleans's identity over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rendered whites' mistreatment and attempted eclipse of African Americans all the more malicious. This is the beginning of that story.

New Orleans became a consumable city because of its geographic location. Poised near the mouth of the Mississippi, it functioned as a crucial node in networks of regional, national, and transnational trade through which people and things flowed constantly. Antebellum visitors were dazzled by the city's myriad opportunities for entertainment and dining, industries that relied on the labor and sale of people of color. By the mid-nineteenth century, free and enslaved people of color worked in all sectors of the city's food industry, as stewards and cooks on steamboats, street peddlers, market vendors, cooks, domestics, and culinary entrepreneurs. At the same time that New Orleans consequently earned its reputation for great cuisine, brokers were selling enslaved people by the tens of thousands, often in public auctions witnessed by passersby and tourists. Thus, workers of color helped generate New Orleans's growing national reputation as a city of consumable delights as they were simultaneously treated as objects for sale and manipulation.

The extent to which people of color and food became linked in antebellum New Orleans can be read in the commercial geography of the city and the relative mobility of groups within it. The proliferation of coffee houses and fine hotels, in particular, epitomized New Orleanians'

impulse to commoditize people of color. Both kinds of establishments hosted sales of property, furniture, and slaves. Patrons could purchase an experience or object created by a person of color – such as a fine lunch or a cup of coffee – and they could buy a person as well. The casual frequency with which people and food appeared side by side for sale helped generate deeply problematic associations between race and culinary culture in New Orleans. In antebellum decades, as even a century later, settings of food production and consumption hosted the clearest examples of New Orleans’s perverse slippage between person and thing. In these spaces, consumers learned to associate people of color with food, beginning an exploitative relationship that would mar the Crescent City’s tourism industry well into the twentieth century and have profound social and political consequences for New Orleanians of color.

Antebellum newspapers and travel narratives helped diffuse this unethical blend of business and leisure among a wide readership, beginning a national fascination with New Orleans as a hedonistic, exotic locale. These texts cast the southern metropolis as a seasonal destination and a city of men. To readers in New York, Boston, and beyond, authors described how white men flocked to New Orleans during the fall and winter but abandoned it during the spring and summer, fearing yellow fever. Yet city records reveal the extent to which people of color were in motion as well. There was a heavily regulated mobility; authorities tracked people of color like foodstuffs or other items for sale because they perceived them to be valuable commodities, too. The histories of free and enslaved people of color who moved within, to, and from the city, gleaned from the bits of data collected in an attempt to control them, show the extent to which freedom in antebellum New Orleans was a fragile, movable state. Free people of color guarded carefully the tangible proof of their status. And at times, enslaved New Orleanians

retaliated against their designation as consumable commodities in the most fitting – and devastating – manner possible.

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## **I. Soap, Nutmeg, and Slaves: Building Blocks of a Consumable City**

When Jean Gaston set up shop in 1807 to make sweets and pâté, he added to the city’s uniquely rich and varied larder. Following Louisiana’s acquisition by the United States, the promise of enormous affluence lured planters and businessmen to New Orleans. Urban entrepreneurs multiplied in order to supply, feed, and entertain them, creating a new cityscape of edible and liquid pleasures. People of color, both free and enslaved, participated fully – though not always willfully – in the construction of this consumable city. As perceived in sites of food production, sale, and consumption, slave-holding New Orleanians and their associates sought to objectify people of color to an extent that was at times absolute.

Insatiable appetites far and near – for sugar and cotton, above all – stimulated the meteoric development of antebellum New Orleans and the countryside surrounding it.<sup>3</sup> The city sat in the slender neck of an hourglass that funneled America’s agricultural wealth downward to the Gulf of Mexico and drew food, people, and goods upward into the country’s interior. Tributaries of the Mississippi River “extend[ed] for thousands of miles in different directions, and open[ed] communications with the various ports of the most extensive and fertile valley on the face of the earth,” marveled the author of the 1822 *Paxton’s Annual Advertiser*. In this era before railroads and highways, people and goods passed through the Crescent City via the river.

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<sup>3</sup> On the spread of slavery – and the United States alongside it – through the early nineteenth-century American Southwest, see Edward E. Baptist, *The Half That Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

Accordingly, New Orleans's levees were "crowded with vessels from every nation, and boats from a thousand different places in the 'upper country,'" the author described.<sup>4</sup> Ships arrived filled with manufactured goods and departed carrying cotton. Witnesses could measure New Orleans's extraordinary riches in the heavy holds of the vessels that passed through its ports.

The extent of early New Orleans's culinary, economic, and cultural reach could be mapped most clearly in a commonplace source: the shipping notices and price lists that appeared on the front pages of the city's newspapers. In French, Spanish, and English, readers could track vessels arriving from or departing to ports as varied as Antwerp, Charleston, Bordeaux, Baltimore, Liverpool, New York, Havana, Vera Cruz, and Mobile, among many others. Announcements describing the goods exchanged in this humid corner of the triangle trade read like fantastical shopping lists for customers of boundless means and tastes. For example, the June 23, 1807, edition of the *Louisiana Gazette* published a list of items acquired in Baltimore and Havana that would arrive in New Orleans in two or three days. The vessel held:

100 Pots and 30 boxes Sweet-meats  
50 Bags and 8 bbls. Coffee...  
...Choice London particular Madeira  
50 Kegs nice Crackers, Indiasoy Ketchup  
Soap and Candles  
Soft shelled Almonds – Pearl Barley  
American Cheese – Ground Ginger  
Basket Salt – Blacking – Nutmegs  
Wove letter Paper  
Chewing Tobacco – Olives and Anchovies  
3 Hogsheads Loaf Sugar  
ALSO  
5 Dozen elegant fancy chairs  
5 Dozen pantaloon thread hose  
1 Trunck containing 20 pieces Silk Chambray and 20 pieces Black Cambrick.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John A. Paxton, *Paxton's Annual Advertiser* (New Orleans, LA, 1822), 26.

<sup>5</sup> "The subscriber has received..." *Louisiana Gazette*, June 23, 1807.

Such an assortment combined objects that were basic and luxurious and edible and inedible, from Europe, America, and the Caribbean, if not farther afield. New Orleanians needed soap and candles and desired nutmeg and fancy chairs, or perhaps the reverse proved true for some consumers. Regardless, the consolidation of these items into a single list encouraged readers to dream of filling their pantries and outfitting their drawing rooms with an array of goods limited only by their imagination or budget. All would soon be easily within reach in New Orleans shops. These were far from the only objects for sale in June 1807, however.

Early New Orleans newspapers also taught readers to understand people of color as things that could be purchased akin to Madeira and almonds. In the same issue of *The Gazette*, additional advertisements informed readers of the availability of a “large brick two story house” in central New Orleans; “24 Young Negroes of the Congo Nation, Consisting of boys from 16 to 18 years of age”; and an entire downriver plantation with forty acres of rice planted in the ground, to be transferred to the buyer with the “18 Negroes” already living there. A separate seller sought to attract readers to the sale of “four Negro families from a cotton Plantation.... [t]he whole to be disposed of on reasonable terms, and a liberal credit.”<sup>6</sup> This edition of the *Gazette* – which was one of many editions, with the *Gazette* being one among multiple newspapers – filled its pages with things that could be acquired for a price: plantations, businesses, buildings, slaves, horses, foods, and imported goods. Even the titles of adjacent advertisements repeated the theme: “Sheriff’s Sale,” “For Sale,” “A Plantation for Sale,” and “Negroes for Sale.” The terribly mundane appearance of *people* amidst a wide variety of objects confirmed the already routine nature of their commoditization in New Orleans society. Characterized as cooks or servants, or attached to or separate from sugar and cotton plantations, they appealed to readers as domestic and agricultural tools, or so the buyers hoped. A New

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<sup>6</sup> “Sheriff’s Sale”; “For Sale”; “A Plantation for Sale”; “Negroes for Sale,” *Louisiana Gazette*, June 23, 1807.

Orleanian skimming this issue of the *Gazette* would have read of a boy and a chair as belonging to the same litany of available things.

New Orleans's first directory of businesses and residents, published in 1811, reflected this vigorous volume of economic activity by chronicling the birth of industries that would soon make the city one of the biggest and richest in the nation. A handful of cotton presses, sugar refiners, planters, cigar makers, and public auctioneers all maintained properties in the city center. So too did the first wave of purveyors of a burgeoning food culture. Hungry and thirsty residents could find twenty-nine bakers, twenty-two butchers, eight confectioners, one chocolate maker, six coffee houses, three distillers, assorted liquor and wine merchants, thirty-six grocers, thirteen taverns, and one *traiteur*, a caterer. As of 1811, Jean Gaston was still in business as a pastry cook, though he had moved to a new location at 45 Conti Street. He competed for customers with three other pastry cooks who also clustered in the streets surrounding the St. Louis Cathedral.<sup>7</sup> Some entries in the city's first directory were destined to change or disappear over time – such as the sail makers, ship captains, and sailors who marked the New Orleans of 1811 as a river city – but its catalogue of food-related businesses would only grow.

As the city's newspapers and directories indicated, inhabitants of antebellum New Orleans could find food nearly everywhere, in a great diversity of public, semi-public, and private spaces, such that cuisine became central to the city's rising national persona.<sup>8</sup> In his 1851 collection of essays on New Orleans, New York City writer A. Oakey Hall likened food and

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas H. Whitney, *Whitney's New-Orleans Directory, and Louisiana & Mississippi Almanac for the Year 1811* (New Orleans: Thomas H. Whitney, 1810).

<sup>8</sup> For histories of the early New Orleans cityscape, see Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Dell Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Liliane Crété, *Daily Life in Louisiana, 1815-1830*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); and Albert Fossier, *New Orleans: The Glamour Period, 1800-1840. A History of the Conflicts of Nationalities, Languages, Religion, Morals, Cultures, Laws, Politics, and Economics During the Formative Period of New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1957).

drink to “Gog and Magog...whose court, as held in New Orleans, is not to be despised or treated lightly.”<sup>9</sup> Hall’s reference implied a twin pursuit that was universally captivating when exercised in New Orleans, even if eating and drinking were operations of simple subsistence in other American cities. Appropriately, then, the seat of New Orleans’s culinary “court” overlapped with the city’s political, cultural, and religious epicenter: the Place d’Armes, the public square in front of the St. Louis Cathedral, and the adjacent riverfront levees and central food market.

In these spaces, observers found the full range of the early Crescent City’s people and foods on display. “Along the levee, as far as the eye could reach to the West & to the market house to the East were ranged two rows of market people,” wrote the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe in 1819. “I cannot suppose that my eye took in less than 500 sellers & buyers.” On scraps of canvas cloth and palmetto leaves, women and men offered meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit to passersby and sailors.<sup>10</sup> Henry C. Castellanos, a New Orleans native, lawyer, and journalist, likewise wrote of the 1820s Place d’Armes and riverfront as filled with food vendors. In the cathedral’s shadow, strollers could buy edible delights that reflected the city’s tropical ties and sub-tropical location, including “oranges, bananas, ice-cream, peanuts, [and] ginger beer...cooled in large tubs.” Oysters, too, attracted hungry buyers to riverfront stands. Sellers secured their boats and carried their load of “fresh and luscious bivalves” mere feet from the bank of the Mississippi to customers, as Castellanos recalled.<sup>11</sup> The vigor and visibility of New

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<sup>9</sup> A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattaner in New Orleans; or, Phases of “Crescent City” Life* (New York: J.S. Redfield, Clinton Hall, 1851), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Entry dated January 12, 1819, Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820*, ed. Samuel Wilson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University, 1951), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1990, repr. 1895), 145. City records show that antebellum municipal authorities auctioned off twenty-one oyster-selling stands at intervals along the levee to the highest bidder. Stands closest to the city center commanded the highest prices. For the records of these auctions in 1830 and 1832 see Series I: Folder 4: Lease of the Stands for the Sale of Oysters, August 27, 1832, and Series II: Folder 24: Municipal contracts – property rental, September 1, 1830, MSS 277:

Orleans's food-centric bustle made the city unique in the writings of many who spent time there in the early nineteenth century.

In the streets that radiated outward from the Place d'Armes, cafés, bakeries, and other businesses distinguished one gridded corner from another in the minds of residents and travelers, creating a cognitive map of the city that was anchored in food and drink. Castellanos recalled St. Peter and St. Ann Streets, which bordered the Place d'Armes and led away from the river, as lined with two-story buildings where "hardy Austrians and Slavonians" sold tropical fruits on the ground floor and lived upstairs. At the Café del Aguila, at the intersection of St. Ann and Chartres streets, "Coffee, chocolate or tea, steaming hot, were served on small tables to customers immersed in the mysteries of dominoes," he recalled.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to such precisely sited memories, an 1836 visitor described finding so many grog shops on every block that the greater city of New Orleans became one unending grog shop in his mind, and perhaps also to his readers in the *Natchez Courier* and *Boston Weekly*. After encountering one such establishment packed with customers, the writer spied another "next door, and at the next corner, and at the corner above that, and below it, and between the said corners, and across the street, and in the next street...and so on *ad infinitum*. There were bar rooms over bar rooms," all filled with patrons, he described.<sup>13</sup> In varying degrees of detail and nostalgia, travel writings, newspaper articles, memoirs, city directories, and newspaper advertisements charted the Crescent City's many establishments that pleased the gourmet and glutton alike.

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Mathews City of New Orleans Collection, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as HNOC).

<sup>12</sup> Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was*, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Editor of the *Natchez Courier*, "The City of New Orleans," printed in *Boston Weekly Messenger*, July 28, 1836, 4.



Many of these texts also pointed to the omnipresence of free or enslaved people of color laboring in the antebellum New Orleans food industry, such that their influence marked virtually every food-centric transaction and experience. A substantial number of New Orleanians of color worked in particularly entrepreneurial occupations, as food vendors in public markets and in city streets. Of the hundreds of sellers whom Latrobe encountered on the levee in 1819, he was most struck by the “black negroes & negresses...mulattoes, curly & straight-haired, quarteroons of all shades, long haired & frizzled....Their wares consisted of as many kinds as their faces.” The diversity of the market’s people entranced him in equal measure to its foods. Women of color filled the city’s avenues, too, serving as the primary food purveyors to white women shoppers who remained cloistered inside their homes.<sup>14</sup> “In every street during the whole day women, chiefly black women, are met, carrying baskets upon their heads calling at the doors of houses,” Latrobe described.<sup>15</sup> Vending food propelled New Orleanians of color into highly visible, public roles, forcing them into a position that was simultaneously desired and subservient, regardless of their social status as free or enslaved. Eliza Ripley recalled her childhood in the 1840s, when the call of a woman selling homemade Creole cream cheese, a local specialty, would rouse her out of

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Latrobe and Eliza Ripley both described antebellum white women’s reliance on women vendors of color to shop. Contemporary studies of early-nineteenth-century women food vendors of color and their roles in Atlantic World networks of mobility and communication include Demetri D. Debe, “Necessary Connections: Building Black Mobility in the Public Markets of the Circum-Caribbean, 1660-1815” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, in progress); and Ashley Rose Young, “Nourishing Networks: Provisioning Southern Cities in the Atlantic World, 1700-1950” (PhD diss., Duke University, in progress). See also Shauna Sweeney, “A Free Enterprise: Market Women, Insurgent Economies, and the Making of Atlantic World Freedom, 1790-1880” (PhD diss., New York University, 2015); Jessica B. Harris, “‘I’m Talkin’ ‘Bout the Food I Sells’: African American Street Vendors and the Sound of Food from Noise to Nostalgia,” in *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, eds. John T. Edge, Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 333-342; Ellen Louise Hartigan-O’Connor, “The Measure of the Market: Women’s Economic Lives in Charleston, South Carolina, and Newport, Rhode Island, 1750-1820” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2003); and Daniel H. Usner, Jr., “Food Marketing and Interethnic Exchange in the Eighteenth Century Lower Mississippi Valley,” *Food and Foodways* 1 (1986): 279-310. On the relationship between white women and vendors, see Latrobe, *Impressions*, 101; and Eliza Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans: Being Recollections of My Girlhood* (New York: Arno Press, 1975, repr. 1912), 24-27, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Entries dated January 12, 1819, and March 16, 1819, Latrobe, *Impressions*, 22, 101.

her early morning stupor. “A rush to the door with a saucer for a...tiny, heart-shaped cheese, a dash of cream poured from a claret bottle.... How nice and refreshing it was,” she remembered.<sup>16</sup> Other vendors passed through the neighborhood selling figs, praline candies, and blackberries: treats whose sweet tastes belied the labor required to procure and sell them. Although vendors’ constant mobility conveyed a sense of independence, many walked the streets for the profit of someone else.<sup>17</sup>

City records confirmed the prevalence of people of color working as purveyors, preparers, and servers of food, quantifying the degree to which New Orleans’s growing culinary reputation relied on their labor. Beginning in 1840, the mayor’s office maintained a register of free people of color living and working in New Orleans to distinguish them from the many enslaved people who worked in similar capacities. In volumes chronicling the years 1840 to 1856, city inspectors recorded dozens of free men and women of color working as food vendors alone. Aged 18 at the youngest and 70 at the oldest, they sold chickens, ice cream, sweet rice fritters known as *calas*, cakes, fruits, vegetables, and coffee. Some combined street vending with other jobs to make ends meet. Agathe, sixty-five years old and born in Haiti, worked as both a street vendor and a washerwoman. William Beckett, thirty years old and born in Norfolk, Virginia, had labored previously as a cook and fireman on steamboats but sold chickens at the time that he registered with the city. Other free New Orleanians of color worked as butchers, bakers, cigar makers, pastry chefs, barkeepers, stewards on steamboats, grocers, and restaurant waiters and cooks. Some fed consumers in a more intimate manner, such as Françoise, a forty-

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<sup>16</sup> Ripley, *Social Life*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Aside from the aforementioned studies, nostalgic descriptions of such vendors can be found primarily in local newspapers, travel narratives, guide books, and even the pages of *The Newcomb Arcade*, a quarterly magazine published in the early twentieth century by the women students at H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, the women’s school associated with Tulane University.

four-year-old woman born in Charleston, South Carolina, who worked as a wet nurse. A few maintained their own businesses, such as William Scott, a forty-year-old “mulatto” from Virginia who registered as a tavern keeper, and Priscilla Williams, a forty-four-year-old black woman from Philadelphia who ran a boarding house.<sup>18</sup> While the city’s register also showed free New Orleanians of color working in many other capacities – as shoemakers, bricklayers, barbers, and carpenters – its entries outlined an enormous range of food-related positions, from the menial to the managerial. The record clarified the extent to which people of color were largely responsible for feeding, serving, and housing the inhabitants of antebellum New Orleans.

New Orleanians of color cooked behind private doors, too, and descriptions of their labors – while sparse – show that white slave owners were already learning to appropriate the fruits of their culinary work. Eliza Ripley recalled the physical efforts required to host a dinner party in 1842 without the modern conveniences that would be available by the turn of the twentieth century. “There was no cut nor granulated nor pulverized sugar,” she recounted. “There were no fruit extracts, no essences for seasoning... no ground spices, no seedless raisins.” Sugar had to be pulverized by hand, whole spices were ground by hand, and raisins seeded by hand too. Ice cream “was whirled in the ice tub by hand – and a stout one at that – and required at least one hour, constant labor, to freeze,” she remembered. Ripley’s persistent use of the passive voice veiled the identity of the hands accomplishing all of this kitchen work. She specified delicately that “Madame superintended the making of gelatine,” but keeping an eye on a boiling pot required a different degree of effort and expertise than that involved in actually

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<sup>18</sup> New Orleans (La.) Office of the Mayor, Register of free persons of color entitled to remain in the state, 1840-1856, Volume 1 (hereafter cited as Register, 1840-1856), Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

dirtying one's hands to boil calves' feet.<sup>19</sup> An enslaved woman named Charlotte did this work, at least in the household that Ripley joined after her marriage. "Charlotte had complete charge of everything about the house," Ripley recalled. "She made the jellies and the pickles, the ice cream, the cakes."<sup>20</sup> Ripley cited the availability of one cookbook in her family's kitchen, but it is uncertain, if not unlikely, that the house's cooks would have been able to read it.

Ripley's memoir therefore clarified the extent to which Charlotte's labors were not just physically challenging but also thoroughly expert and creative. Charlotte, like many other antebellum domestic cooks whose work was not chronicled in equal detail, cooked, baked, and preserved foods for an entire household. With unwritten expertise, likely passed down from a mother or other companion cook, she maintained a repertoire of dishes that were refined and practical, from ice cream to pickled vegetables. Though Ripley took it as a signal of Charlotte's loyalty that she hid the family's silverware when Federal troops approached the house during the Civil War, it was apparent that Charlotte understood the thankless nature of her work. "[O]ften [Charlotte] remarked that no one in the house did more and had less to show for it at night than she did," Ripley recorded.<sup>21</sup> Charlotte perceived that her kitchen work was essential, yet abused.

The labors of people like Charlotte and the thousands of others similar to her fed a society that treated the efforts – and bodies – of people of color as crucial ingredients to the metropolis's growth. Antebellum New Orleans's leisure industry, which included its restaurants, hotels, grog shops, cafés, billiard tables, and dance halls, exploded due to the profits of the city's slave trade and the cotton and sugar production that were its associated industries. As the Crescent City gained fame as a culinary capital, it simultaneously grew into America's largest

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<sup>19</sup> Ripley, *Social Life*, 43, 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 212, 213.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

slave market. The expansion of one sector relied on the other. After the United States banned the importation of enslaved people beginning in 1808, New Orleans became the epicenter of the nation's domestic slave trade, which sent approximately one million women, men, and children to labor in the cotton and sugarcane plantations of the Deep South.<sup>22</sup> Slave sales were more visible and voluminous in New Orleans than in any other American city. They occurred in large yards that held hundreds of people, in small showrooms, and at auctions in public places throughout the city.<sup>23</sup> Free people of color who worked as food vendors certainly peddled their wares on streets where enslaved people of color were advertised for purchase. The coexistence of experiences of freedom and bondage permeated daily life in antebellum New Orleans.

Transactions that destroyed families and sent people to their deaths occurred casually and constantly in the Crescent City, such that tourists watched slave sales as a form of amusement. In early 1835, Edward Russell passed through New Orleans on his way from New England to the Red River region of northeast Texas, where he hoped to profit from land speculation. He noted in his diary on January 26, 1835, that he had purchased oranges and oysters and judged New Orleans to be “a wonderful place for business & dissipation.” On January 31, he wrote, “This

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<sup>22</sup> Previous estimates of the number of enslaved people transported to cotton and sugar growing regions via America's domestic trade revolved around 660,000 to 750,000, but Baptist gives a figure closer to one million. Baptist, *The Half That Has Never Been Told*, xiii. On New Orleans's crucial role in the domestic slave trade, see Maurie D. McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); and Frederic Bancroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore, MD: J.H. Furst, 1931).

<sup>23</sup> Slave sales were not just conspicuous in antebellum New Orleans; they were celebrated openly as the source of the city's wealth. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Maurie D. McInnis, “Mapping the Slave Trade in Richmond and New Orleans,” *Buildings & Landscapes* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 102-24; Richard Campanella, “On the Structural Basis of Social Memory: Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade, Part I,” *Preservation in Print* (March 2013): 16-17; and Campanella, “On the Structural Basis of Social Memory: Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade, Part II,” *Preservation in Print* (April 2013): 18-19.

forenoon saw slaves sold at Auction at 10, 11 & 12.00 \$ each,” then he got his hair cut and purchased saddlebags and a powder flask for his upcoming journey.<sup>24</sup> In a pattern of thought that had been visible in New Orleans’s earliest newspapers, Russell itemized the things that made antebellum New Orleans a consumable city: food, goods, and people, all of which he experienced as objects for sale.

In certain settings, the degree to which New Orleans’s slave-holding world collapsed people of color and food into a single, consumable entity proved quite literal. After Russell left the city, he proceeded by steamboat up the Mississippi River. Along the way he recorded the words of a fellow traveler, who informed Russell that southern planters “care[d] for nothing but ‘to buy Negroes to raise cotton & raise cotton to buy Negroes.’”<sup>25</sup> The man described an obsessive avarice for human labor that could never be satisfied. Enslaved people, cotton, sugar, and other raw and finished goods formed a continuous cycle of production, such that all came to be understood as equivalent in the eyes of those who profited. Traveling through Louisiana’s sugar cane fields in late 1857, Frederick Law Olmsted learned a similar lesson related to the equation of person and product. Planters occasionally drove their slaves to harvest cane at a rate so intense that some died from exhaustion, he observed. But “Hot coffee was kept constantly in the sugar-house,” Olmsted described, “and the hands on duty were allowed to drink it almost *ad libitum*. They were also allowed to drink freely of the hot *sirop*.”<sup>26</sup> Overseers stimulated their enslaved workers with coffee and sugar in order to fuel the production of sugar. Forcing slaves to

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<sup>24</sup> Russell’s journey was ultimately doomed, as he died later that year. Entries dated January 26, 1835, and January 31, 1835, MSS 424.2, Edward Russell travel journal and transcript, 1834-1835, HNOC.

<sup>25</sup> Entry dated February 3, 1835, *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> As cited in “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson’s Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly* V, no. 41, October 1857, 453.

ingest the substances they produced melded their bodies even more fully with the foods that they made, ensuring that processes of production and consumption continued without pause.<sup>27</sup>

Although Eliza Ripley's cook, Charlotte, worked at a distance from rural plantations, she, too, labored as part of the same system that insisted on the total objectification of people of color. Charlotte managed a rich and varied pantry, whose stores of spices, fruits, and liquor were brought to New Orleans in ships certainly involved in some aspect of the slave trade. She pulverized sugar that had been refined by slaves and created meals to be served on linens whose fibers had first touched the fingers of enslaved people. The consuming ties that bound Louisiana's cane and cotton fields to American kitchens and homes, far and near, matured throughout the antebellum period into a web of extraordinary wealth. Between 1830 and 1840 alone, New Orleans's population grew more than 120 percent, to nearly 102,200 people, making it America's third largest city in 1840.<sup>28</sup> To fuel its growth, the city's economy cannibalized New Orleanians of color, rendering people into commodities akin to the commodities that they produced. A closer look at specific sites of business and leisure in antebellum New Orleans demonstrates how this dynamic developed in quotidian transactions no more complicated than the purchase of a cup of coffee.

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## **II. Pursuing Pleasure and Profit in Crescent City Coffee Houses and Hotels**

In the telling of many travel narratives, experiences of commerce and pleasure in antebellum New Orleans blended until they became indistinguishable. Business pursuits

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<sup>27</sup> For further consideration of Louisiana's sugarcane production and harvesting see chapter 3, as well as John B. Rehder, *Delta Sugar: Louisiana's Vanishing Plantation Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce and Labor, Statistics for Louisiana, Containing Statistics of Population, Agriculture, Manufactures, and Mining for the State, Parishes, Cities, and Other Divisions, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 568-569.

occurred in distinctly consumptive settings; coffee, alcohol, and sumptuous meals set the scene for debates over the prices of sugar and slaves. The proliferation of coffee houses and fine hotels, in particular, epitomized the city's unique fusion of business and leisure and New Orleanians' impulse to commoditize people of color. In these places, hunger for money and enslaved people manifested itself as a hunger for food and drink. Businessmen exploited the labor and bodies of people of color in order to appease these conjoined appetites. Settings of food production and consumption taught consumers in New Orleans to link people of color and food into a single, consumable unit that could be bought, sold, and devoured.

Compared to New Orleans, "There are few places where human life can be enjoyed with more pleasure, or employed to more pecuniary profit," declared the author of the 1822 city directory.<sup>29</sup> Already the Crescent City was beginning to develop a reputation among the American public as a setting ideal for earning and spending money, frequently in the very same places. "[A]t the dinner-table; between the acts at opera and theatre; in the drawing-room; at the ball or soirée...stocks, cotton, sugar, and money are the liveliest topics," agreed New Yorker A. Oakey Hall in 1851. Quests for pleasure and profit flowed into a single stream of activity. "The evening is the reaction of the day; the prolonging of the money-fever," Hall continued.<sup>30</sup> The literal and conceptual distance between profiting from sugar refining and purchasing a cup of sweetened punch, for example, was uniquely short in the Crescent City as compared to other commercial centers like New York City or Baltimore. As the capital of great empires of sugar and cotton, antebellum New Orleans exerted a centripetal force on the profits it generated.

The city's coffee houses served as one kind of establishment that embodied New Orleans's peculiar union of business, leisure, consumable goods, and consumable people.

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<sup>29</sup> Paxton, *Paxton's Annual Advertiser* (1822), 46.

<sup>30</sup> Hall, *The Manhattaner*, 23-24, 33.



Imported green, or unroasted, coffee beans arrived at the port of New Orleans in massive quantities beginning in the early nineteenth century from plantations in the Caribbean or Brazil.<sup>31</sup> On February 19, 1808, the firm Hillen & Wederstrandt announced in the *Louisiana Gazette*, “Just landed & for sale, about 80,000 lbs. first quality Green COFFEE.”<sup>32</sup> Such an enormous quantity indicated that a healthy market awaited it. While coffee had been growing in popularity throughout the United States in the past few decades, many early New Orleanians hailed from European or Caribbean cultures already steeped in lengthy traditions of coffee consumption. Visitors to nineteenth-century New Orleans found coffee brewed in stronger, smaller servings than elsewhere in the United States, likely a legacy of preferences for the form of coffee favored in places like Haiti, Cuba, and France.<sup>33</sup> In his travel diary, Edward Russell described the coffee that concluded a meal at his boarding house on January 27, 1835, writing, “The last round of dinner is a cup of coffee, of smallest size, but it is pure coffee, no milk.”<sup>34</sup> Both the prevalence and format of coffee consumption in New Orleans reflected the city’s cultural and geographic ties. Sites of coffee consumption served singular roles as well.

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<sup>31</sup> On the history of coffee imports in New Orleans and the city’s distinctive culture of coffee consumption, see “Coffee Trade and Port of New Orleans,” online exhibit, Louisiana State Museum, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.crt.state.la.us/louisiana-state-museum/online-exhibits/coffee-trade-and-port-of-new-orleans/index>. As of 2016, the port of New Orleans still imported more coffee than any other American city. It maintained fourteen warehouses, 5.5 million square feet of storage, six industrial coffee roasters, and the world’s largest coffee silo. “Cargo,” The Port of New Orleans, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://portno.com/cargo>.

<sup>32</sup> “COFFEE,” *Louisiana Gazette*, February 19, 1808.

<sup>33</sup> Women vendors in the nineteenth-century French Market sold coffee by the cup, a treat often enjoyed with *calas*, hot rice fritters. Twentieth-century tourists learned to enjoy coffee with beignets at French Market institutions like Café du Monde and Morning Call. Diluting coffee with chicory and hot milk to make *café au lait* may have enabled locals’ habit of drinking coffee throughout the day, a habit noted by visitors. *Café brûlot*, a hot concoction of coffee, alcohol, spices, and citrus peels, offered a dramatic conclusion to many fine restaurant meals through the twentieth century and yet another way to enjoy coffee in the Crescent City. For more on coffee, see chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>34</sup> Entry dated January 27, 1835, MSS 424.2, Russell travel journal, HNOG.

Antebellum New Orleans's coffee houses functioned as versatile, semi-public spaces for men with prodigious appetites and money to spend.<sup>35</sup> Beginning in August 1806, when the Exchange Coffee House first opened its doors in the center of the French Quarter, the city's coffee houses evolved into meeting places for businessmen to read and share news, drink coffee and alcohol, eat meals, gamble and play billiards and dominoes, board overnight, and bid on a wide variety of goods and people sold at auction.<sup>36</sup> Much more than a simple café, they served as the dining room, barroom, bedroom, and office for an ever-changing population of travelers who were often far from home. The self-declared "Yankee" tourist Joseph Holt Ingraham described, "There are certainly one hundred coffee-houses in this city...and they have, throughout the day, a constant ingress and egress of thirsty, time-killing, news-seeking visiters [*sic*]."<sup>37</sup> Enslaved people, horses, agricultural implements, and land: all went on the auction block in front of crowds tipling coffee or liquor. "Will be sold at the [Exchange] *Coffee House* on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> November, 1807. A set of second hand SUGAR BOILERS," an article noted in the November 6, 1807, edition of the *Gazette*. Then, immediately after, "Will be sold at the *Coffee House* on Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, 1807. A Negro man named NED, and a Mulattoe girl named CELIA."<sup>38</sup> Even if newspaper readers did not participate in these particular auctions, such advertisements, similar to the port's shipping notices, taught New Orleans consumers to

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<sup>35</sup> On the increasingly gendered nature of public and private spaces in nineteenth-century America and the development of liminal, "semi-public" places, see Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); and Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Campanella, "On the Structural Basis of Social Memory: Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade, Part I," *Preservation in Print*; "Exchange Coffee House," *Louisiana Gazette*, August 19, 1806. See also Christine Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies and Grog Shops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Samuel Wilson, Jr., "Maspero's Exchange: Its Predecessors and Successors," *Louisiana History* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 191-220.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West, by a Yankee. In Two Volumes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 115.

<sup>38</sup> "Sheriff's Sale," *Louisiana Gazette*, November 6, 1807.

understand the consumption of food and drink as intrinsic to sales of goods and slaves. Within the coffee house's walls, commercial transactions and social interactions went undistinguished in terms of time or space; business and pleasure blended fully. To some observers, such a multitude of activities verged on chaos.<sup>39</sup>

Yet a number of New Orleans's coffee houses ascribed to a measure of exclusivity and erudition, signaling that even if they did serve punch and other stimulants, the public should understand their function and clientele as more urbane than those of grog shops. In the Americas and Europe, coffee enjoyed a reputation as a beverage that was both pleasing and productive. Coffee "serves as an *intellectual drink*," specified the author of a nineteenth-century treatise on coffee, tea, and chocolate. These three substances stimulated the mind and the palate, he asserted, such that they "have played a very great part in the political, scientific and commercial world."<sup>40</sup>

Whereas European coffee houses of this and earlier eras famously inspired the cerebral work of revolutionaries and great writers, in antebellum New Orleans, coffee fueled commerce.<sup>41</sup> When the Exchange Coffee House changed hands in the fall of 1814, the new owner announced in an advertisement that he intended to make the establishment "really and permanent[ly] useful

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<sup>39</sup> In Ingraham's telling, New Orleans's coffee houses served far more alcohol than coffee. He wrote, "Though their usual denomination is 'coffee-house,' they have no earthly...right to such a distinction." Ingraham noted customers sipping juleps; negus, a warm punch made of port, sugar, and spices; and smoking cigars. Many men read newspapers, "occasionally assisting their comprehension of abstruse paragraphs by hot 'coffee,' alias warm punch and slings." New Orleans natives agreed. "Nobody ever saw anything drunk in these 'coffee houses' except spirits," remarked a Crescent City newspaper reporter in 1852. Ingraham, *The South-West*, 113, 114; *Weekly Delta*, May 29, 1852, as cited in Robert C. Reinders, *End of an Era: New Orleans: 1850-1860* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1964).

<sup>40</sup> Auguste Saint-Arroman, trans., *Coffee, Tea and Chocolate: Their Influence Upon the Health, the Intellect, and the Moral Nature of Man* (Philadelphia: Townsend Ward, 1846), 30, 1.

<sup>41</sup> On the history of European coffee houses, see Brian William Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and Cowan, "New Worlds, New Tastes: Food Fashions After the Renaissance," in *Food: The History of Taste*, ed. Paul Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 197-231.

to commercial gentlemen” by maintaining an upstairs reading room where customers would find “the principal Gazetts [*sic*] in the United States, also charts, maps, and books relating to geography, commerce.” Interested readers were invited to purchase a subscription to the reading room for five dollars, initiating a closed club composed of subscribers and their acquaintances.<sup>42</sup> Catering to a literate, cosmopolitan crowd of discerning appetites, coffee house proprietors attempted to claim a degree of refinement that belied the very crude sale of people occurring under their watch.

Visualizing the speed with which coffee houses multiplied and their resulting density in sectors that also housed major slave yards, cotton presses, and sugar refineries helps anchor antebellum New Orleans’s blend of business and leisure in real space.<sup>43</sup> Data from the 1811, 1822, 1832, and 1842 city directories showed a meteoric spike in the number of coffee houses in the metropolitan center during these decades.

**Table 1.1.** Number of coffee houses listed in antebellum New Orleans directories

Year	Number of Coffee Houses
1811	6
1822	19
1832	57
1842	383

Sources: Whitney, *Whitney’s New-Orleans Directory* (1810); Paxton, *Paxton’s Annual Advertiser* (1822); Percy & Co., *The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser* (1832); and *New Orleans Directory for 1842, Comprising the Names, Residences, and Occupations of the Merchants, Business Men, Professional Gentlemen and Citizens of New Orleans, Lafayette, Algiers and Gretna. Two Volumes in One* (New Orleans: Pitts & Clarke, 1842).

<sup>42</sup> “Exchange Commercial Coffee House,” *L’Ami des Lois*, October 4, 1814.

<sup>43</sup> For the book that will result from this dissertation, I intend to create maps showing the spread of coffee houses in antebellum New Orleans, which will allow for a more effective way to understand the data in the above table.

*Note (Continued):* The directories' count of coffee houses must be understood as approximate. In some cases, conflicting spellings of a proprietor's name caused a single establishment to appear twice in the same edition. Multiple proprietors for one business could also prompt that business to be listed more than once. On the other hand, oversights of other establishments also certainly occurred. The publishers of the 1842 directory admitted, "The various languages spoken in the city, and the impossibility of ascertaining whether all the agents employed in procuring statistics and names in distant parts of the city have done their duty faithfully, open many avenues to mistake and omission." Even with errors, though, these numbers give a good impression of the speed of the spread of coffee houses and their general locations. Introduction, *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

As the city grew, so did its coffee houses. Their proliferation was not random, however. Rather, the proximity of coffee houses to other commercial operations, especially sites of slave sales, demonstrated their importance as commercial institutions themselves. City directories showed an initial cluster in the French Quarter and along the riverfront, close to the original center of town where Latrobe, Castellanos, and others found vendors of oysters, oranges, and other foods. As New Orleans expanded, especially along its upriver crescent, coffee houses followed. The wedge of blocks between Canal and Poydras streets, home to the magnificent St. Charles Hotel beginning in 1837 as well as several slave yards, demonstrated a particularly significant growth in new coffee saloons.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, addresses on Old Levee, New Levee, and Tchoupitoulas streets referenced continuously booming riverfront activity. Other coffee houses opened at sites close to public markets or other prominent commercial establishments.<sup>45</sup> H. Rinne operated a coffee house in 1842 "near the Orleans Cotton Press." In the same year, Joseph Moreu served coffee "below the Louisiana Sugar Refinery."<sup>46</sup> Such sparse directory listings, not even full addresses, assumed that the reader was surely familiar with the noted cotton press and sugar refinery and could use those establishments as orientation to find the nearby, and

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<sup>44</sup> On the increasing consolidation of slave pens in New Orleans, see Campanella, "On the Structural Basis of Social Memory: Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade, Part II," *Preservation in Print*; McInnis, "Mapping the Slave Trade," *Buildings & Landscapes*; and Johnson, *Soul by Soul*.

<sup>45</sup> For example, M. Clifford operated a coffee house at the corner of New Levee near the St. Mary Market in 1832. In 1842, Jean Bisa operated a coffee house situated at the Red Stores, "between the two markets," a reference to the French Market, which had expanded into multiple buildings. Percy & Co., *The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser* (1832); *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

<sup>46</sup> *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

associated, coffee houses. As all four directories indicated, coffee houses were deeply embedded in the commercial geography of antebellum New Orleans.<sup>47</sup> They clustered in constellations around pre-existing business institutions that were all dependent in some degree on the labor of people of color.

Directory listings also alluded to the other kinds of appetites that coffee houses satisfied, aside from those for stocks, slaves, and sugar. Benvenuto Duran and P. Faivre ran coffee houses that doubled as groceries in 1832.<sup>48</sup> In 1842, Richard Murphy's establishment at 94 St. Charles Avenue served as both a "coffee house and *restaurat*," an early spelling of the restaurants first visible in city directories in 1832 and in substantial numbers only in 1842.<sup>49</sup> Multiple coffee houses also offered rooms to boarders. Luc Thevenin named a coffee house as his address in 1842, when his directory listing read, "Enquire at coffee house corner St. Louis St. and Exchange Alley."<sup>50</sup> For many businessmen visiting the Crescent City, a coffee house served as their most stable place of business and rest. Some coffee houses also featured billiard tables, such as those run by Antoine Lafaye at 45 Orleans Avenue, in the French Quarter, in 1832; and Ysidro Quadras, just a few blocks away at the corner of Chartres and St. Peter, in 1842.<sup>51</sup> As directory listings indicated, coffee houses served locals and visitors seeking to read the news of faraway places, bid on auction sales, eat and drink, or relax. Perhaps the only constant feature of these

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<sup>47</sup> For additional descriptions of antebellum New Orleans's commercial sectors, see Upton, *Another City*, and Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 243-253.

<sup>48</sup> Percy & Co., *The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser* (1832).

<sup>49</sup> The 1832 city directory listed one restaurant, a "French restaurant" operated by Cheri Bessy at 73 Chartres. By 1842, the directory listed thirty-three restaurants, as well as many taverns, boarding houses, hotels, and other places for eating and drinking; Percy & Co., *The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser* (1832), *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

<sup>50</sup> *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

<sup>51</sup> Percy & Co., *The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser* (1832), *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

establishments was that they existed for the needs of businessmen. Even if men of color worked as waiters or even the proprietors of these businesses, white men served almost exclusively as the patrons of antebellum coffee houses.<sup>52</sup>

For this reason, the growth and density of coffee houses throughout antebellum New Orleans can be understood as a visual marker of the expansion of commercial and entertainment sectors that promoted white men as consumers and workers of color as producers.<sup>53</sup> Coffee houses catered to businessmen who were largely involved in the sugar, cotton, and slave-trading industries. Thus, as establishments that hosted slave sales, served food and drink that relied on the labor of enslaved people for their production, and catered to the needs of businessmen involved in the New Orleans economy, coffee houses were instrumental in building an antebellum city that exploited enslaved people, directly and indirectly.

In addition to coffee houses, the city's fine hotels served as another important setting in which the sale of people and food coincided in New Orleans, though at a much grander scale. Coffee houses and hotels existed in a symbiotic relationship as they anchored districts of the city where businessmen worked and played. New Orleans's 1842 directory described an establishment owned by Peter Clausen as a "coffee house and ten pin alley, opposite the St. Charles theatre," thereby locating it on St. Charles Avenue between Poydras and Gravier Streets,

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<sup>52</sup> When antebellum directories listed women in commercial roles, they appeared most often as washerwomen or at the helm of boarding houses. Of sixteen boarding houses in New Orleans in 1811, five were managed by women. Of forty-four boarding houses in New Orleans in 1832, at least seventeen were run by women. Yet directories also listed women managing cook shops and working as confectioners, tavern keepers, cigar makers, sugar makers, and mantua makers, evidence of New Orleans's continuing sartorial connections to Europe. Whitney, *Whitney's New-Orleans Directory* (1810); Paxton, *Paxton's Annual Advertiser* (1822); Percy & Co., *The New-Orleans Annual Advertiser* (1832); and *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

<sup>53</sup> Many free people of color in antebellum New Orleans owned slaves. The degree to which they participated in slave auctions in a variety of public and private sites is unclear, however. See Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Johnson, *Soul by Soul*.

within a stone's throw of the St. Charles Hotel.<sup>54</sup> Nine years later, A. Oakey Hall wrote of the same stretch of street, "I can never forget those marvelous two blocks upon St. Charles street, running from the great hotel towards Lafayette Square." They were "redolent of oysters and lunches, juleps and punches... [and] filled with the echoes of falling tenpins and clicking billiard balls," he reminisced.<sup>55</sup> Such gustatory and auditory memories would seem to characterize these blocks between the coffee house and the hotel as more of an amusement park than the metropolis's most important business district and the epicenter of New Orleans slave sales. In this consumable city, though, such distinctions were of little importance.

In mid-nineteenth-century America, hotels functioned as economic, cultural, and culinary institutions that pitted cities against each other in contests of wealth and refinement.<sup>56</sup> In years when metropolitan boosters compared population statistics and other financial metrics, such as import and export figures, hotels stood as symbols of a city's current and future promise.<sup>57</sup> Astor House and the St. Nicholas Hotel in New York City, Tremont House and Revere House in Boston, and Tremont House in Chicago (named in honor of the Boston establishment) defined the standards of elegant leisure activity for a nation whose richest residents were only beginning to consume conspicuously. Southern and western hotels, such as the St. Charles and St. Louis

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<sup>54</sup> *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

<sup>55</sup> Hall, *The Manhattaner*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Visiting New Orleans in the 1830s, Joseph Holt Ingraham compulsively compared the Crescent City's Bishop's hotel, where he stayed, to others he had experienced, writing, "The Tremont [in Boston] possesses more architectural elegance; and Barnum's, the pride of Baltimore, is a handsomer structure." New Orleans's Bishop distinguished itself with its barroom, Ingraham decided, which was "universally allowed to be the most splendid in America." In this work, Ingraham claimed to have invented the nickname "Crescent City" for New Orleans. Ingraham, *The South-West*, 182; 91.

<sup>57</sup> On competition among nineteenth-century American cities, especially in the realm of population growth, see Eli Cook, "The Pricing of Progress: Economic Indicators and the Capitalization of American Life" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013), 103-143. On the history of American hotels, see A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).



Hotels in New Orleans and the Baldwin Hotel in San Francisco, also competed for adulation and profits from customers who traveled increasingly often for business and pleasure.

Projecting a sophisticated and successful image was especially important for hotels in the antebellum South during years when the sectional crisis deepened and northerners became evermore critical of the very uncivilized slave trade that continued to flourish there. Accordingly, New Orleans hotels rose in a familiar neoclassical style that made them look very much like their sister establishments in northern cities and even seats of national power such as the United States Capitol (*fig. 1.1*). For example, a visitor to the St. Charles Hotel in 1845 marveled at the structure's trademark "dome, of beautiful proportions...forty-six feet in diameter, [it] surmounts the octagon building, elevated upon an order of fluted columns." Series of Corinthian columns provided a grandiose frame for the men's dining room and saloon, which hosted auctions, drinking, and socializing, and Ionic columns ringed the lavish "octangular" [*sic*] barroom.<sup>58</sup> Altogether, the hotel's dome, columns, and symmetrical façade gave the establishment an air of grandeur and order that was universally recognizable to the city's residents and visitors.

Lewis Webb, a young man from Rockingham, North Carolina, who worked as a clerk in a New Orleans mercantile firm, alluded to such architectural features and their corresponding cultural significance when he wrote in his diary about the 1853 grand reopening of the St. Charles, rebuilt after an 1851 fire. "It is by far the most elegant hotel I ever saw," Webb raved. "The exterior appearance of the building is beautiful in style & architecture [*sic*] – with

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<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Moore Norman, *Norman's New Orleans and Environs: Containing a brief historical sketch of the territory and state of Louisiana, and the city of New Orleans, from the earliest period to the present time: presenting a complete guide to all subjects of general interest in the southern metropolis; with a correct and improved plan of the city, pictorial illustrations of public buildings, etc.* (New Orleans: B.M. Norman, 1845), 139.



Figure 1.1. In antebellum America, neoclassical forms – such as those visible in the United States Capitol, pictured in the 1846 daguerreotype, above – constituted a common architectural language of sophistication and refinement. Similar forms bore disparate results when experienced in southern hotels – such as the St. Louis Hotel in New Orleans, below – where enslaved people were sold. John Plumbe, United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., east front elevation, ca. 1846, Daguerreotype collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as LOC).

the most perfect & harmonious proportions....and the interior arrangement is on a style more magnificent & elegant – than any hotel in the U.S. I spent more than an hour looking at this palace hotel.”<sup>59</sup> Webb’s emphasis indicated the dramatic impression that the building had made on him. The structure’s design communicated to expert and non-expert viewers alike that the St. Charles and the city it stood for participated in economic and cultural contests of national proportions. New Orleans’s grand hotels stood as castles of consumption – though only for some.

Familiar architectural forms had significantly different consequences when experienced in the Crescent City as opposed to Manhattan or Washington. Significantly, in the accounts of

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<sup>59</sup> January 24, 1853, Record Group 49: L.H. Webb Diaries, 1853 (hereafter cited as Webb), Louisiana State Museum (hereafter cited as LSM).

many visitors, the grand scale and luxurious details of New Orleans's fine hotels helped imbue the activities that occurred within them – namely, slave auctions and dining – with an air of refinement.<sup>60</sup> That consumers could enjoy the spaces where slave sales occurred exposed a fundamentally corrupted quality to the antebellum New Orleans economy and leisure world that distinguished them from similar experiences in other American cities. In 1851, a northerner described New Orleans's St. Louis Hotel, a rival of the St. Charles, as “aristocratic... [It] possesses quite the air of an Italian ducal palace.” Yet like no ducal palace that could be visited in Venice, he admitted, the great rotunda of the St. Louis resounded with “echoes and marble pavements surrendered to groaning deputy sheriffs and ranting auctioneers,” who sold people, land, and goods.<sup>61</sup> To slave buyers, the hotel's palatial spaces elevated their work, rendering it purportedly noble and important. To critical observers, such as abolitionists, however, the contrast between the grand room and its very base purpose appeared horribly dissonant.

Photographs taken before and during the 1916 demolition of the St. Louis Hotel showed a lofty space reminiscent of the Roman Pantheon, though details of the building's construction pointed to applications specific to New Orleans. In the hotel's rotunda, enslaved people once stood for sale on blocks against the wall, elevated above sightseers and potential buyers who observed them from the floor. British abolitionist Ebenezer Davies described one auction that he witnessed there in the 1840s as transpiring amidst a “terrible din,” in which auctioneers called out the attributes of people offered for sale in a constant stream of French and English. One auctioneer announced the sale of a twenty-five-year-old enslaved man named John, “an excellent

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<sup>60</sup> On the potential for architectural spaces, including the dining or tea table, to order social experiences, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Rodris Roth, “Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage,” in *Material Life in America, 1600-1800*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 439-462; and Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

<sup>61</sup> Hall, *The Manhattaner*, 17.

French and American cook – *excellent cuisinier Français et Américain*,” and began the bidding at 600 dollars. Robert Murphy purchased John for 775 dollars, as well as Silas, a fifteen-year-old house servant, for 670 dollars, and Scipio, a twenty-four-year-old man and “excellent cook, fully warranted in every respect,” for 705 dollars. To this horrified observer, the men and women on the block displayed a range of apparent emotional reactions to their state. Twenty-seven-year-old George “kept his eyes fixed upon the dome, as if he felt above looking down on the groveling creatures beneath him,” Davies recorded. Others scrutinized the clock on the opposite wall, some fought to control tears, and still others smiled appealingly.<sup>62</sup> Such varied attitudes and emotions repudiated the attempts of sellers and buyers to treat these men and women as pure commodities.<sup>63</sup>

Yet the space in which they stood worked against any inclination to humanize them. As enslaved men and women stood on the block at the St. Louis, they appeared framed by the columns on their right and left. (*fig. 1.2*) Such a setting attempted to characterize the people as living *objets d’art*, more thing than human, and confirmed their costly status as agricultural and domestic commodities.<sup>64</sup> Paradoxically, then, the hotel’s refined architectural elements contributed to the very base dehumanization of slaves in observers’ eyes. Though A. Oakey Hall,

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<sup>62</sup> Prior to the sale, Davies found “about 200 gentlemen, – some drinking, some eating, some smoking, some reading, some talking,” in the hotel’s saloon. From these leisurely activities they proceeded directly into the adjoining rotunda, where they bid on an assortment of people for sale. Ebenezer Davies, *American Scenes, and Christian Slavery: A Recent Tour of Four Thousand Miles in the United States* (London: John Snow, 1849), 58. For detailed descriptions of other sales, see Davies, *American Scenes*, 49-65.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson argues that enslaved people often exerted influence over their sale with tools as subtle as modifications to their demeanor and body language. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 20.

<sup>64</sup> In the 1830s, Ingraham exhibited just such an attitude toward a seventeen-year-old enslaved boy who had been ordered to assist him during his visit to New Orleans. Ingraham wrote, “A statue of dazzling ebony, by name Antoine, to which the slightest look or word will give instant animation, stands in the centre of the room, contrasting beautifully in colour with the buff paper-hangings and crimson curtains. He is a slave.” Ingraham related to Antoine as an aesthetic object, whose skin color purportedly complemented the tones of the room’s curtains, and who could be called into action at will. Ingraham, *The South-West*, 88.

a northerner, remained silent on the subject of slavery in his essays on New Orleans, he judged the St. Louis rotunda a “gloomy looking place” even during the hotel’s heyday, long before holes punched through the dome and the room’s molding fell in chunks to the floor.<sup>65</sup>



Figure 1.2. These two photographs depicted one of several auction blocks where enslaved people were forced to stand for sale in the St. Louis Hotel. The grand columns of the hotel’s rotunda framed the slaves offered for auction as living *objets d’art*, rather than mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers. The 1852 city directory described Barnett & Brother, the company to which this block belonged, as “auctioneers...sales daily at 10 a.m. of dry goods, clothing, furniture, &c., Out door, real estate, slaves, and all other sales attended to.” In 1852, as a half-century earlier, New Orleanians traded objects, land, and people in the same transactions. Bennett Dowler, *Cohen’s New Orleans and Lafayette Directory: Including Carrollton, Algiers, Gretna, and McDonogh, for 1852* (New Orleans: Office of the *Daily Delta*, 1852); Detroit Publishing Co., New Orleans, La., old slave block in St. Louis Hotel, ca. 1900-1910; and Detroit Publishing Co., Old slave block in St. Louis Hotel, New Orleans, La., 1906, Detroit Publishing Company Photography Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, LOC.

<sup>65</sup> Hall, *The Manhattaner*, 17.



Figure 1.2 (Continued).

Nevertheless, even Hall could not fail to be impressed by the lusty appetites for food, drink, and money cultivated by the patrons of such places. In Hall's telling, visitors at the St. Charles Hotel experienced the structure's grand architecture in a very different way than did the enslaved people standing on the auction block at the St. Louis. At the St. Charles, also a major site of slave auctions, Hall found "hundreds of steady, conscientious lovers of lunches and liquors...clustering by pillar and column in social merriment."<sup>66</sup> Corinthian columns that marked the sale of one human stood as symbols of leisure for another. From late fall to early spring, the luxurious spaces of the St. Charles filled with traveling businessmen who used the building as a

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

place of business, relaxation, and consumption. Lewis Webb, the clerk from North Carolina, remarked in his diary, “The rotunda of the St. Charles at night...is more like a stock and merchant exchange than the office of a hotel.” Webb frequented the hotel’s reading rooms, where he surveyed the nation’s newspapers next to the fireplace. He could not always afford to keep his own fireplace burning in his boarding house room and thus the St. Charles functioned as a surrogate office and drawing room.<sup>67</sup> Still, as a devout teetotaler and penny pincher, Webb hung outside the orbit of the hotel’s primary delight: the meals that fed businessmen.

Whereas the architectural components of New Orleans hotels conveyed impressions of sophistication and wealth, they also demonstrated quite explicitly the central importance of the dining experience for the men who passed through their doors. Before freestanding restaurants became popular later in the century, hotels served sumptuous meals that allowed for early displays of dining etiquette among a public whose upper crust was rapidly pulling away from those below. From Boston to New York City to Chicago to New Orleans, hotel dining rooms featured lengthy menus that changed daily. Their offerings celebrated regional specialties, such as canvasback duck in the Northeast, and flaunted recent technological advances, like the availability of ice to serve in water glasses.<sup>68</sup> In New Orleans’s “first” St. Charles Hotel, the structure that stood from 1837 until the hotel’s first fire in 1851, men dined in a room 129 feet long by 50 feet wide by 22 feet high.<sup>69</sup> The men’s dining and sitting rooms alone stretched almost an entire city block, filling the side of the building that faced Gravier street,

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<sup>67</sup> Entry dated January 24, 1853, as well as assorted entries, Webb, LSM.

<sup>68</sup> On mid-nineteenth-century fine dining in hotels, see Paul Freedman, “American Restaurants and Cuisine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *New England Quarterly* 84 (March 2011): 5-59.

<sup>69</sup> Norman, *Norman’s New Orleans*, 140. After its first fire, the St. Charles Hotel reopened in 1853. A second fire, which began in the structure’s kitchen, again razed the building, in 1894. The hotel’s third iteration opened in 1896 and was finally razed in 1974. For concise histories of the St. Louis and St. Charles hotels, see Richard Campanella, “The St. Louis and the St. Charles: New Orleans’ Legacy of Showcase Exchange Hotels,” *Preservation in Print* (April 2015), 16-17.

communicating the central, symbolic importance of the meal to the work of trading sugar, cotton, and slaves. In contrast, ladies dined in a room less than a third of the size, measuring 52 by 36 feet, reflecting the far lesser degree to which they stayed and ate at the St. Charles. Similar to coffee houses, antebellum New Orleans hotels served a population that was virtually entirely male.<sup>70</sup>

Eugene Davis, a Virginian who spent time in the Crescent City in February 1847, recorded the tantalizing delights that drew businessmen to the St. Charles's huge dining room. "I believe I had rather see this St. Charles Hotel than any other single house I ever saw," he declared in a letter. "The spiral staircase descends from the top of the building, like a big corkscrew, right plump into the centre of the rotunda." Davis's description cast the hotel, buzzing with the energy and appetites of the men who filled it, as a corked bottle of Champagne. Appropriately, he continued, "Some of the meats at table are always boiled in Champaign. – And the molasses...is manufactured expressly for this table. It is the essence of the finest loaf sugar – of which there is a copious deposit at the bottom of the jar."<sup>71</sup> In his letter, Davis's excitement for the grand hotel traveled both literally and figuratively from the rotunda's peak downward to

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<sup>70</sup> Many antebellum hotels and boarding houses did not accept female guests. In 1836, the editor of the *Natchez Courier* complained of New Orleans's Bishop's Hotel, "We found...carpetless and muddy stairs...dust, covering every object upon which you lay your hand...the whole shewing the place to be what it is – destitute of female influence." Still, businessmen did sometimes bring their wives with them to New Orleans. The brief nature of the stay and the city's lively atmosphere allowed some women to feel like they were escaping the social constraints typical of their status. In 1856 Lillian Foster wrote of her time in the St. Charles Hotel, "In home circles in large cities, a kind of conventional barrier is erected around a fashionable woman...but where everybody comes and goes in a month, and memory will not stoop to record the flirtings and coquettings of the hours, there is no time to build up these artificial fences....The drawing-rooms and the broad halls of the hotel become an unobstructed area for the display of every whim or caprice born in a pretty woman's brain, like bubbles in the bright champagne." Editor of the *Natchez Courier*, "The City of New Orleans," printed in the *Boston Weekly Messenger*, July 28, 1836, 4; Norman, *Norman's New Orleans*, 140; Lillian Foster, *Wayside Glimpses, North and South* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 154; also cited in Reinders, *End of an Era*, 153. See also Marise Bachand, "A Season in Town: Plantation Women and the Urban South, 1790-1877" (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Eugene Davis, February 4, 1847, "Two Letters from New Orleans," unpublished booklet, May 6, 1947, Vertical Files; Descriptions, New Orleans, 1803-1859; Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC).



the delights of the dinner table spread before him. Tangible residues of the city's wealth took edible form at the St. Charles, in the boiled-down Champagne that flavored dishes and the crystalline remnants of Louisiana sugarcane visible in a molasses jar. As Davis's letter made clear, the St. Charles offered an overabundance of consumable riches made possible entirely by the labor of enslaved people, whether on the sugarcane plantation, in the hotel kitchen, or in its dining room.<sup>72</sup>

A menu from the Gentlemen's Ordinary of the St. Charles confirmed Davis's characterization of the dining table as an altar at which businessmen worshipped New Orleans's culture and consumed the fruits of others' labors. Although early summer was low season for the St. Charles, well into the time of year when yellow fever had scared droves of businessmen home, the daily bill of fare for June 14, 1848, featured no less than seven separate courses.<sup>73</sup> "The dishes...were almost numberless," a visitor recalled of the St. Charles's culinary offerings, "and the bill of fare...bore resemblance to a miniature gazette."<sup>74</sup> Speaking the somewhat pompous, extravagant language of nineteenth-century American fine dining, this menu would

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<sup>72</sup> While people of color surely prepared the grand meals consumed in hotel dining rooms, they also served the meals – or not – depending on the pleasure of the patron. Dining at New Orleans's Bishop's Hotel in the 1830s, Ingraham drew equal pleasure from the delicious foods on the table and the experience of being served by enslaved people. "The table is burthened with every luxury which can be procured in this luxurious climate," he explained. "The servants are numerous, and with but two or three exceptions, slaves.... In this important point, Bishop's hotel is every way superior to the Tremont [in Boston]." In contrast, an advertisement in the 1842 city directory for the recently opened National Hotel specified, "The servants are all white, and have been carefully selected with reference to their capacity, honesty and civil deportment." Such a statement indicated a growing association between skin tone and assumptions of moral character. Ingraham, *The South-West*, 182-183; Advertisement for the National Hotel, inside cover, *New Orleans Directory for 1842* (1842).

<sup>73</sup> Bill of Fare, Gentlemen's Ordinary, St. Charles Hotel, Wednesday, June 14, 1848, Box 1, Folder 2: St. Charles Hotel, Bill of Fare, June 14, 1848, MSS 411 New Orleans Hotel Collection (hereafter cited as Bill of Fare), HNOC.

<sup>74</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Cunyghame, *A Glimpse at the Great Western Republic* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), 217.

have been largely legible to a customer hailing from New York City or Chicago. The bill of fare, similar to the hotel's architecture, aspired to a generic national standard of refinement.<sup>75</sup>

From this mid-June menu, diners chose from a set of dishes that referenced New Orleans's vast trade networks, America's contemporary fascination with French cuisine, and a sampling of foods indigenous to the region. Boiled Buffalo Tongue and Fulton Market Beef pointed to origins west and north, whereas the shrimp of "*Crevettes au naturel*," sweet potatoes, rice, snap beans, and oca [*sic*] surely came from local waters and soils. Entrées such as "*Escalopes de Veau sautés aux champignons*," scalloped veal sautéed with mushrooms, and "*Poitrine de Mouton à la jardinière*," or mutton breast with garden vegetables, conveyed a Continental sophistication to diners who could read, or pretended to read, culinary French. The oranges, pineapples, and bananas featured on the dessert menu, as well as the Madeira, Sherry, Port, and Hock offered as wines, trumpeted the kitchen's access to the nearby port, though such items would have appeared on fine New York or Boston menus too. Only the note that alerted diners to the closing times of the Eastern, Coast, and Lake Mails, as well as the appearance of "*beignet soufflés*" [*sic*], a fried treat popularized by African-born street vendors, tagged this as a menu distinctly of nineteenth-century New Orleans, where businessmen linked to all corners of the nation sat down together to eat.<sup>76</sup>

Shortly before the first St. Charles Hotel building burned in 1851, A. Oakey Hall recorded the atmosphere of the kind of meals described by Eugene Davis in 1847 and the bill of fare in 1848, where businessmen appeared frantic to satisfy insatiable appetites. "The door opens. A hum of voices and a clash of knives and forks and spoons salute you stunningly. What is the occasion? A gala day? A public dinner?" he teased his reader. "Nothing but the

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<sup>75</sup> See Freedman, "American Restaurants and Cuisine."

<sup>76</sup> Bill of Fare, HNOG.

gentlemen's *ordinary* of the hotel!" This crowd of hundreds, employed to buy and sell sugar, cotton, and people, "appear[ed] and disappear[ed] day by day, relentlessly eating and drinking." These were the same men whom Hall observed discussing business at the opera or theater. Their infection with what he termed the "money-fever" drove their behavior at the dinner table too, where they ate and drank without pause. Hall marveled at "those fresh from the gombo soup, and the ham, and the punch and julep, rushing back again, unable to be tormented by the mere looking on." Antebellum New Orleans derived its hedonistic reputation from consumptive experiences of excess, whether in the context of the planter trapped in a cycle of buying slaves, selling cotton, and buying slaves, as described to Edward Russell in 1835, or the diner who felt a magnetic compulsion to devour the city's cuisine a decade later. "I tremble to think of the juleps, and punches, and nogs, and soups, and plates of fish, and game, and beef and loaves of bread," Hall confessed.<sup>77</sup> Whether with yellow fever, money-fever, appetite, or thirst, antebellum New Orleans left no visitor unaffected. Intrinsic to the satisfaction of the many appetites that plagued the antebellum city was the sale, forced labor, and culinary expertise of people of color.

Altogether, antebellum New Orleans's coffee houses and fine hotels served complementary, crucial roles in the elaboration of this southern metropolis as a consumable city. Settings of food production and consumption erased the line dividing business and leisure pursuits. Simultaneously, they hosted the clearest examples of New Orleans's singular slippage between person and thing. Buying and selling sugar, consuming molasses, and bidding on enslaved people who would make sugar – all in the same spaces, virtually simultaneously – forced a deeply destructive, totalizing association between people of color and food. To the planters and businessmen who filled New Orleans's saloons and dining rooms, all components of that economic calculation appeared manipulable. Whereas the informal nature and prevalence of

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<sup>77</sup> Hall, *The Manhattaner*, 11-12, 10.

coffee houses made slave sales feel perversely casual, the sumptuous spaces of New Orleans's fine hotels tried to render slave auctions perversely dignified. In each setting, the conjoined sales of people and food were inextricably linked. Understanding how free and enslaved people moved within New Orleans's commercial geography illuminates further the attempted complete commoditization of people of color and the potential that such an attitude allowed for resistance.

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### **III. Mobility and Immobility: Defining the American Color Line**

The antebellum New Orleans economy flourished and associations between people of color and the food industry persisted because of the perpetual circulation of people and goods within the city. The Crescent City's wealth relied on a simple element: the freedom of movement of ships arriving at and departing from the port, as well as the constant mobility of planters, traders, businessmen, and the enslaved people who enriched them. To a national readership, white businessmen appeared to be the most mobile population within antebellum New Orleans, arriving in the fall and departing in the spring. Yet city records reveal the extent to which people of color were in motion as well. Authorities tracked people of color in transit because they perceived them to be essentially valuable commodities, too, akin to the sugar and coffee that passed through the port. Documents that charted the histories of people of color who moved within, to, and from New Orleans, many of them enrolled in the work of the food industry, offer insight onto a much larger subject: the lived experiences of freedom and bondage in the early-nineteenth-century Caribbean world. They show the extent to which freedom in antebellum New Orleans was itself a fragile, movable condition.

As descriptions of the Gentlemen's Ordinary at the St. Charles Hotel showed, the dining room resounded with the sounds of silverware on plates and business transactions in progress

during only part of the year. By late summer, “when Yellow Jack comes into town,” a writer described, “The room echoes to the tread of some score or so, whom death nor disease can frighten from the worship of the appetite.”<sup>78</sup> This fluctuation attributed a definite social and economic power to white male businessmen, who fled the city in the summer months to escape not just the humidity but also the threat of epidemic. Between 1817 and 1905, yellow fever killed more than 41,000 people in New Orleans, with especially major outbreaks occurring in 1819 (relative to the size of the population), 1853, 1854, and 1855.<sup>79</sup> On May 18, 1853, the clerk Lewis Webb noted in his diary, “This afternoon as I stood in the door [of my shop] crowds in carriages and on foot were hurrying to the Louisville & Cincinnati packets to take their departure....Hundreds are leaving by every boat.” Webb could not yet know that the approaching outbreak would kill 7,849 people in the city, more than in any other year, ever.<sup>80</sup> Businessmen’s wealth thus allowed them the freedom to travel to New Orleans during months that would profit them and the freedom to leave when their health might be endangered. Such a possibility was far from true for the city’s poorer residents, white or black.

This pattern of businessmen’s migrations to and from New Orleans had been true for decades, to the extent that the broader American public came to understand the Crescent City as a seasonal destination and a city of men. Directories throughout the antebellum era noted the difficulty of providing an accurate measurement of New Orleans’s population since the number

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<sup>78</sup> Hall, *The Manhattaner*, 10-11.

<sup>79</sup> These statistics are drawn from George Augustin, *History of Yellow Fever* (New Orleans: Searcy & Pfaff, 1909), as cited in “Yellow Fever Deaths in New Orleans, 1817-1905,” Louisiana Division, NOPL, accessed January 16, 2016, <http://nutrias.org/facts/feverdeaths.htm>. See also Benjamin H. Trask, *Fearful Ravages: Yellow Fever in New Orleans, 1796-1905* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2005); New Orleans Sanitary Commission, “Report of the Sanitary Commission of New Orleans on the Epidemic Yellow Fever of 1853” (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1854); and Erasmus Darwin Fenner, *History of the Epidemic Yellow Fever at New Orleans, La., in 1853* (New York: Hall, Clayton, 1854).

<sup>80</sup> Entry dated May 18, 1853, Webb, LSM.

of inhabitants swung so severely between seasons. During cool months, “Strangers from every part of the union flock into the city, like birds of passage, to pass the winter and away again in the spring,” explained the authors of the 1822 city directory.<sup>81</sup> Two decades later, the trend persisted. In 1845, a writer described white businessmen in New Orleans as “migratory citizens, who live at the hotels and boarding houses, [and] embrace nearly...one half the business men of the city.”<sup>82</sup> Such a portrayal cast visiting white traders, brokers, and planters as the most active, economically important inhabitants of New Orleans. While they were present, the metropolis’s hotels, coffee houses, theaters, and billiard halls thrived.

These men came to town largely to buy and sell enslaved people and the commodities that they produced. For this reason, the fall and winter months became the optimal time of year for slave auctions, too. Traders forced enslaved men, women, and children by the thousands to trek from points east and north – especially Virginia, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky – to the slave pens and auction halls of New Orleans.<sup>83</sup> Thus, white businessmen and black slaves traveled parallel tracks to and through the city during the year’s cool months, though for divergent ends. Similar to how hotels functioned as sites of pleasure for wealthy patrons and settings of horror for enslaved people changing hands, so too did New Orleans’s business season hold very different meanings for planters and slaves. The free mobility of wealthy businessmen

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<sup>81</sup> Paxton, *Paxton’s Annual Advertiser* (1822), 42.

<sup>82</sup> More specifically, Norman estimated, “Of the one hundred and thirty thousand souls, who now occupy this capital, about twenty thousand may be estimated as migratory. These are principally males, engaged in the various departments of business.” Norman, *Norman’s New Orleans*, 76.

<sup>83</sup> The physically excruciating nature of sugarcane production, in particular, prompted extraordinary demand in Louisiana for sturdy male slaves, such that the enslaved population developed demographics different from those of other slaveholding states. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 64-71. See also Baptist, *The Half That Has Never Been Told*; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*; Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle*; and Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce*.

was the means by which they achieved prosperity, whereas the forced mobility of enslaved people defined the state of their bondage.<sup>84</sup>

As demonstrated by the high walls and locked doors of the city's slave yards, New Orleans citizens perceived the mobility of people of color as a capacity to be feared and constrained. Freedom of movement represented the opposite of a state of enslavement, of course, and so running away constituted the most essential affront to slaveholders. Enslaved people in antebellum Louisiana did run away, and even rebelled violently, but in addition to those literal acts they claimed mobility in more figurative ways as well.<sup>85</sup> On March 19, 1808, John W. Gurley posted a notice in *Le Moniteur* that his slave, Charles, a "mulatto" man, had run away on March 3. "He is around 25 years old, about 5 feet 10 inches, [and] is well proportioned," Gurley described. Charles possessed a number of qualities, according to Gurley, that made his flight all the more menacing. He "speaks French & English; is alert & intelligent, & will invent all kinds of stories to encourage his escape," Gurley noted. Charles had fled on one of his horses and as he rode further away from his slaveholder, he spread the falsehood that Gurley had died and one of his friends had sent Charles on "important business" on behalf of Gurley's estate.<sup>86</sup> In Gurley's

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<sup>84</sup> White women remained far more isolated from daily urban life in antebellum New Orleans than white men or men and women of color. In 1840s New Orleans, Ripley recalled, "There were no restaurants, no lunch counters, no tea rooms, and...no woman's exchange, no place in the whole city where a lady could drop in, after all this round of shopping, take a comfortable seat and order even a sandwich, or any kind of refreshment....No doubt there were myriads of cabarets and eating places for men on pleasure or business bent." Ripley, *Social Life*, 62-63.

<sup>85</sup> On the multiple forms of resistance of enslaved people before the Civil War and free people of color after the Civil War, see Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>86</sup> Abolitionist Ebenezer Davies was horrified by the prevalence of advertisements describing runaway slaves that he found in the 1840s New Orleans newspapers, writing, "Runaway slaves seems to be constantly advertised....Human chattels assuming their natural right to go where they please are advertised with a woodcut representing them as bending forward in the act of running...a pitiable figure!" Marcus Wood argues that runaway ads can be read as abbreviated, urgent autobiographies – "a grim, minimal, and deeply moving set of micro narratives articulating the price of freedom" – authored by the many who were unable to publish their stories in fuller form. Davies, *American Scenes*, 11; Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation*

telling, Charles threatened slaveholding society by claiming a multilayered mobility. Charles had absconded from Gurley's home, on a horse no less, but his fluency in two languages, his intelligence, and his readiness to offer detailed, credible tales made him especially apt to slip from enslavement into freedom. Only the capacity to shift between races and pass as white, as did many enslaved people with light skin tones, could have increased Charles's perceived threat.<sup>87</sup> Although physically bound to a plantation or home, enslaved people in Louisiana and many other states used linguistic, intellectual, and racial mobilities to their advantage whenever they could.

Unlike Charles, many free and enslaved people of color in antebellum Louisiana experienced a certain degree of lawful mobility for purposes related to their labors, especially if they were involved in the work of food production or sale. Yet even this limited movement caused fear among white observers and prompted meticulous surveillance. Food vendors counted among the most mobile workers of color in the antebellum era, as they traveled throughout rural and urban regions to procure and sell goods.<sup>88</sup> To one reader of the *Louisiana Gazette* in the fall of 1808, the constant mobility of enslaved food vendors called for suspicion. "The communication that is kept up, by means of these miserable and clandestine itinerant merchants, betwixt the slaves in the country and the slaves in town is perhaps little known, or less thought of," the reader warned in a letter to the editor. "It may, however, be worthy of some

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(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 133-134; my translation, "60 Pst. De Récompense," *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, March 19, 1808.

<sup>87</sup> Such was the case for Tom, a "mulatto man...born in Virginia, about five feet ten inches high...stout and well-formed," who ran away from Christopher Adams's Opelousas plantation in July 1815. A "smart sensible fellow," Tom "will no doubt endeavour to pass for a white man," Adams speculated. "From his complexion he might be taken for a white man, if his hair, which is of a whitish color and perfectly nappy, did not betray the negro." "50 Dollars Reward," *Louisiana Gazette*, July 11, 1815. On the history of passing, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>88</sup> See Harris, "'I'm Talkin' 'Bout the Food I Sells'"; and Usner, Jr., "Food Marketing and Interethnic Exchange."



consideration.”<sup>89</sup> The prospect that the bearers of coffee and *calas* could function as avenues of communication between enslaved people in disparate locations provoked intense alarm. Forced immobility on plantations or in homes kept enslaved people isolated from each other and from the news or ideas that newcomers could bring.

Despite slaveholders’ efforts to keep slaves stationary or at least secluded, the Crescent City’s geographic position as a major port meant that even enslaved New Orleanians of color traveled more often than did slaves in many other American places. Compulsive attempts by slave owners and municipal authorities to regulate black bodies in motion – similar to the ways in which they recorded the barrels of coffee and casks of Madeira flowing in and out of the city – bore an unexpected result. Bureaucratic recordkeeping efforts during the early antebellum era chronicled important, and rare, biographical data of a population frequently treated by New Orleans society as largely anonymous. Often illiterate and foreign-born, enslaved and free people of color entered the written historical record via these documents intended to control them.

From 1818 to 1831, the New Orleans mayor’s office issued passports to all free and enslaved people of color who departed from the city. These records took the form of a handwritten register in which a bureaucrat listed the names of slave owners, free people of color, and slaves, the ship on which they would travel, its captain, and their intended destination. In addition, the writer recorded a host of descriptive information that could be used to identify the person of color in question. These included the individual’s name, age, height, skin color, identifying marks like scars, moles, and tattoos; and deformities or injuries. The passports contained a curious paradox; although they existed for the basic purpose of constricting or controlling the travel of people of color, they confirmed the degree to which they were in fact highly mobile.

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<sup>89</sup> Letter to the editor, *Louisiana Gazette*, November 29, 1808.

While at surface level a simple catalogue of physical characteristics, the passports also revealed substantial details of the person's life, offering evidence of abduction and forced migration as well as episodes of physical and sexual violence. For example, a passport issued to Charles Pelletier on December 9, 1819, to board the sloop *Commodore Patterson*, bound for the Port of Havana, pointed to a wide range of birthplaces for the four enslaved men who accompanied him. In addition to Songy, twenty-five, and Toussaint, thirty-four and born in New Orleans, Pelletier traveled with Peter, a twenty-seven-year-old man "having numerous small cuts on the breast, mark of the Congo nation," and Antonio, "bearing on each temple three cuts, mark of the Mandingo nation."<sup>90</sup> A passport issued on April 14, 1820, to a Madame Favre described the enslaved man who accompanied her to Matanza and Havana, Cuba, as "Castor a negro...of 45 years 5 feet 3 ¾ inches high red complexion and of the Hibo nation."<sup>91</sup> These listings portrayed enslaved people who hailed from vastly disparate regions in northwestern and central western Africa, whom traders had brought by force to New Orleans, possibly with a first stop elsewhere in the Caribbean or United States, and who were now bound to travel yet again, to Cuba. Their moves had been transatlantic and transnational, across multiple borders and cultures. Though concise, these passports showed how the experience of enslavement in the nineteenth-century Caribbean world entailed imposed immobility within a larger frame of completely unpredictable, forced mobility. Slaveholders who abducted, transported, and traded men, women, and children treated enslaved people like animate commodities.

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<sup>90</sup> Passport issued to Charles Victor M\_\_ Pelletier, December 9, 1819; Record book of licenses, bakers' declarations, and statements of public works, 1812, and passports, 1818-1831 (hereafter cited as Passports); New Orleans (La.) Office of the Mayor, Louisiana Division/City Archives, NOPL.

<sup>91</sup> Passport issued to Madame Favre, April 14, 1820, Passports, NOPL.

The passports also clarified the intensely violent means with which slave owners restricted the movement of the people they controlled. While several passports noted scars endured during unspecified or presumably accidental injuries, such as that of thirteen-year-old José, who had been bitten by a crocodile prior to his travels in June 1821, other people bore the clear marks of their enslavers.<sup>92</sup> Joseph, a twenty-four-year-old “mulatto” man who traveled on the two-masted schooner *Lappwing* to Santiago de Cuba in March 1819, could be identified by his severed left Achilles tendon, most likely cut following an attempt to run away.<sup>93</sup> A passport issued for the travel of Mary Julie, a twenty-four-year-old “negro woman” who traveled in April 1820, indicated violence of another sort. She boarded the ship *Gold Huntress* with her children, Louise Delphine, “a negro girl aged of 27 months and Henriette Calalie, a mulatto girl eight months old.” While the difference in the girls’ skin tones could have been attributed to the eye of the beholder, it more likely indicated that Henriette Calalie had a white father and was the product of a sexual encounter that had been against the will of her enslaved mother.<sup>94</sup> Slavery required immobility and isolation until the abusive will of the slaveholder indicated otherwise.

Importantly, antebellum New Orleans travel passports identified free and enslaved people of color with equal specificity, pointing to the predominant attitude among whites that all black women, men, and children were essentially commodities. The passports for Widow Boromé, a “very white” free woman of color who traveled alone in 1819, and Adelaide, an enslaved, fifty-year-old woman who traveled with her mistress in the same year, included a virtually identical

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<sup>92</sup> Passport issued to Mistress Perra, June 30, 1821, Passports, NOPL.

<sup>93</sup> Passport issued to Mr. Pre. M\_\_\_, March 19, 1819, Passports, NOPL.

<sup>94</sup> Passport issued to Madame Favre, April 14, 1820, Passports, NOPL.

degree of detail.<sup>95</sup> New Orleans authorities recorded careful descriptions of free people of color who traveled legally only because others who looked similar to them were not allowed free mobility.<sup>96</sup> In other words, the fact that Louisiana was a slave society dictated the terms of mobility even for those who were free.

The mayor's travel passports, then, confirmed that free people of color in antebellum Louisiana never experienced an unconstrained state of freedom. Whether they walked the streets of New Orleans selling blackberries or boarded a ship to leave the city, free people of color moved on the same footing as enslaved people, with the implicit permission and surveillance of the city government. Furthermore, the careful measurements of physical features that composed travel passports paralleled the traits listed in contemporary newspaper descriptions of fugitive slaves as well as enslaved people to be sold at auction. Thus, in all of these public records, white authorities measured, tracked, and sought to control people of color in transit – even free people of color – because, at base, their skin tone made them valuable commodities in New Orleans's slaveholding world. In the eyes of a society reliant on enslaved labor, all people of color possessed a current or potential monetary value not unlike that of the imported foodstuffs also listed in city newspapers.<sup>97</sup>

Similar to travel passports, the mayor's register of free people of color working in the food industry also functioned to define the narrow line separating states of freedom and

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<sup>95</sup> My translation, passports issued to Veuve Boromé, October 8, 1819; and Rosette Lachataignerais, January 25, 1819, Passports, NOPL.

<sup>96</sup> Not infrequently, free people of color who were slave owners traveled with their slaves, necessitating a travel passport for every member of the party. For example, in November 1818 the city issued a passport to Catherine Boucher "f.d.c.l.," or *femme de couleur libre*, free woman of color, who traveled with six enslaved people to Santiago de Cuba. Passport issued to Catherine Boucher, November 2, 1818; Passports, NOPL.

<sup>97</sup> Johnson argues that slave auctions exemplified "[s]lavery reduced to the simplicity of a pure form: a person with a price....The entire economy of the antebellum South was constructed upon the idea that the bodies of enslaved people had a measurable monetary value, whether they were ever actually sold or not." Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2, 25.

enslavement. Moreover, the register's data revealed that freedom was far from a solid, continuous condition of existence, at least in antebellum New Orleans. This municipal log captured a sliver of the antebellum era, from 1840 to 1856, that characterized the men and women of color who worked as the city's cooks, butchers, market vendors, and bakers as existing along a *spectrum* of freedom.<sup>98</sup> Some workers had lived as free people of color for decades, such as Sophie Conasa, a sixty-year-old black street vendor of "Hibo" origin who had been emancipated in 1795.<sup>99</sup> Others had labored as slaves until very shortly before the city initiated its registry system. David Capland, a thirty-one-year-old black man born in Richmond, Virginia, who worked in New Orleans as a baker, noted the date of his emancipation as November 1839.<sup>100</sup> Manumission came at the stroke of a pen held by a former slave owner, a fellow free person of color, or even a family member. Victoire Meselle, a sixty-year-old street vendor from Haiti, was freed by her mother, Anne Lanausse, on August 3, 1814, in Santiago de Cuba.<sup>101</sup> As these abbreviated personal histories showed, freedom was a movable state – a trait that adhered often, but not always, to the color of one's skin.

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<sup>98</sup> Compared to the enslaved New Orleanians who traveled with city-issued passports, free people of color who lived and worked in the city were just as diverse in terms of ethnicity, origin, and language. Free black New Orleanians who worked in the food industry hailed from a staggering variety of domestic and international locations. Native Virginians, alone, listed birthplaces in Richmond, Williamsburg, Port Royal, Norfolk, York County, Jefferson County, Petersburg, Fauquier, and Chesterfield. Other food workers came from South Kingston, Rhode Island; Long Island, New York, and Amherst, New Hampshire. George Brown, a thirty-year-old "griff" man who worked as a steward on steamboats and had arrived in New Orleans in 1825, listed Portland, Maine, as his hometown (New Orleanians defined "griff" to mean a person who was three-quarters black and one-quarter white). Many others hailed from throughout the Caribbean and Africa. Towns in Haiti predominated, pointing to the wave of refugees who had fled the Haitian revolution and settled in New Orleans. Free workers of color also came from Guinea, the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, Grenada, St. Thomas, St. Croix, Guadeloupe, Cuba, Senegal, and even Egypt. The extreme heterogeneity and cosmopolitan experiences of both free and enslaved black New Orleanians defied the city's blanket commodification of people of color. Entry for George Brown, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL. On the history of free people of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans and processes of racialization and Americanization, see Thompson, *Exiles at Home*.

<sup>99</sup> Entry for Sophie Conasa, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

<sup>100</sup> Entry for David Capland, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

<sup>101</sup> Entry for Victoire Meselle, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

Being a free person of color in antebellum New Orleans thus required careful documentation, as well as constant defense. That Anne Lanausse could manumit her daughter seemed to imply the reverse: that freedom could also be taken away.<sup>102</sup> Accordingly, the mayor's register included abundant evidence of the frantic measures taken by New Orleanians of color in the food industry to maintain proof of their free status. In March 1850, John C. Shannon attached a note to the registry entry for James Fertram, a twenty-four-year-old "griff" and New Orleans native. Shannon wrote on Fertram's behalf, confirming that Fertram was working as a pastry cook onboard the steamboat *Oregon* when, on the journey from Louisville to New Orleans, "Said boat was blown up and sunk – and he states he has lost all his papers...on board. I know him and can recommend him for veracity," Shannon attested.<sup>103</sup> Milton Franklin wrote on behalf of William Williams for a similar reason on July 19, 1851. A thirty-year-old black man and native of Lebanon, Ohio, Williams worked as a cook onboard various Mississippi steamboats and had mislaid the papers that certified his freedom. Franklin wrote to the New Orleans mayor, "I the undersigned steward of the steamboat *Duchess* do declare without hesitation that William Williams a free man of color has been working on various steamboats with me for the last six or seven years...I furthermore declare it to be my sincere belief that said Williams has lost his papers."<sup>104</sup> Events as dramatic as a steamboat explosion or as simple as some mislaid scraps of paper promised disaster for Fertram and Williams. Due to the color of their skin, the line between freedom and slavery for these two men in slaveholding Louisiana was so thin as to

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<sup>102</sup> Certainly this did happen to hundreds of free people of color, including Solomon Northup, who escaped from bondage and published the story of his abduction. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853).

<sup>103</sup> Note attached to entry for James Fertram, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

<sup>104</sup> Note attached to entry for William Williams, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

appear translucent. Yet importantly, laborers like Fertram and Williams could appeal their freedom to New Orleans authorities only with the testimony of a white person.

Additional affidavits on behalf of free food workers of color extended this logic, in that white writers advocated for a black person's freedom specifically in terms of his or her relationship with whites. For example, John Morrill and three other "Citizens of New Orleans" wrote to the mayor on June 25, 1855, on behalf of Priscilla Williams, a forty-four-year-old boarding house keeper and native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Williams had been born free in Philadelphia and moved to the Crescent City in 1837, they asserted. Furthermore, "She has always conducted herself well and has [adhered] to all the requirements of the laws & ordinances relative to the conduct of persons of color toward white persons, and has never been guilty of any offense or misdemeanor," they affirmed.<sup>105</sup> In a similar manner, two New Orleanians wrote on behalf of Allan Fields, a thirty-seven-year-old "mulatto" man who worked as a steamboat steward, swearing, "He has always conducted himself in an orderly manner & behaved as a quiet person."<sup>106</sup> As portrayed by these affidavits, freedom seemed far from a simple question of legal status. Rather, being deemed free or not free appeared to depend heavily on the way in which a person of color behaved in relation to whites. A man or woman of color who was law-abiding, orderly, and quiet – docile, like slaveholders preferred a slave – was most worthy of being confirmed as free, these letters purported to argue.

As made abundantly clear by New Orleans's antebellum travel passports and the registry of free food workers of color, a white man in antebellum Louisiana enjoyed a strain of freedom very different from that experienced by a free man of color. Whether his family had lived in the city for generations or had emigrated from Prussia the previous week, the white resident of

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<sup>105</sup> Note attached to entry for Priscilla Williams, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

<sup>106</sup> Note attached to entry for Allan Fields, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

antebellum New Orleans never needed to question or defend his social and legal status as a free citizen. In contrast, workers of color like James Fertram and Allan Fields worked desperately hard to guard proof of the subjective, constrained version of freedom accorded to them. As the records of these food industry workers showed, living as a free person of color in antebellum New Orleans meant forever teetering on the brink, legally, socially, and economically. In their daily experiences, freedom was not just variable; it was also persistently endangered. This fact characterized antebellum New Orleans as a society so mired in its reliance on enslaved labor that it enacted a persistent, downward pull on even free people of color.

The most striking example of this dynamic can be found in Prosper Blair's entry in the mayor's registry. A grocer who had arrived in New Orleans in 1822, Blair listed Joseph Paul Coulon as his reference. Blair was not a negro, nor was he of "yellow complexion," a mulatto, a "dark mulatto," a griff, or any other term invented by antebellum America's slaveholding world to categorize a person whose ancestors originated in Africa.<sup>107</sup> Blair was born in Calcutta, India. The bureaucrat who added Blair's name to the registry noted his color as "Indian." To explain such a strange entry, the writer attached a note. "Prosper Blair is only registered here because he fears being disturbed due to his brown color," he described, "and he wants the testimony of M. Joseph Paul Coulon in his favor to be preserved in this book."<sup>108</sup> Already a resident of New Orleans for almost two decades, Prosper Blair volunteered himself for the mayor's registry of free people of color out of *fear*. Blair dreaded future harassment on the sole basis of his skin tone, a decision surely made after enduring previous trials. In the malicious gaze of white New

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<sup>107</sup> See entries for Adolphe Fauchon and James W. Kennedy, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.

<sup>108</sup> Entry for Prosper Blair, Register, 1840-1856, NOPL.



Orleanians, Blair risked looking a shade of black and thus sought to record proactively in the mayor's book that he was free.

As Prosper Blair's anxiety proved, in mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans, the color line was already inexorably drawn.<sup>109</sup> Blair, James Fertram, Allan Fields, William Williams, Priscilla Williams, and many others resisted the magnetic force that New Orleans exerted on people of color, from freedom into bondage and from autonomy into commoditization. White traders and planters circulated freely to, from, and within the antebellum city, flaunting their mobility as a tool with which they achieved prosperity and bodily safety. During the same years, authorities mapped the bodies of free and enslaved black New Orleanians in order to track them in motion. Lists of scars, mutilated limbs, missing fingers, and indigenous markings mapped the shapes of black people in transit. To those who prospered from the sugar and cotton trades, people of color contained a value even greater than the coffee beans, Madeira, nutmeg, and loaf sugar that also passed through the port of New Orleans. As the experiences of many free and enslaved food workers showed, New Orleanians of color labored within a society and economy that sought continuously to devour them, to turn them into even more totalized commodities, to render them closer and closer to the consumable products that they created and served.

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### **Conclusion: Revenge of a Consumable Commodity: Poison the Pot**

In 1819, when the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe visited New Orleans, he sensed that he walked on shaky ground. "It is a pity, as to the mere expense of building," he wrote, "that this

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<sup>109</sup> In 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, famously, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." Despite New Orleans's reputation as a racially heterogeneous city since even before it was an American city, this research shows how the subjective line between black and white mattered very much even in the early nineteenth century. Du Bois, "The Forethought," *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 692.

is a floating city, floating below the surface of the water on a bed of mud.”<sup>110</sup> Collapsing people of color and food into a single unit that could be bought and sold had built a fundamentally destabilized world. Even in its earliest years the Crescent City was a sinking city, sited in an illogical location, teetering on foundations that were structurally and morally insecure. In March 1860, a little more than a year from the start of the Civil War that would end American slavery, an episode occurred in a New Orleans kitchen that illuminated the danger inherent in treating people of color as consumable commodities.

“This is one of the most horrible and painful affairs we have ever been called upon to record,” reported the New Orleans *Daily Crescent* on its front page on March 23, 1860. “The excitement about it pervades the whole city.”<sup>111</sup> On the evening of March 20, Garden District resident Colonel Lemley had hosted a dinner party in honor of a family friend who had recently completed a medical degree at the University of Louisiana. At the conclusion of the meal, the guests feasted on Charlotte Russe, an elegant dessert composed of vanilla custard cooled in a mold lined with ladyfingers. Hours later, between eighteen and twenty people present at the dinner became violently ill. Three would die, including Lemley’s wife and Willie Young, his nephew. The speed and severity of their sickness prompted the coroner to suspect poison. In macabre detail, Dr. E.D. Beach explained in a public report how he confirmed his hypothesis. “The entire stomach, one half of the liver, and a portion of the large and small intestines [of Willie Young] was...cut into small pieces,” treated with sulfuric acid, and burned to charcoal, he

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<sup>110</sup> Entry dated February 27, 1819, Latrobe, *Impressions*, 67.

<sup>111</sup> “Horrible Poisoning Affair in the Fourth District,” *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, March 23, 1860, 1.

described. Beach then added copper gauze and watched the mixture turn grey, indicating the presence of arsenic, which had “doubtless” been added to the Charlotte’s custard.<sup>112</sup>

The police charged the Lemleys’ enslaved cook, Ann, with the crime. A flood of newspaper reporting in subsequent weeks failed to clarify the facts or confirm Ann’s guilt. Instead, it brought into sharp focus the deep ambivalence on the part of the white public related to the presence of people of color in the kitchen, as figures needed yet castigated and desired yet feared. At the same time, newspaper coverage confirmed the complete inability of slaveholding society to understand the violent damage it inflicted on families of color in treating mothers, fathers, and children as movable parts that could be bought and sold.

News of the Lemleys’ disastrous dinner party appeared in newspapers across the country, printed in Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin. German-speaking readers in St. Paul, Minnesota, learned of the poisoning in the *Minnesota Staats-Zeitung*. The *Courrier des Etats-Unis* printed the affair’s lurid details for New York’s francophone population. The breadth of coverage pointed to the appalling and frightening nature of the crime. Virtually all reporting assumed the guilt of the cook, Ann, long before the New Orleans police had completed their investigation. An article in the *Cleveland Morning Leader* of Cleveland, Ohio, on March 28, 1860, began, “Families dependent upon slave cooks must often eat with misgivings.”<sup>113</sup> A week later, the same paper ran an article titled, “Revenge by Slaves.” After offering the story of a Virginia slaveholder who had recently been killed by his slaves, the writer proceeded immediately to an update on the Lemley case in New Orleans, implying that both events adhered to a common

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<sup>112</sup> As cited in “The Lemley Poisoning,” *The Weekly Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), April 1, 1860.

<sup>113</sup> “A Whole Family Poisoned,” *Cleveland Morning Leader* (Cleveland, OH), March 28, 1860, 2.

pattern of vengeful slaves.<sup>114</sup> Ann's guilt appeared a foregone conclusion in the perspective of frightened readers in New Orleans as well as thousands of miles away.

This was despite the fact that multiple components of the case pointed toward the cook's innocence. No witness had seen Ann, one of many people in a busy kitchen, add arsenic to the sweet. Ann had not even prepared the Charlotte Russe; Sarah Young, Col. Lemley's niece, described in sworn testimony that she had made the custard. At the request of Sarah's mother, Ann did stir the custard to cool it, but Ann insisted that had she never poisoned it.<sup>115</sup> The egg whites had been left unattended in the hall for two hours, Ann declared to reporters of *L'Abeille*. Could not someone have added the arsenic then? Besides, "In terms of pastry, [Ann] could prepare only 'dumplings,'" the reporter claimed.<sup>116</sup> A week after the dinner party, authorities took Ann from her prison cell back to the Lemley household. There, they forced her to look at the corpses of Mrs. Lemley and Willie Young, whose faces remained visible in the glass windowpanes of their coffins. A *Delta* reporter described how Col. Lemley confronted Ann, ordering, "Look there....This is all your work." But Ann responded, "You know, master, if I had wanted to do such a thing, I could have done it any time for years past."<sup>117</sup> Ann understood the *power* intrinsic in her role as the household's cook. Though enslaved, Ann could satisfy sensory desires, fill bellies, or even kill the people who sat at the table that she filled, depending on how she chose to season the pot. Ann's kitchen labors gave her an authority that would seem to prove her innocence, rather than guilt.

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<sup>114</sup> "Revenge by Slaves," *Ibid.*, April 4, 1860, 2.

<sup>115</sup> "The Fourth District Poisoning Affair," *Daily Crescent*, April 30, 1860, 3.

<sup>116</sup> My translation, "Un Drame en Louisiane," *Courrier des Etats-Unis*, (New York, NY), 6, March 31, 1860, reprint of an article from *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, March 23, 1860.

<sup>117</sup> News column, *The Constitution* (Washington, D.C.), April 5, 1860, 3, with reporting from the *Delta*, no date.

Despite Ann's protests and a lack of tangible evidence, the New Orleans press sought to convict Ann on the faulty grounds of motive. This perspective reflected the public's simple, racist inability to conceive of families of color as humans, rather than valuable objects. During the inquest, Isabella McKee, a friend of the Lemleys, swore that she had come to the Lemley house about one month before the dinner party and had found Ann in the kitchen. She testified,

I asked Ann where Charley, her son, was, and if he had run away again. She said, they have got *him* down in the trader's yard, and are going to sell him; they have 'done sold one child of mine, and there's a day coming when they will all repent this.' I told her she must not talk to me that way about her mistress....Charley was a regular runaway and is still, I believe, in the trader's yard. He was a notoriously bad boy.<sup>118</sup>

In additional reporting, McKee added another detail to this encounter, claiming that when she entered the kitchen, Ann pointed to her face, declaring, "See this mark on my face; *Mrs. Lemley struck me with a cowhide, and they have my son in a trader's yard; and she will repent the day when she did this.*"<sup>119</sup> This exchange, available to the press only by hearsay, emphasized Ann's anger but discounted it by disparaging the character of her son. Charley, an enslaved boy whose primary crime seemed to be a desire to escape his enslaved state, appeared in additional newspaper articles as "unruly and vicious," and an "incorrigible runaway."<sup>120</sup> Repeated attempts to escape from the Lemley household had given Col. Lemley few options, *L'Abeille* claimed; "Not being able to do anything else, he decided to sell [Charley]."<sup>121</sup> Charley's disobedience had forced his sale, reporters and readers declared to themselves. The fault lay solely with him and perhaps his mother, alleged to have encouraged his escapes. Still, even the threat of Charley's

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<sup>118</sup> "The Fourth District," *Daily Crescent*.

<sup>119</sup> "Excitement in New Orleans – Poisoning by Slaves," *Janesville Daily Gazette* (Janesville, WI), 2, largely a reprint of reporting in the *Delta*, March 23, 1860.

<sup>120</sup> "A Heinous Crime," *Albany Journal* (Albany, NY), March 28, 1860, reprint of reporting in the *Picayune*, no date; "The Lemley Poisoning," *Weekly Advocate*, with reporting from the *Delta*.

<sup>121</sup> "Un Drame," *Courrier*, reprint of *L'Abeille*.

sale “can hardly be deemed very satisfactory” as a motive, the *Charleston Mercury* suggested, considering that Charley was simply “a bad boy.”<sup>122</sup>

In such reporting, observers displayed the warped logic that had led to Ann’s arrest. Her motive for adding arsenic to the Charlotte Russe was obvious, reporters declared. She was upset by the sale of her son and wanted revenge. But certainly that motive was unreasonable, they insisted simultaneously, because her son was a bad boy, an unruly slave. Accepting the motive required acknowledging that an enslaved woman could love her son so deeply that she would commit murder on his behalf. Yet at the same time the public derided such a possibility as implausible, since to embrace it fully – as right, as justified – would be to deny the premise on which all of New Orleans’s slaveholding society operated. A short distance from the Lemleys’ kitchen, enslaved people climbed atop auction blocks in coffee houses and the St. Louis Hotel. Newspaper readers skimmed lists of furniture, plantations, sugar boilers, people, and horses for sale. Gentlemen businessmen traded hogshheads of sugar over glasses of champagne in the Gentlemen’s Ordinary of the St. Charles Hotel. All of these experiences relied on the bodies of people of color as objects that could be mobilized, immobilized, bought, and sold at will.

Yet at the most essential level, Ann’s crime had made her human. For this reason, it not only frightened white Americans; it also offended and confused them. Ann had been “raised in the family,” the *Charleston Mercury* reported.<sup>123</sup> “This woman nursed me when I was an infant,”

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<sup>122</sup> Associations between white children and innocence and black children and “badness” evolved during this era. See Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); as well as Bernstein, “Can Black Children be ‘Angels’? The History behind the *New York Times* Insult to Michael Brown,” *Racial Innocence*, August 31, 2014, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://racialinnocence.blogspot.com/2014/08/can-black-children-be-angels-history.html>; “Diabolical Attempt to Poison a Family and Their Guests While at Dinner,” *The Charleston Mercury*, March 29, 1860, 1.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

testified Sarah Hall, stepdaughter of Col. Lemley.<sup>124</sup> In their eyes, Ann had been part of the family, yet not of the family. The insertion of Charley, Ann's true family, into the Lemleys' household had forced the entire construction to crumble. "The sickness of all [after eating the Charlotte Russe]...proved how sadly they were mistaken, in what they had believed to be one of the most delicate of luxuries," reported the *Delta*.<sup>125</sup> The Lemleys had enslaved Ann and ordered her to feed and nurture. Instead, it seemed, she had had the audacity to kill.

In the aftermath of the dinner party, the *Picayune* printed an outraged lament for the victims that cast the poisoning as a specifically unnatural act. "To satisfy her hatred and blind revenge for imaginary wrongs," the writer railed, "the cruel perpetrator of this heinous deed has sent desolation to many a family hearth; children are left orphans, deprived of their natural guardians....What a terrible record will be the testimony of these innocent victims."<sup>126</sup> Ann had sinned terribly by killing Willie Young, the writer charged, because she had robbed his mother of her son. Yet Ann had poisoned the custard to protest the selling of her own son, the same papers admitted. Blindness toward the humanity of the cook in the kitchen muddled observers' logic beyond rescue.

In fact, the *Picayune*'s elegy could, and should, have served for the tens of thousands of enslaved families ripped apart by the slave trade, which sent desolation to *their* hearths and left countless *black* children orphans. Ann and Charley endured an existence as consumable commodities – valued, desired, and enjoyed alongside the dishes that Ann prepared. Authorities

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<sup>124</sup> Marcus Wood argues, "Black milk, slave mother's milk, was stolen in vast, unknown, incalculable quantities as generation after generation of white infants 'drank, and drank' from the nipples of the 'Mammy'...Black milk...consequently marks a trauma point in the memory of Atlantic slavery." Wood, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2; "The Fourth District," *Daily Crescent*.

<sup>125</sup> "The Lemley Poisoning," *Weekly Advocate*, with reporting from the *Delta*.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, with reporting from the *Picayune*.

incarcerated Ann because she resisted such an equation and refused to slip smoothly down the throats of the white family that claimed to own her.<sup>127</sup> Or perhaps she did not. Perhaps she never added arsenic to the custard, as she insisted tirelessly. No conclusion as to Ann's guilt appeared in the New Orleans press. Nevertheless, the fear that such a possibility provoked sent her to a jail cell just a few years before President Lincoln would declare slavery to be null. Still, even civil war and the end of slavery would not be enough to undo the exploitative, consuming association between New Orleanians of color and the city's cuisine. As the Lemleys took their first bites of the tainted Charlotte Russe, that story was just beginning.

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<sup>127</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins argues, "The title of my book [*Racial Indigestion*]...points to the idea that the constitution of whiteness via the most racist images and practices of eating culture is neither seamless nor easy.... Across the nineteenth century black bodies and subjects stick in the throat of the (white) body politic, refusing to be consumed as part of the capitalist logic of racism and slavery as well as the cultural and literary matter that they produced." Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 8.



## Chapter Two: From Babel to Open Book: Whitewashing the French Market's Colonnades

On January 9, 1819, the brig *Clio* dropped anchor in New Orleans harbor. Onboard were approximately twenty passengers, including two merchants, a shipbuilder, a clerk, a cotton planter and his slaves, and the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, famed for his role in completing the United States Capitol in 1803.<sup>1</sup> Latrobe had set sail from Baltimore to complete the unfinished business of his architect son, Henry, who had died of yellow fever in New Orleans almost a year and a half earlier. Unexpectedly, perhaps, Latrobe's first encounter with New Orleans from the ship's deck came not with his architect's eye, but his ear. "So thick a fog enveloped the city," Latrobe wrote in his journal, "that the ear alone could ascertain its existence." London was noisy, Latrobe reflected, but this was something different. "It is a more incessant, loud, rapid, & various gabble of tongues of all tones than was ever heard at Babel. It is more to be compared to the sounds that issue from an extensive marsh, the residence of a million or two of frogs." The unrecognizable din – more animal than human – bewildered him, until, like a curtain yanked up to reveal a stage, the fog suddenly cleared and Latrobe perceived the source of the noise. "It proceeded from the market & levee, opposite to which we had cast anchor, & which...was in a moment, by the sudden disappearance of the fog laid open to our view."<sup>2</sup> The *Clio*'s journey had ended on the Mississippi River opposite New Orleans's French Market, whose vendors and customers spilled out of the market building onto the levee around it. When Latrobe's wife, Mary, joined him the following spring, she unwittingly phrased her astonished first impressions of the city in similar terms. Mary wrote to a friend that, threading among a mass

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820*, ed. Samuel Wilson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Latrobe, January 9, 1819, *Ibid.*, 18.

of shoppers and sellers on the levee, “A jargon assailed me equal to Babel its-self.”<sup>3</sup>

The Latrobes were two individuals among many who visited the nineteenth-century New Orleans French Market, the city’s central food market, and described the place as “Babel.” This descriptor appeared in a wide variety of newspapers, private journals, and letters, from the pens of local authors as well as tourists visiting from far away. As a common thread strung between a range of textual and visual sources, the term “Babel” imparted a sense of scale and disorganization to the multitudes of people and languages that characterized the market. This Biblical metaphor served as a malleable marker for a site that was alternately stimulating, cacophonous, and, to some, a mess.<sup>4</sup>

Travel guides, newspaper reporting, visual media, and public records tracked the French Market’s heyday, from its construction at the turn of the nineteenth century to its first major renovation in 1936, as a transition from perceived disorder to imposed, imperfect order. In the French Market’s first century, New Orleanians of color, many of them non-English speaking, dominated the market as both vendors and customers and used it as a space of social interaction and economic independence. Their presence helped characterize this public space as simultaneously exotic and foreign, yet central to New Orleans’s identity. White shoppers and visitors who plunged into the flood of noises, smells, impassable crowds, and edible and inedible goods reported reactions that progressed from overwhelmed attraction at the beginning of the century to wariness, if not revulsion, by the end of the century.

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<sup>3</sup> Letter of Mrs. B.H.B. Latrobe to Mrs. Catherine Smith, April 18, 1820, *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament story of Babel recounts how a shared language enabled a group of strangers to collaborate on a seemingly impossible project: a tower that could reach as high as heaven. God watched the structure rise and perceived the powerful potential of their coordination, saying, “They have all one language...and now nothing will be restrained from them.” He garbled their speech, the people dispersed, and the job failed. A site of efficiency became one of chaos. Babel came to stand for a setting of synchronized ambition that devolved into disarray. When visitors called the New Orleans French Market “Babel” they lent it a monumental, though arguably doomed, air. Gen. 11:1, 4-9 (AV).

By the 1910s, the New Orleans public, especially a committee of white housewives, denounced the city's public markets as unsanitary and anti-modern. The women pushed for changes that would render the French Market cleaner, fairer, and more legible in their eyes, calling for refrigeration, electric lighting, and new standards of cleanliness. In doing so, they presaged larger Progressive campaigns that would reshape the face of cities throughout the nation in coming decades. As in other settings touched by Progressives, New Orleans housewives used technological and sanitary measures as stand-ins for their discomfort with race. Their reforms transformed a unique institution in which people of color had long existed on comparable footing with whites, if not claimed the market as a space primarily of their own.

The housewives' efforts in the 1910s paved the way for a major modernization of the French Market in the 1930s, which had profound consequences for the roles and perceptions of New Orleanians of color in the marketplace. Funded by the New Deal, this first renovation in the French Market's history definitively whitened the market space. Physical repairs and new regulations distanced sellers and buyers from the food and from each other and obliterated earlier methods of social interaction and sensory experience. By this era, the market's famously multiethnic persona had paled to a stark line between white and black, as white authorities segregated or excluded people of color who had benefited from earlier, informal use of the market space. Market officials and the press celebrated the French Market's renovation in a way that imposed a specific trajectory on the market's history, from a romanticized past to a crumbling nadir to a modern and sanitized present. These stories slanted the market's history in a way that cast contemporary renovations as irrefutably enlightened when compared to the institution's quaint, but backward, past.

The cultural and economic implications of early twentieth-century efforts to clean up the

French Market sharpened in a city famed for its culinary delights. The centrality of the French Market to New Orleans's history, cultural identity, and tourist appeal meant that changes to the market had especially long-lasting and important impacts on the historical narrative of New Orleans as a multiethnic place. Tropes of the New Orleans French Market as "eternal" – widely popularized during the 1930s – obscured tangible evidence of increasing exclusion and denied the reality of eras in which white New Orleanians had *not* dominated the city's culinary, cultural, or ethnic landscapes. In crafting a narrative of the French Market as eternal and unchanging, municipal authorities and popular writers attempted a three-part renunciation of people of color, as they sought to deny black New Orleanians a stake in the market's past, present, and future.

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### **I. Hearing, Smelling, and Tasting Babel**

Since its founding more than a decade before the United States acquired New Orleans as part of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the French Market offered a greater experience of linguistic, ethnic, racial, and social diversity than any other site in the city. The amalgamation of people, languages, and foods on display there fueled travelers' increasing fascination with the market and the city it fed. Popular news magazines like *Harper's Weekly*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, and *Emerson's Weekly* helped spread New Orleans's unique culinary allure to a wide readership of potential visitors.<sup>5</sup> Though a tourist attraction, the French Market also served an important role in the daily routine of nineteenth-century city residents, especially free and enslaved people of color, who participated as vendors and shoppers. Within the bounds

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<sup>5</sup> Peirce F. Lewis acknowledged the special role of writers in cultivating an American fascination with New Orleans that began in the eighteenth century, describing, "With each additional author, the miasma grew thicker." Lewis argued that city residents were always willing to profit from New Orleans's dual allure to pleasure seekers and businessmen, explaining, "New Orleans was important in myth and important in fact....Moreover, Orleanians have always known it and hastened to capitalize on the combination by deliberately surrounding the city with as much additional mythology as they could conjure....To read the brochures, New Orleans offers the tourist a variety of less deadly sins, crusted with an antique patina, and smelling strongly of gardenias." Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe, NM: The Center for American Places, 2003), 7, 9-10.

of the market they experienced a distinct freedom of movement, autonomy with money, and social benefit.

The French Market's location in the city, and the city's position on the Mississippi River, assured that the market flourished as an important economic and cultural crossroads under multiple national governments and over the span of centuries. Choctaw Indians and French and Spanish colonial forces had traded food and other goods on the Mississippi riverbank decades before the Spanish government founded New Orleans's first regulated public food market in 1779. In 1791, authorities constructed a riverside market building with stalls that would come to be known as the French Market. Throughout the 1800s, American municipal leaders built and modified new market buildings around the 1813 meat market, destined to become the longest continuously used French Market structure, to house additional departments where fish, seafood, game, produce, and dry goods were sold.<sup>6</sup> Vendors and shoppers filled these buildings, and, until prevented from doing so by increasing regulations and new construction, staked out territory on the "neutral ground" in between them, as well as on the levee that held back the river (*fig 2.1*).<sup>7</sup> As the city's growth spiked in the 1830s, authorities built additional public markets throughout New Orleans neighborhoods, such that by 1911 New Orleans had more public markets, relative to the city's population, than any other American metropolis.<sup>8</sup> Despite the proliferation of public

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<sup>6</sup> Separate structures for the selling of vegetables, fish and game, and fruit and dry goods rose in the 1820s, 1840, and 1870, respectively. Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 245.

<sup>7</sup> "Neutral ground" is the New Orleans term for street medians and, in the context of the nineteenth-century French Market, the unregulated space between buildings. For a chronology of increasingly restrictive regulations of the market's neutral ground, see John Magill, "French Market Celebrates 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Preservation in Print* 18, no. 4 (May 1991): 7-10.

<sup>8</sup> By 1911, New Orleanians could shop at thirty-four public markets. On the history of New Orleans's extensive public market system, see Robert A. Sauder, "Municipal Markets of New Orleans," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 2 (Fall/Winter 1981): 82-95; Sauder, "The Origin and Spread of the Public Market System in New Orleans," *Louisiana History* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 281-297; Sally Reeves, "Making Groceries: Public Markets and Corner

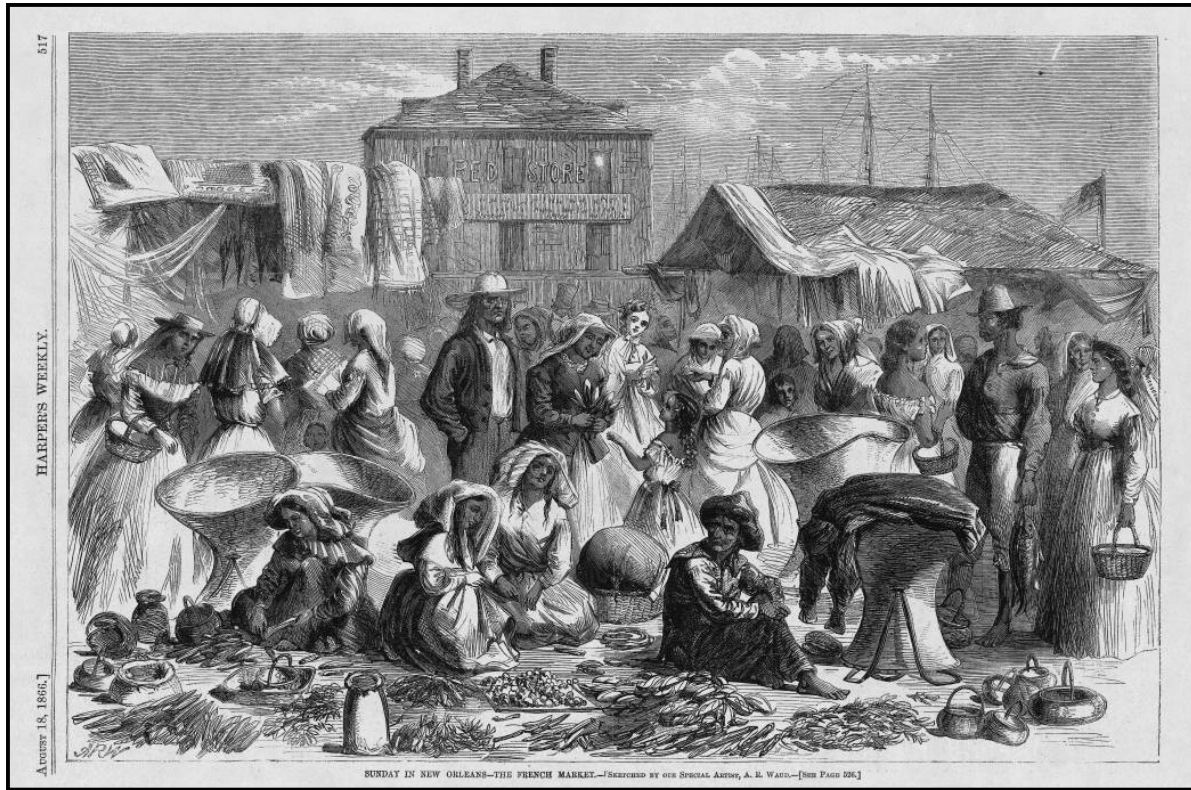


Figure 2.1. On Sunday mornings at the mid-nineteenth-century French Market, vendors of color and Choctaw Indians claimed space on the “neutral ground” between market buildings until later prevented from doing so. A.R. Waud, “Sunday in New Orleans – The French Market,” *Harper’s Weekly*, August 18, 1866, 517.

markets and privately owned corner stores in the Crescent City, the French Market retained the greatest symbolic and nostalgic significance among residents and tourists, long past its nineteenth-century peak, due to its continuous presence in the French Quarter.<sup>9</sup> A 1932 editorial in the city’s leading newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, asserted that the French Market “has come

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Stores in Old New Orleans,” *Gulf South Historical Review* 16 (2000): 40-43; and Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 243-248. For histories of the development of public food markets in New York City and beyond, see Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food & Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Gergely Baics, “Feeding Gotham: A Social History of Urban Provisioning” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2009); Helen Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Roger Horowitz, Jeffrey M. Pilcher, and Sydney Watts, “Meat for the Multitudes: Market Culture in Paris, New York City, and Mexico City Over the Long Nineteenth Century,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 4 (October 2004): 1055-83.

<sup>9</sup> Called the city’s “mother” market in a 1933 newspaper editorial, the French Market outlasted all other public markets – in form, if not function – due to its popularity as a centerpiece of the French Quarter tourism industry. “Theo Grunewald,” *New Orleans Item*, May 27, 1933.

to epitomize the life and color and charm of the city itself. . . . New Orleans without the old French Market would not be New Orleans at all.”<sup>10</sup>

Until the popularization of railroads for travel and shipping in the 1870s and 1880s, New Orleans was a firmly river-oriented city and many travelers entered New Orleans only after passing through the gateway of the French Market. Thus impressions gained in the market – for good or ill – helped shape those of the city as a whole. Edward Russell, a New Englander who passed through New Orleans in 1835 on his way to the Red River region of northeast Texas, irritably characterized New Orleans as “the city of Babel,” with “streets quite full of people in all customs & languages & colors and the dregs of all nations.” Unlike most other visitors, he failed to find the French Market impressive as anything other than a shelter from the rain and was annoyed by the “smell of the filthy streets” outdoors and the “smell of the French cookery” indoors. Russell acknowledged in his journal, however, that he may have been less vulnerable to the Crescent City’s culinary charms due to his sufferings as a “dyspeptic” and he happily left New Orleans after less than a week.<sup>11</sup> As Russell’s impressions of New Orleans intimated, many descriptions of the nineteenth-century French Market as Babel adhered to the scriptural tale in evoking a chaotic place characterized by loud conflict and linguistic confusion. Speeding to his hotel in a horse-drawn carriage one evening in the 1840s, New York City writer A. Oakey Hall witnessed a panorama of fragmented nighttime street scenes along the way. In the low flare of gas lamps, he saw and heard “a brace of deserted markets, where negresses and lazy butcher boys were engaged in melodious quarrels quite anti-scriptural in their tone but yet suggestive of

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<sup>10</sup> “New French Market,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 13, 1932.

<sup>11</sup> Entries for Sunday, January 25, 1835, Wednesday, January 28, 1835, and Tuesday, January 27, 1835, MSS 424.2, Edward Russell travel journal and transcript, 1834-1835, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as HNOC).

the tower of Babel.”<sup>12</sup> When introduced through the lens of the French Market, newly arrived observers like Russell and Hall found multilingual New Orleans to be disagreeable or plagued by disagreements, respectively.

The sensory confusion that characterized New Orleans’s nineteenth-century public markets resounded with travelers as a symptom of another sort of commingling. In addition to the city’s coffee houses and luxurious hotels, where enslaved people stood on auction blocks, public markets were especially effective at blurring the line between the many kinds of foods for sale in New Orleans and the people who bought and sold them. Coffee at the French Market offered a particularly apt example of an experience that generated reductive associations between the city’s people and food. Freshly brewed coffee became a trademark of women of color in the French Market, in particular, and several writers recalled in fetishistic detail the stimulating, dark beverage they enjoyed and the women who prepared and served it to them. In these evocations, women of color and the imported, tropical drink they brewed coalesced to embody the experience of New Orleans as an exotic, consumable city. Henry C. Castellanos, a noted judge in nineteenth-century New Orleans, remembered the 1820s market coffee seller as a woman both exotic and maternal. He wrote, “Here Aglaé, stately and gracious with her turbaned head and ebony features wreathed in smiles, dispensed her steaming coffee to *mo ti moun*, as she patronizingly called her younger visitors.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, an 1857 writer addressed the male reader overwhelmed by the market’s Babel-like confusion when he suggested, “He finds comfort at the

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<sup>12</sup> In 1857, a writer in *Emerson’s Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly* agreed with Russell’s assessment of the town as a place singular in its linguistic confusion, reporting, “The traveler cannot fail to be struck with the Babel of tongues he hears in New Orleans....So far, the people do not become homogeneous, either in language, character, or interests. A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattaner in New Orleans; Or, Phases of “Crescent City” Life*, ed. Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976, repr. 1851), 7; “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson’s Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly* V, no. 41, October 1857, 436.

<sup>13</sup> Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1990, repr. 1895), 146.



hands of the charming quadroon girl, who sells that most delicious of drinks, coffee, made surpassingly good; no one knows the secret so well as the quadroon.”<sup>14</sup> Such descriptions presaged future stereotypes of the smiling southern “mammy” popularized in a wide range of imagery, texts, and consumer products, who soothed and nourished her white charges while deploying magic, secret knowledge at the kitchen stove.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, by the end of the nineteenth century, black women’s bodies were literally for sale in the New Orleans marketplace, at least temporarily and figuratively, long after the age of slavery had passed. An 1896 New Orleans travel guide described the “labor department” of the Poydras Market, “where numbers of negro women may be found waiting for employment, standing in long rows. Here one can hire a scrubbing woman, a washerwoman, a cook, or a housemaid, at the regular market price.”<sup>16</sup> By that year some of the tangible remnants of New Orleans’s slave-holding past – such as the auction blocks at the St. Louis and St. Charles hotels – had become decaying tourist attractions or vanished in fire and smoke. Yet as the guide book indicated, people for a price could still be found in New Orleans markets. That this notice

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<sup>14</sup> “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson’s Magazine*, October 1857, 438.

<sup>15</sup> By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, brick-and-mortar coffee stalls and restaurants, especially Café du Monde, opened in 1862, and Morning Call Coffee Stand, founded in 1870, began to replace coffee sellers on foot in the French Market. Morning Call would leave the market in favor of a new suburban location in 1974, but Café du Monde still serves *café au lait* and sugar-dusted beignets in the original *Halle des Boucheries* market building. Long after coffee vendors of color disappeared, writers and photographers who captured twentieth-century New Orleans would help create a new *tingnon*-clad female character: the corner vendor of pralines, meltingly sweet pecan candies that ranged in color from a pale tan to glossy dark brown. On the history of the mammy figure, especially in connection with food, see Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of US Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See chapters 1 and 4 for a more detailed exploration of representations of women of color who worked as food vendors and the idea of the consumable black body. *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Nicholson & Co., 1896), 34; see also Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*, eds. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 2014); and Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

appeared in a travel guide implied that tourists would be interested in viewing the Poydras's "labor department," just as they had witnessed the auctions of slaves a half-century earlier. Even as New Orleans modernized, people, food, and things still appeared as experiences for sale in its markets.

Thus, at both the beginning and end of the nineteenth century, the French Market was not just loud and colorful; it also constituted an intimately physical experience, a place where visitors experienced myriad unfamiliar smells, foods, languages, and bodies. Shoppers and vendors – men and women, black and white, American, African, European, and Caribbean – pressed into an elbow-to-elbow mass as they filed through the space. In his 1845 guidebook, Benjamin Norman warned that the sightseer who went to the market must be prepared to "elbo[w] his way through the dense crowd."<sup>17</sup> Judge Castellanos, too, recalled the early nineteenth-century French Market as so packed that "a constant ebb and flow of human streams would often obstruct locomotion, and this annoyance, increased by the interlocking of baskets, was often a source of merriment to the visitor."<sup>18</sup> Whereas tourists enjoyed this crush of the crowd as a novelty, New Orleans residents funneled into the market early in the morning for practical purposes. Whether seeking the women vending coffee and *calas*, fried doughnuts made of mashed rice and dusted with sugar, for a quick breakfast or trying to secure a cheap price for a cut of beef before the day's heat spoiled it, morning shopping ensured that errands were done before the sun rose. A *Harper's Weekly* writer described French Market shoppers as akin to a noisy flock of birds that descended suddenly on the riverfront stalls and, not long afterward, fled.

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<sup>17</sup> B.M. Norman, *Norman's New Orleans and Environs: Containing a Brief Historical Sketch of the Territory and State of Louisiana, and the City of New Orleans, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, ed. Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976, repr. 1845), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was*, 146.

He reported, “As early as three o’clock in the morning...it is almost impossible to move about. By nine o’clock the place is almost deserted.”<sup>19</sup>

Such descriptions of the French Market pointed to the fact that while the site was a popular tourist attraction – largely because of its reputation as an unintelligible Babel – to locals, it was perfectly comprehensible and a necessary component of their daily routine. The final few pages of the diary kept in 1852 by Mary Longfellow Greenleaf, sister of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, demonstrated the French Market’s centrality to residents’ daily needs. From 1841 to 1861, Greenleaf and her husband, James, divided their time between New England and New Orleans due to James’s work in the cotton industry. In a slender journal, Greenleaf kept a careful record of her daily activities during the year she turned thirty-six. She noted the weather, the house calls she made, with whom she dined, and the scripture passages featured in the day’s sermon at the local Episcopal church. While her spare, penciled entries allow the reader to reconstruct in broad strokes how she passed her year, the final few pages of the book added an extraordinary level of detail. There, Greenleaf itemized her daily expenses, amassing a 365-day shopping list for her household.

A sample of her records from one week in early November 1852 spoke to the market’s importance to daily life and the experience of shopping in antebellum New Orleans:

**November**

- 1: market 1.10. soap 5 indigo 5 bread 5 linen 1.0... drayage from ship 1.25
- 2: market 1.25 butter 25. Hops 20. Charity 1.00. lit 50
- 3: market 80. bread ticket 50...
- 4: market 2.35. fruit 20. Butter 25. Cake 30. Coffee 40.
- 5: market 75. Ice tickets 50. Charity 50. Yeast 5.
- 6: market 1.50. K. butter 25. Paid Sarah 18.50. apples 10. Drayage 1.50...seamstress 75
- 8: market 1.55. apples 10... saw 25.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “In the Old French Market,” *Harper’s Weekly*, January 21, 1882, 39.

As this excerpt showed, Greenleaf’s first expense of the day was always the market. The reliable repetition of this item made it the clear anchor of her daily routine, even if she may have sent a servant on her behalf.<sup>21</sup> In certain months, Greenleaf did not bother to repeat the word “market” in her journal, instead indicating it with a simple ditto mark. Because she, and not her husband, maintained this list, she clearly managed a significant portion of their income, even if she entrusted a servant with spending it. Greenleaf’s market purchases were often inexpensive – much cheaper than the regular wages she paid to her servants – but they were a daily necessity.

Still, her complete list showed that the market was not the source for everything she needed; one-stop shopping did not exist at this time in the city. Greenleaf regularly purchased dressmaking supplies and household items like notepaper, candles, and a toothbrush from sellers outside the market. She donated to charity, paid for a six-month subscription to the *Daily Picayune*, and purchased a cookbook on December 2, 1852, perhaps in preparation for the upcoming holiday festivities.<sup>22</sup> In addition to these items, which she likely found in French Quarter shops, she bought a variety of edible goods from street vendors and dry grocers to

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<sup>20</sup> November 7, 1852, seems to be a rare day when Greenleaf did not shop at the market. For a longer sample of transcribed entries from Greenleaf’s expense list in the fall of 1852, see Appendix A: Mary Longfellow Greenleaf Diary, 1852. MSS 363, Mary Longfellow Greenleaf Diary, 1852, HNOG.

<sup>21</sup> Unlike many wealthy New Orleans residents, the Greenleafs did not seem to have owned slaves. Greenleaf’s brother, Longfellow, was a noted abolitionist. Researchers note, “It is believed that Mary was anti-slavery but felt compassion for her New Orleans friends, saying they were misled by wicked leaders.” Records of payments to family servants, such as Greenleaf’s note on November 6, 1852, “Paid Sarah 18.50,” seem to support the hypothesis that the Greenleafs employed servants rather than slaves. For an overview of the Greenleaf and Longfellow family histories, see Finding Aid, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) Family Papers, 1768-1972, 35, Longfellow National Historic Site, Cambridge, Massachusetts, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed February 6, 2016, <http://www.nps.gov/long/learn/historyculture/upload/HWLfamilyaidNMSCfinal.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Only a limited selection of cookbooks was available in the United States at this time. In her memoir of her New Orleans childhood, Eliza Moore Ripley described kitchens of the 1840s as Spartan compared to those later in the century. “Still the thrifty housewife made and served cakes fit for the gods, with only Miss Leslie’s cook book to refer to, and that was published in the twenties.” Here Ripley likely referred to *Seventy-Five Receipts for Pastry, Cakes, and Sweetmeats*, by Eliza Leslie, published in 1828. Eliza Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans: Being Recollections of My Girlhood* (New York: Arno Press, 1975, repr. 1912), 46.

supplement the vegetables grown in her garden.<sup>23</sup> Foodstuffs that Greenleaf listed separately from her market purchases included perishable and non-perishable items like butter, milk, lard, oysters, lemons, vinegar, nuts, cocoa, cornstarch, yeast, bread, cornmeal, honey, onions, salt, rice, apples, cakes, and coffee. Regular payments for bread and ice “tickets” implied that these, too, likely arrived at her door via vendors or delivery carts operating outside the bounds of the market. Still, Greenleaf almost never skipped a daily expense at the market; even a quick glance at her journal’s final pages makes this routine obvious.

If Greenleaf shopped for herself she flaunted convention in antebellum New Orleans. Multiple visitors noted that white women rarely appeared in antebellum public markets in the Crescent City, unlike in large northern cities; instead, they sent enslaved women of color to shop on their behalf.<sup>24</sup> Shoppers and vendors of color thus experienced the French Market as a place of economic and social independence, if not authority, in ways that further challenged outsiders’ perceptions of it as a disorganized Babel. An 1857 writer acknowledged the New Orleans market as “the high place of the blacks – who buy and sell, and chaffer and chaff, and laugh.” They filled the aisles as shoppers and were also responsible for providing much of the food for sale. “Except for the labors of the old negroes, who bring in chickens, and artichokes, and figs, and potatoes, and other edibles,” the author explained, “one sees that the population must

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<sup>23</sup> In entries from early spring 1852, Greenleaf recorded the dates when she sowed bush peas, carrots, parsnips, beets, and turnips in her garden, as well as the days she started tomatoes and eggplants “in box” and then transferred them to the garden one month later. January 5, February 5, February 6, and March 6, 1852. MSS 363, Greenleaf Diary, HNOC.

<sup>24</sup> In 1835, Joseph Holt Ingraham wrote, “[B]efore every pillar [in the market], the shining face of a blackee may be seen glistening from among his vegetables....During the half hour I remained in the market, I did not see one white person to fifty blacks. It appears that here servants do all the marketing, and that gentlemen and ladies do not, as in Boston, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, visit the market-place themselves.” The seemingly total absence of white housewives from New Orleans’s public markets would make it all the more ironic when in the 1910s they would declare themselves the experts on matters related to market sanitation. Ingraham, *The South-West, by a Yankee. In Two Volumes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 102. For further detail on white women’s reliance on enslaved women vendors or shoppers, see chapters 1 and 4.

immediately starve to death.”<sup>25</sup> Throughout the majority of the nineteenth century, people of color at the French Market played nearly every conceivable role, as the hands that grew, harvested, transported, purchased, and prepared most of the food. Enslaved people of color and Choctaw Indians, who traveled to the city from the northern shores of Lake Pontchartrain, used the marketplace to supplement paltry rations and sell food for their own profit. Beginning in 1835, the city set aside the unregulated space between market buildings specifically for these mobile sellers. Although denied the privilege of working from a permanent stand, these figures escaped the extra regulation and expenses that a market stall entailed.<sup>26</sup>

When antebellum slaves and postbellum servants conducted their household’s daily shopping, some learned to reserve a sliver of the budget for their own enjoyment, however brief or small. Eliza Ripley, who grew up in a home on Canal Street, one of New Orleans’s most prominent boulevards, remembered accompanying John, an enslaved man who labored in their house, to the French Market as a child in the 1840s. She recalled, “John, forgetting nothing that had been ordered...always carefully remember[ed] one most important item, the saving of at least a picayune out of the market money for a cup of coffee at Manette’s stall.” The single cup of coffee and plate of beignets, which he shared with the girl, counted for a moment of relaxation and consumptive pleasure within the market’s halls. The pause was brief, though, and “John finished the repast and ‘dreened’ the cup, and with the remark, ‘We won’t say anything about

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<sup>25</sup> “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson’s Magazine*, October 1857, 438.

<sup>26</sup> In his history of eighteenth-century food markets in the Lower Mississippi Valley, Daniel Usner, Jr., agreed that “Afro-American women became the most visible of all buyers and sellers of food in the New Orleans market.” Usner, Jr., “Food Marketing and Interethnic Exchange in the Eighteenth-Century Lower Mississippi Valley,” *Food and Foodways* 1 (1986), 287. On early nineteenth-century food sellers’ creative use of space at the French Market and in city streets and authorities’ attempts to regulate them, see Magill, “French Market,” and Frink, “Spectacles of the Street” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 169-181.

this,’ we started toward home.”<sup>27</sup> John exercised a small, sensory moment of independence in the nineteenth-century French Market, just a few blocks away from French Quarter coffeehouses where white patrons bought enslaved people at auction.<sup>28</sup>

Just as John learned to experience the French Market as a site of leisure as well as work, many of the market’s daily laborers and shoppers of color flourished in the place’s Babel-like linguistic *mélange* that so confused many white travelers. In 1857, a visiting white writer experienced a moment of distinct exclusion due to the market’s multilingual mix. His reaction communicated a combination of bemusement and pseudo-anthropological interest in the role of language at New Orleans’s marketplace, especially among New Orleanians of color. To his readers, he described a pair of shoppers belonging to “that great substratum, the negro element, so exotic and interesting to the stranger,” engaged in morning pleasantries (*fig. 2.2*). Though their exchange was largely unintelligible to him, he nevertheless attempted a crude transcription of their conversation and invited the reader, “Let us listen to these two old ones – all battered, and tattered, and torn”:

MR. JONSING – ‘Got new dog, Monser Thompsing, eh?’

BOTH – ‘Waugh, waugh, waugh!’

DOG – ‘Bow, wow!’ snapping at Mr. Johnson’s leg.

MR. THOMPSON – ‘Nomporte – goin’ apter he breffast, tinks you make good meat – good morn’, Mr. Jonsing.’

BOTH – ‘Waugh, waugh, waugh! Waugh, waugh, waugh!’ and exit.<sup>29</sup>

In these brief lines written like a bit of theatrical script, the author cast the men as colorful characters and placed the noisy dog in equal rank, reporting the men’s “waugh, waugh” and the dog’s “bow, wow” as indecipherable noise of the same class. Clearly the men were friends and

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<sup>27</sup> Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> On the city’s coffeehouses as settings for men’s leisure and business, especially slave auctions, see chapter 1, as well as Richard Campanella, “On the Structural Basis of Social Memory: Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade Part I,” *Preservation in Print* 40, no. 2 (March 2013): 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson’s Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly*, October 1857, 438.

accustomed to greeting each other in this space, but the writer's comprehension ended there.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 2.2. Although a white writer derided the speech of “Mr. Jonsing” and “Mr. Thompsing,” the accompanying illustration showed the two men at ease in the nineteenth-century New Orleans marketplace. “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson’s Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly* V, no. 41 (October 1857), 438.

The men talked at the same time, which to the observer seemed nothing more than a jumbled babble of noise. He deemed the snatches of English he could discern, inflected with a measure of Creole, as meaningless small talk. And yet the illustration accompanying this clumsy recording

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<sup>30</sup> Sybil Kein reported that white writers, especially those working for several Louisiana weekly newspapers, began to publish phony letters to the editor and other articles in the Creole language shortly after the Civil War, as attempts to ridicule and infantilize recently freed slaves and their language. Nevertheless, Mark M. Smith argues that texts like *Emerson’s* did important work in “rescu[ing] [sounds and their meanings] from the ephemerality of voice,” recording perishable aural experiences before other technology existed to do so. Such mediation often crossed the line into exploitation, however. Kein, “The Use of Louisiana Creole in Southern Literature,” in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*, ed. Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 126-128; and Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).



showed two shoppers at ease, one with a walking stick and his dog, smoking, the other carrying a market basket. They eagerly leaned toward each other, smiling and talking. Belittled by the author as an outlandish example of New Orleans color, these shoppers were undeniably at home in the market. There they found familiar faces and easy conversation, where the traveler could only see an exotic and opaque “substratum.” The appearance of “Mr. Jonsing” and “Mr. Thompsing” in a nationally distributed news magazine hinted at their widespread appeal to curious Americans, even if most readers found their speech unintelligible too.

In fact, nineteenth-century New Orleans drew many tourists specifically because of its reputation as an exceptionally heterogeneous, yet still American, locale. Especially in the decades following the Civil War, as New Orleans and the rest of the South segregated along lines of white and black, travelers’ interest in the city’s Babel-like mix of languages evolved into a fascination with the unique mix of *people* visible at the French Market. Visitors marveled – warily – at the market as a crucible in which seemingly discordant sounds, tastes, and colors mingled. Combinations of people and foods that would be peculiar, if not proscribed, a few blocks away in the French Quarter or in other American cities went unremarked within the bounds of the market. To observers, New Orleans and its markets seemed an exotic vestige of an American past in which the line between black and white remained blurred.

The French Market was a “veritable ‘curiosity-shop,’” marveled a reporter in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in 1883. The tourist walked amongst “one and all, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.” In the market’s crowded aisles, “a breast of mutton and a piece of lace hang in close proximity; small alligators and spring chickens lie down together.”<sup>31</sup> This writer, who called the market “Babel” in another passage of the same article, reached again for a Biblical

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<sup>31</sup> “The Old French Market,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, March 31, 1883, Issue 1,436, 95.

allegory, but here painted the establishment as a vision of the promised land, where Jew and Gentile were neighbors and the leopard lay down with the kid.<sup>32</sup> In the same era, William Coleman, author of one of the first travel guides to the city, felt similarly drawn to the market as a kind of cabinet of wonders with fantastical ethnic and racial mixes. He marveled, “A man might here study the world. Every race that the world boasts is here, and a good many races that are nowhere else. The strangest and most complicated mixture of Indian, negro and Caucasian blood, with negroes washed white, and white men that mulattoes would scorn to claim as of their own particular hybrid.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike later visitors to the market, these writers gloried in the seemingly democratic juxtapositions, mixing, and blending that defined the marketplace.

Still, they gazed with removed, scientific appraisal and assessment, rather than full engagement. Similarly, an 1883 article in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* described a “wonderfully picturesque” French Market defined by its diversity. “Every nation on earth is represented at this epicurean court,” the writer insisted. “Negroes and ‘poor white trash’ glare at each other; Frenchmen and Germans fight tongue-duels; Mexicans and Indians, Creoles and Americans, all help to swell the Babel of tongues, shouting and yelling vociferously together.”<sup>34</sup> Though animosity abounded in this writer’s description of the market, his comparison of the

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<sup>32</sup> In the eleventh chapter of the Bible’s Book of Isaiah, the prophet describes a harmonious new world after the Son of God comes, predicting, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, / and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; / and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; / and a little child shall lead them.” Isa. 11:6 (AV).

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin M. Norman, who had published an even earlier guidebook to the city in 1845, had expressed a similarly exhilarated reaction to the market’s sensations, when “all colors, nations, and tongues are commingled in one heterogeneous mass of delightful confusion.” William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map. Illustrated with many original engravings; and containing exhaustive accounts of the traditions, historical legends, and remarkable localities of the Creole city* (New York: Will H. Coleman, 1885), 258; Norman, *Norman’s New Orleans*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> William Coleman’s 1885 guide to the city described a similar scene of rude pandemonium, where the traveler was subjected to “languages whose whole vocabulary embraces but a few dozen words, the major part of which are expressive, emphatic and terrific oaths....Every language spoken on the globe is slanged, docked, or insulted by uncivilized innovations on its original purity.” Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book*, 259, 262; “The Old French Market in New Orleans,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Issue 1, 436, March 31, 1883, 95.

scene to a court of law implied that all parties fought for customers on comparable footing. The clamorous nature of the market had hardly changed since Latrobe walked through it more than six decades earlier. Nor had the prominent role claimed by New Orleanians of color.

An especially clear depiction of the marketplace as a site of authority for blacks can be observed in a full-page etching of the French Market that was published in *Harper's Weekly* on January 21, 1882 (*fig. 2.3*). The accompanying text identified this as New Orleans's "famous market...a perfect Babel," and the confusion implicit in calling it Babel was readily visible in the mess of goods, vendors, and shoppers that lined both sides of the market space. The people pictured were all engaged in different activities – they sat and sewed, stooped and reached into a bag, inclined to hear a quoted price, hauled a heavy basket – and their heads and bodies blended into the scrum of fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other goods surrounding them. Here was America's southern, semi-tropical Babel, a buzzing mix of humans and the things they make, buy, and sell. Emerging up out of the chaos, though, appeared the classical colonnades that gave order to the market, perspective to the work, and drew the viewer's eye toward its focal point: the female shopper in the center aisle. The only figure whose form was fully enunciated and who faced the viewer head-on, she trod a straight path through the market that seemed to have been magically cleared of the clutter on either side of her. Her upright posture echoed that of the columns and the expression on her face was impassive. Most significant, though, were her arms, with solid, well-defined fingers that held stable the two baskets she carried, one already overflowing with produce she had purchased. The other basket appeared empty, implying that she still had decisions to make and money to spend. In this representation, this woman shopper

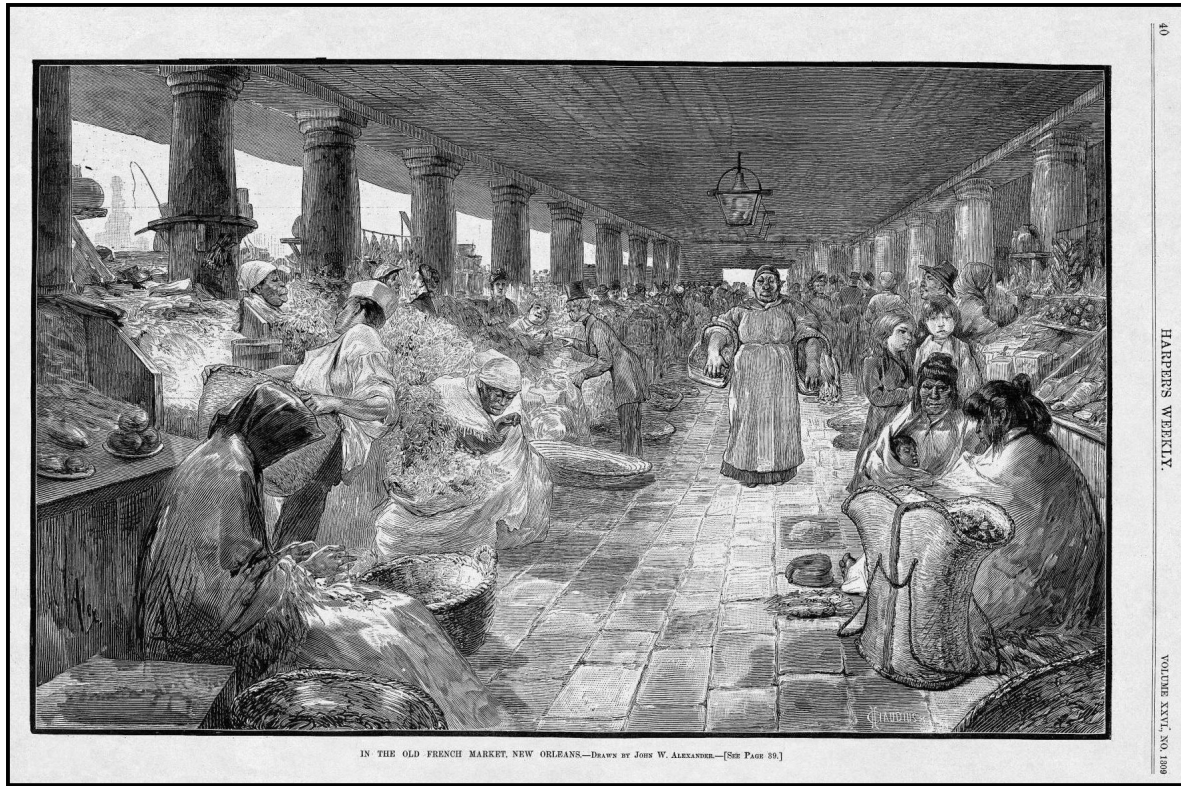


Figure 2.3. Until the early twentieth century, enslaved women and servants of color accomplished the daily shopping trip – and managed the finances associated with it – at the city’s public markets. “In the Old French Market, New Orleans – drawn by John W. Alexander,” *Harper’s Weekly* XXVI, no. 1309, January 21, 1882, 40.

of color was the undeniable center of the work, literally and thematically. Communicating clear authority and calm independence, she claimed the market as her own domain.

By the time the *Harper’s* illustration went to press in 1882, however, the French Market’s era as a site of comfort, profit, and autonomy for such figures as the mobile woman coffee vendor, the chatty “Mr. Jonsing” and “Mr. Thompsing,” and the authoritative shopper of color was approaching its end. The sensory, linguistic, and racial amalgamations that had thrilled or intrigued visitors earlier in the nineteenth century came to disgust tourists and locals by the turn of the twentieth. To eyes freshly inspired by Progressive calls for sunlight and sanitation – and mindful of the segregated barriers reinforced by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision – New

Orleans's legendary Babel suddenly seemed a chaotic and filthy wasteland.<sup>35</sup> In the 1910s, New Orleans's white housewives declared that they should be entrusted with cleaning it up.

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## II. Cleaning up Babel

In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, visitors and locals began to dwell on the French Market's dirtiness, rather than its assortment of food and people. Travel guides started to subtly deemphasize the French Market as a tourist attraction. At the same time, white housewives in New Orleans organized a public campaign to renovate the city's markets, decrying them as anti-modern and even un-American. Concurrent with technological and regulatory shifts in the market, these years marked a crucial period of transition in the ways that New Orleanians represented and experienced race and ethnicity in the market place. As the French Market changed, so too did perceptions of what it meant to be Indian, Sicilian, black, and Creole. The implications of these shifts would become clear during the market's 1930s renovation, which definitively de-ethnicized the French Market and largely ended its longstanding role as a practical and symbolic centerpiece of the city's identity.

In an 1892 essay accompanying his book of New Orleans photographs, Carl Groenevelt described the French Market as a "little city in itself," though not one laid out in orderly, gridded streets. Instead, shoppers found themselves winding their way through "queer, cramped places

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<sup>35</sup> The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision upheld the constitutional basis for "separate but equal" facilities for whites and people of color. Homer Plessy was an "octoroon" (the designation used in Louisiana for a person considered to be 7/8 white and 1/8 black) and New Orleans native. He was arrested in New Orleans on June 7, 1892, after boarding an East Louisiana Railroad car reserved for white passengers. On the history of segregation in New Orleans and resistance to it see Blair L.M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

with narrow passages.”<sup>36</sup> Groenevelt and his contemporaries were torn between a fascination with the picturesque nature of the French Market – epitomized by its twisting alleyways, dim rafters, and so-called swarthy vendors – and a growing wariness of what, or whom, its dark corners hid.<sup>37</sup> Two years earlier, Herbert Burdett had agreed, writing, “It must be admitted that the French Market, if picturesque, is also dirty. The butchers are not at all particular as to where they throw their refuse; cobwebs hang from the roofs and form a nucleus for all manner of grime; vegetable garbage in profusion adorns the alley-ways.” And yet the “dingy, more or less tattered awnings” that shielded fruit, vegetables, meat, and fish from the sun and wind “form[ed] a picturesque setting,” an accidental but clever frame for the people and goods beneath. To his eye, the decrepit fabric complemented the general aesthetic of the Sicilian fruit vendors, “with their swarthy skins, unstudied attitude, and careless raiment”<sup>38</sup> (fig. 2.4).

Like other public facilities in New Orleans during this era, the French Market had undeniably begun to crumble. The city’s economy and public works lagged in the decades following Reconstruction, as state authorities struggled to attract investment to the state and encourage northern or European immigration, seeking to reserve most jobs for whites and exclude freedmen of color.<sup>39</sup> Burdett observed that well-heeled tourists were beginning to shrink

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<sup>36</sup> Carl E. Groenevelt, *New Orleans, Illustrated in Photo Etching from New and Original Plates, with Descriptive Text* (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell, 1892).

<sup>37</sup> Although William Coleman had lauded the French Market’s exotic energy in his 1885 *Historical Sketch Book*, he too could not help but notice its near-century’s worth of accumulated grime. “From the ceiling hang endless ropes of spider’s webs, numberless flies, and incalculable dirt.” Still, he seemed willing to accept these features as a necessary part of the market’s lived-in charm. Contemplating the stools of the market’s coffee stands, which sat amidst piles of vegetable debris, he reasoned, “But then this is the market, and the wilted cabbage leaves are a part of the place.” Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book*, 258, 262.

<sup>38</sup> Herbert W. Burdett, “Historic America: VI. New Orleans,” *The Illustrated American*, April 5, 1890, 153.

<sup>39</sup> Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); and Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

from the market's grimy corners. "The fashionable visitors who 'do' the market on Sunday as the 'correct thing' peer curiously at the more mysterious stalls and the most conspicuous bargain-buyers, and shudder a little at the dirt," he wrote.<sup>40</sup> From a primary attraction for out-of-town travelers during earlier decades, the French Market had become a box to check, and a dirty one at that.



Figure 2.4: By the turn of the twentieth century, Sicilian immigrants dominated the New Orleans fruit trade, from the smallest scale – as peddlers on foot – to the largest scale – as in the case of the Vaccaro brothers and their Standard Fruit Company empire. George François Mugnier, "Fruit Stand, French Market," ca. 1880-1910. George François Mugnier Photograph Collection, Folder Two, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://nutrias.org/photos/mugnier/vieuxcarre/gfmvc45.jpg>.

<sup>40</sup> Burdett, "Historic America," 154.

The market's steady decline as a tourist draw can best be seen in surveying the subtle changes in nine successive editions of the *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, a travel guide published by New Orleans's most prominent newspaper.<sup>41</sup> A comparison of the volumes published in 1896, 1900, 1903, 1904, 1907, 1908, 1910, 1917, and 1924 reveals decreasing text and dwindling photographs featuring the French Market, a shift from enthusiasm for the market's people and goods to appreciation of its architecture, and a transition from a general attitude of pride to one of wariness and nostalgia. Two passages, from the 1900 and 1903 editions, help especially to illuminate changing perceptions of the French Market's appeal. According to the 1900 guide, at the French Market the tourist would find "Chinese and Hindu, Jew and Spaniard, French and Teuton, Irish and English."<sup>42</sup> In 1903, the multiethnic crowd remained the same but the author now warned that their assembled impact on the visitor could be overpowering. The 1903 market was populated by "Chinese and Hindu, Jew and Spaniard, French and Teuton, Irish and English, all uniting in a ceaseless babel of tongues that is simply bewildering.... You turn from the market, with its singular complexity that interests while it challenges admiration, and emerge upon the levee."<sup>43</sup> By 1903, the tourist must "emerge" from the market as from a whirlpool of noise that threatened to drown him. The same mix of people that had been charming in 1900 had grown overwhelming within just a few years, meriting a note of caution.

Nevertheless, whereas the 1903 guide still encouraged travelers to venture inside the French Market, the 1910 edition did not. Distinct from previous versions, which had emphasized the market's multilingual crowd, the guide's tenth edition focused solely – and briefly – on the

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<sup>41</sup> In 1914, the *Picayune* and *Times-Democrat* newspapers merged to form the *Times-Picayune*. Thus, the guide was titled the *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* up to and including its eleventh edition, published in 1913. Beginning with the twelfth edition, published in 1917, it was known as the *Times-Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*.

<sup>42</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans: Revised and Enlarged*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1900), 46.

<sup>43</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans: Revised and Enlarged*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1903), 34, 35.



French Market's architecture. In fact, from the writer's dry description of the building's brick walls, wooden roofs, and "interesting old columns," he gave the impression that he never actually ventured inside the market, but instead lingered on the perimeter.<sup>44</sup> By the twelfth edition, published in 1917, increasing wariness toward the market had matured into a simple warning, as the writer counseled, "The French Market is greatly changed from the old days." And by the guide's final edition, the difference between the market of 1924 and that of 1896 was literally night and day. In 1896, the author had advised an energetic morning excursion, writing, "The markets in New Orleans are well worth a visit.... To see them in their perfection, [the tourist] will have to arise early enough to get to the market by sunrise."<sup>45</sup> By 1924, the guide's author recommended that a tour of the French Quarter and the French Market begin in the late afternoon, "because at that time the soft colors of evening will fall across the battered façades of the old houses and will treat them kindly.... You must look with friendly eyes. If you do not, you may come away with only the ideas of dirt and squalor."<sup>46</sup> Fearing the bright sunlight's exposure of the market's decline, the 1924 *Times-Picayune's Guide* advised a softer lens through which to perceive the French Quarter and its history.

Turn-of-the-century travel writers used an additional lens through which they explained the story of the French Market's decline: the figure of the Choctaw vendor, who sold hand-woven cane baskets and herbs, especially sassafras.<sup>47</sup> Whereas the "stately," turbaned Aglaé and her aromatic coffee had personified the exotic and consumable qualities of nineteenth-century

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<sup>44</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: Picayune Job Print, 1910), 57.

<sup>45</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans: Nicholson & Co., 1896), 33.

<sup>46</sup> *The Times-Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: The Times-Picayune, 1924), 17.

<sup>47</sup> Dried, pulverized sassafras root is *filé*, a critical ingredient in many gumbo recipes. It adds a slightly bitter taste and thicker texture to the soup.

New Orleans, the slow disappearance of the Choctaw in the 1900s epitomized the market's decay as well as its need for modernization. Although several Native American tribes, such as the Houma, Tunica, and Acolapissa, among others, had lived in Louisiana before and after the arrival of French colonists, the Choctaws became the most regular trading partners of French settlers. Throughout the nineteenth century, Choctaw vendors constituted a reliable presence at the French Market. There, American authorities isolated Choctaws and other vendors of color to the "neutral ground" between market buildings. In early twentieth-century Louisiana, Choctaw employment in the logging industry declined as deforestation spread. By 1939, a Louisiana newspaper profiled what the reporter claimed to be Louisiana's "last full blooded Choctaw."<sup>48</sup> Choctaws had long played a visible role in New Orleans's culture, largely due to their participation in the French Market. Yet they, too, ultimately suffered from catastrophic economic, environmental, and social insults inflicted by American presence in their homeland.

Although appealing to white tourists as exotic oddities, nineteenth-century Choctaw market vendors simultaneously befuddled them by not participating in the French Market's famous, noisy Babel. Writers who described Choctaw women at the French Market tended to depict them as silent. In his 1893 *New Orleans Guide*, James Zacharie juxtaposed women shoppers of color with Indian women vendors, emphasizing the noisiness of one and the noiselessness of the other. "Fat negresses...stroll along, talking gumbo French...exchanging sweet morsels of news or gossip," he described. "Amidst all this noise and confusion, the

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<sup>48</sup> Tim Mueller, *Nations Within: The Four Sovereign Tribes of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); H.F. "Pete" Gregory, "Indians and Folklife in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana," *Folklife in the Florida Parishes* (Hammond, LA: Louisiana Folklife Program and Center for Southeast Louisiana Studies), accessed February 7, 2016, [http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Virtual\\_Books/Fla\\_Parishes/book\\_florida\\_indians.html](http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Virtual_Books/Fla_Parishes/book_florida_indians.html); David I. Bushnell, Jr. "The Choctaw of Bayou Lacombe, St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana," *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 48 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909); "Six Choctaw Remain of Proud Bayou Lacombe Tribe," *Times Picayune*, July 2, 1939; and "Mathilde Johnson, Last Full Blooded Choctaw in Lacombe," *St. Tammany News Banner*, Covington, La., February 18, 1976.

Choctaw Indians sit, silent as statues, apparently oblivious of their surroundings.”<sup>49</sup> The women separated themselves from the market’s noisy Babel, remaining uniquely quiet. “Chinamen, Russians, Malays, Britons...stop to glance at the squaws,” Herbert Burdett described in 1890. “Germans and Greeks, Cuban darkies and Emerald Islander[s] ask questions...but through it all the Indians sit motionless and scornfully contemplative.”<sup>50</sup> Though an object of fascination for all, they seemingly communicated with no one. The silence of Indian women stymied turn-of-the-century white observers who stood ready to judge them according to their speech.<sup>51</sup>

White tourists expressed disappointment in the loss of noble demeanor they claimed to notice in Choctaw vendors and, importantly, blamed this shortfall on their intermarriage with people of African descent. “They have melted away into Mulattoes,” William Coleman complained in 1885. “The lazy, unstudied attitude of...these daughters of the forest is not exactly in accordance with the poetic idea one used to drink in.”<sup>52</sup> Burdett agreed, acknowledging that the Indian sellers were “the star attractions of the market in the eyes of many strangers,” but warned readers that their “blood...is generally diluted with that of the negro...There is nothing

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<sup>49</sup> Zacharie, James S, *New Orleans Guide, with Descriptions of the Routes to New Orleans, Sights of the City Arranged Alphabetically, and Other Information Useful to Travelers; also, Outlines of the History of Louisiana* (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1893), 213.

<sup>50</sup> Burdett, “Historic America,” *The Illustrated American*, 154.

<sup>51</sup> Turn-of-the-century anthropologist David I. Bushnell, Jr., noted that the Choctaws told a creation myth strikingly similar to the Biblical story of Babel. Bushnell summarized the Choctaw myth as follows: “Many generations ago Aba, the good spirit above, created many men, all Choctaw, who spoke the language of the Choctaw, and understood one another...One day all came together and, looking upward, wondered what the clouds and the blue expanse above might be. They...at last determined to endeavor to reach the sky.” The men worked for three days. On the fourth day, “[W]hen daylight came and they...began to speak to one another, all were astounded as well as alarmed – they spoke various languages and could not understand one another...Finally they separated. The Choctaw remained the original people; the others scattered.” Bushnell speculated that the Choctaws drew some components of this myth from European sources, writing, “The Choctaw undoubtedly heard the story from the early missionaries, but certain parts of this version appear to be of native conception, consequently it may be that we have here their own ancient myth combined with, or modified by, the story told them by the missionaries.” Bushnell, Jr., “The Choctaw of Bayou Lacomb,” 30; Bushnell, Jr., “Myths of the Louisiana Choctaw,” *American Anthropologist* 12, no. 4 (October-December 1910): 531.

<sup>52</sup> Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book*, 258.

particularly noble about them, and their listless, half-sullen attitude is far from inspiring.”<sup>53</sup>

Travelers who came to New Orleans during this era sought the picturesque, but seemed crestfallen by the Choctaw women whom they interpreted as remnants of a decayed nation due to their intermarriage with people of color. This attitude communicated an important fact about whites’ own racial anxieties in a city that had served recently as the birthplace of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. In decrying the Choctaws’ “dilution” via intermarriage, whites perceived Indians as having crossed a Rubicon that doomed their civilization to failure.

Indians’ alleged state of limbo between civilization and savagery infused the 1900 *Picayune’s Guide’s* description of Choctaw market women as “quaint” and smelling sweetly of herbs and leaves, yet also “strange beings, apparently half-civilized...patient, quiet, swarthy, dark-skinned....They were crowded out of New Orleans by the superior and cultured race.”<sup>54</sup> Just eight years later, these women disappeared from the market altogether. The 1908 edition of the *Picayune’s Guide* suddenly described the Choctaw vendors in the past tense, explaining, “Formerly the French Market was a resort for the Indians....Until of their own free will the greater part of their number elected to depart.”<sup>55</sup> To turn-of-the-century white marketgoers, the vanished Indian vendors of baskets and sassafras represented the ultimate dangers of the French Market’s Babel – at what point did the multilingual mix become racial “melting”? and then extinction? – and provided tangible evidence for why the market needed to be ordered and regulated. Calls for major changes to the French Market and other public markets followed les

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<sup>53</sup> Burdett, “Historic America,” *The Illustrated American*, 154.

<sup>54</sup> *The Picayune’s Guide*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (1900), 46.

<sup>55</sup> Bushnell confirmed the timing of the Choctaws’ disappearance as reported by the *Picayune’s Guide*. In 1910 he wrote, “A few miles north of Lake Pontchartrain, in St. Tammany parish, Louisiana, are living at the present time some ten or twelve Choctaw, the last of the once numerous branch of the tribe that formerly occupied that section.” Bushnell, “Myths of the Louisiana Choctaw,” 536; *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: Picayune Job Print, 1908), 29.

than five years after the Choctaw vendors had disappeared.

Though reformers spoke primarily in terms of rats and refrigeration rather than race, racial anxieties would prove crucial to public calls to renovate the French Market. In the 1910s, white New Orleans housewives, especially those belonging to the Market Committee of the Housewives' Division of the City Federation of Clubs, decried New Orleans's public markets as a communal health danger and anti-modern. On a very public stage, they asserted their expertise as shoppers and household managers and demanded a variety of technological and regulatory renovations, as well as an end to restrictions that curtailed the development of private markets.<sup>56</sup>

Notes from State Board of Health inspections of public markets conducted in 1912 noted a variety of problems throughout the city, ranging from "dirty refrigerators" to "defective ice boxes – unsanitary tools....cats and mice running over meat," and an "awful stench from [the] floor of Poydras [market]."<sup>57</sup> The following year, Board of Health President Dr. Oscar Dowling quantified such substandard conditions in a careful list of the presence or absence of screened windows, flies, running water, and covered garbage. The results were abysmal. Horses and dogs made regular appearances in the markets, Dowling observed, and they trod floors encrusted with

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<sup>56</sup> Since the turn of the twentieth century, municipal regulations had favored the city's public markets over private markets. Ordinance 7606, C.S., of May 25, 1893, declared, "No private market shall be established within 2100 ft. of any public market." It also required any proprietor of a private market to obtain a license from the city engineer and ruled that a private market should be "not less than 10 by 15 ft in superficial area," presumably hoping to prevent the proliferation of small sidewalk food stands, such as those run by many Sicilian immigrants. In 1900, Ordinance 312, N.C.S., expanded the protective sphere surrounding public markets to 3,200 feet. These ordinances prompted multiple lawsuits from private market owners, who commissioned maps hoping to demonstrate that their businesses lay outside of public markets' restrictive areas, according to the footsteps of a person walking with an average gait. In 1913, Dryades Market vendor John H. Hunsinger resisted the Market Committee's attempts to ease restrictions on private markets, declaring, "I think [private markets] are a disgrace to the city....Why, you will have every dago in the city getting a hole in the wall and starting a place with a few vegetables and a little fruit and calling it a private market. They will be dirty and nasty and a menace to the city." Report of the Market Committee, Housewives' League Division, March 24, 1914, Folder 985-1-2, Market Committee Records, 1913-1916, Manuscripts Collection 985 (hereafter cited as MS 985), Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC); "Stallkeepers Have an Inning," *The Daily Picayune*, May 31 1913; Folder 985-1-9: Clippings, no date, LaRC.

<sup>57</sup> Notes from the State Board of Health, 1912, Folder 985-1-1, MS 985, LaRC.

the viscera of turtles and chickens.<sup>58</sup> Corners that some might have called picturesque a couple decades earlier now seemed to harbor offensive and dangerous quantities of filth. Still, the French Market's dirtiness was nothing new. As early as 1821, John James Audobon had called the French Market "the Dirtiest place in all the Cities of the United States."<sup>59</sup> Factors other than dust seemed to be at play in calls to renovate New Orleans's public markets at this time.

Housewives belonging to the Market Committee soon took such inspections into their own hands and claimed responsibility for dictating the necessary next steps. In May 1913, Committee member Mrs. John B. Parker inspected the Prytania Street market and reported, "Filth and dirt was all around. The only method of cleaning was to have a boy throw water once a week over the floor....The flies seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves."<sup>60</sup> A chorus of women corroborated such discoveries as they aired their disgust with market conditions in city newspapers. One incensed shopper wrote to the *New Orleans Item* to declare, "The public markets of New Orleans are a disgrace to civilization....Why, you can smell one of these 'sanitary' markets from one to two blocks away." Open-air stalls meant "flies swarming over the meat so thick that you can not see anything but flies...you have no way of telling how many mashed flies the butcher has wrapped up on your steak," she griped.<sup>61</sup>

Another shopper was careful to point out that the stakes were much greater than the unpleasant discovery of a handful of squashed bugs coating her dinner chops. In a letter to the *Times-Democrat*, Mrs. Jacob Ambrose Storck, president of the Fine Arts Club of New Orleans,

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<sup>58</sup> Results of Dowling's inspections conducted on May 18, 1913, "Dowling Steps In," unnamed newspaper, ca. June 1, 1913, Folder 985-1-8: Clippings, June 1913-1916, MS 985, LaRC.

<sup>59</sup> As cited in Magill, "French Market Celebrates 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Preservation in Print*.

<sup>60</sup> "Women Report on What They Found," *The Daily Picayune*, May 21, 1913, 3.

<sup>61</sup> A Resident, "Our City Markets," Letter from the People, *New Orleans Item*, May 19, 1913.

explained, “No subject is more vital to the public health at large than marketing, since upon the proper nourishment of the family depends their health, happiness and efficiency.” Furthermore, “It naturally devolves upon the woman in the home to see to it that this very essential household obligation is well discharged.”<sup>62</sup> Productive families flourished on healthful food, which could only be procured at clean markets, and the housewife served as the central link in this chain, she claimed. Members of the Market Committee recognized the power that resided in battalions of shopping housewives, armed with critical eyes and noses, and called on their continued watchful participation. In a 1915 report, the Committee announced, “We...would like to have a woman from each market neighborhood to serve on the Market Committee...and to report to [the chairman] the sanitary condition of all markets.”<sup>63</sup> The Committee charged all women to be watchful consumers, for their observations could best dictate the markets’ needs.

With the backing of an attentive press, the housewives’ Market Committee formulated an official platform in 1913 that described a New Orleans market of the future that looked very different from the market of the past, in terms of both infrastructure and people. In place of the French Market’s open stalls, dank alleyways, and chaotic throngs of shoppers and vendors, the women wanted refrigerated glass cases, bright electric lighting, and ordered aisles. An editorial in the *New Orleans Item* explained, “Food would be displayed, not in open stalls, subject to wind, dust, flies, and handling, but as in our modern restaurants, in glass counters, supplied with cold air by pipes.”<sup>64</sup> Women cited examples they had encountered in other cities and declared their desire for grocery shopping in New Orleans to look and feel more like it did in New York

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<sup>62</sup> Mrs. Jacob Ambrose Storck, “Market Question in New Orleans,” *The Times-Democrat*, May 25, 1913.

<sup>63</sup> Report of Investigating Committee, Housewives’ League, March 19, 1915, Folder 985-1-4, MS 985, LaRC.

<sup>64</sup> As described in an editorial, “Climate and Marketing,” *New Orleans Item*, May 18, 1913.

City, Washington, D.C., or, essentially, anywhere else.<sup>65</sup> “Other cities have sanitary markets, both public and private, which make us ashamed of ours,” declared the head of the City Federation of Clubs, Mrs. Inez MacMartin Myers. “When one sees the private stores...in other cities, where, displayed in large refrigerated windows, the various cuts of meat and all kinds of produce can be seen...the question arises why have we not the same?”<sup>66</sup> Whereas in earlier eras New Orleans’s Babel-like public markets had distinguished the city as exotic, now the public market system made it look antiquated and backwards, critics fretted.<sup>67</sup>

New Orleans resident Judith Hyams Douglas envisioned an extra touch to suggested renovations, eventually adopted by the Market Committee, to enhance her ideal shopping experience. She wrote to the *Times-Democrat*, “My idea would be to employ girls, physically

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<sup>65</sup> Tracey Deutsch argued that the eclipse of mom-and-pop grocery stores by chain supermarkets, which began on a national scale in the 1910s and 1920s, was a top-down process that unrolled according to the strategies of corporations and the federal government, rather than shoppers’ desires. This research finds a different history at play in New Orleans, where organized housewives lobbied for the specific amenities offered by chain supermarkets and suggested the abolition of all municipal restrictions favoring the city’s historic public markets. On the Market Committee’s demands, see Speech [at] Round Table Club, ca. December 1916, Folder 985-1-5, MS 985, LaRC. Also see Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> “Housewives Ask for Repeal of Market Statues,” *New Orleans Item*, May 18, 1913. The *New Orleans Item* reported the specific demands of the Market Committee to include, “That the strictest sanitary regulations be enforced, such as the screening of all markets, putting tile floors, etc. That the matter of personal cleanliness of all employees in the market be rigidly enforced, and the employees be made to wear immaculate white suits.” “Women’s Federation Asks Change in Market System,” *New Orleans Item*, 1913.

<sup>67</sup> French Market vendors strongly resisted the reforming efforts of the Market Committee, casting the women’s complaints as a class-driven crusade, but seemed unable to organize effectively against them. Some market sellers scoffed at the premise of middle-class housewives claiming expertise related to shopping, since this group often sent servants to shop for them. Vendor Sol Ruello scolded, “If the New Orleans housewife wants a low cost of living, why doesn’t she come down to the French Market and get it?...She is not like her mother before her. She is too proud to go to the French Market and buy her supplies. Twenty-five years ago the housewives used to do it.” Other vendors alleged that women reformers simply had too much time on their hands and derided as frivolous the women’s calls for cleanliness. French Market vendor Frank Clesi declared, “It is not the poor people who are kicking [about the public markets]....It is the class that rides in automobiles. As for myself, I handle mostly high-class products. Therefore I know.” An editorial in the *Item* agreed, stating, “It is the club women...and the women at whose doors the wolf never howls who are [seeking to renovate the public markets]. The woman who trudges six or eight blocks to market every morning...making every day countless small sacrifices for the sake of her little ones, is not spending much time thinking about modern sanitation.” “Lazy Housewives Blamed by Dealers,” no source, ca. spring 1913; “City Markets to Stay,” *Times-Democrat*, May 31, 1913; No title, *New Orleans Item*, May 16, 1913; Folder 985-1-7: Clippings, January-May 1913, MS 985, LaRC.



sound, who would receive an outer garment....of white linen.”<sup>68</sup> Douglas’s white girls clad in white linen would act as smiling guides, converting a chore conducted in a dirty and heterogeneous marketplace into a sanitized, enlightened, more homogeneous experience. Whereas in earlier eras free and enslaved people of color had dominated the French Market as shoppers and vendors, literally and figuratively elbowing out white residents and tourists, now white New Orleanians sought to claim the historic space for themselves alone. The Market Committee’s white-coated guides personified Progressive ideals of cleanliness and expertise. Yet they also declared a transparent racial perspective that idealized whiteness in the market’s people and structures alike.

The housewives’ campaign to renovate the markets stemmed from a sense that the spaces where New Orleans’s famous foods could be purchased, and the rules used to govern them, were specifically anti-modern and even un-American. In a speech to the New Orleans Round Table Club, a longstanding men’s group that met in a mansion on St. Charles Avenue, a Market Committee member explained why New Orleans’s public markets were outdated, both practically and politically.<sup>69</sup> She declared, “The French Market, if not physically as old as the city, was one of the European ideas brought over by the first settlers, and it has been along European lines of government that our market system has been run.” Market rules had not been modified since well before the turn of the century, she alleged, “and these in turn were based upon the old ideas that pervaded Europe before the French Revolution and before the time of Adam Smith...rather than upon the more modern and more American thought that there should

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<sup>68</sup> Judith Hyams Douglas, “The Market Problem, *The Times-Democrat*, May 25, 1913.

<sup>69</sup> The Round Table Club commonly welcomed male intellectuals to address the Club’s all-male membership. That a member of the Market Committee spoke to the Club about the need to modernize the city’s public markets may have indicated the topic’s importance to the city’s educated white citizens. John Smith Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, Volume II (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1922), 695.

be no restrictions except those absolutely necessary.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, according to her reasoning, the French Market and its smaller siblings wallowed due to an approach to marketing, business, and government that predated New Orleans’s transfer to the United States, and the time had come to Americanize it. Largely implicit – but not at all absent – were the racial components of her vision for an American market in New Orleans.

The Committee’s characterization of the market as not quite American recalled newspaper reporting of a tour of the French Market three years earlier by Edward Lafaye, Commissioner of Public Properties, on May 31, 1913. Lafaye had spent an afternoon chatting with fruit sellers and truck gardeners in an attempt to better understand the public markets’ problems. Newspapers that chronicled his visit used language that harkened back to nineteenth-century accounts in portraying the market as Babel and casting Lafaye in the role of a civilizing diviner. As Lafaye entered the French Market, he “was the center of a seething throng of perspiring, excited stall keepers and truckers, many speaking broken English and all gesticulating vociferously,” a *Times-Democrat* writer reported. “Several times the mass of humanity, redolent of toil and their wares, became so dense that the Commissioner almost had to fight his way to freedom and fresh air.”<sup>71</sup> Ten years after the 1903 *Picayune’s Guide* had described the market as a Babel from which the tourist must struggle to “emerge,” this public servant still had to do the same. Amidst the market’s noisy crowd, one voice dominated: that of Annie Foto, a vegetable seller, “a sort of queen among the olive complexioned, dark-eyed women of the market,” according to the *Item*. “She projected her plump self in the foreground and engaged [Lafaye] in

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<sup>70</sup> Speech [at] Round Table Club, ca. December 1916, Folder 985-1-5, MS 985, LaRC.

<sup>71</sup> “Visits French Market,” *The Times-Democrat*, June 1, 1913.

conversation.”<sup>72</sup>

Vendors like Foto, likely a Sicilian immigrant, were largely responsible for the public’s perception of the French Market as persistently un-American around the turn of the century, but their racial trajectory within New Orleans’s population would diverge from that of Choctaw vendors and people of color.<sup>73</sup> Arriving by the thousands in New Orleans from Sicily beginning in the 1870s, many immigrants found work vending citrus fruits, bananas, and oysters in the French Market, to the extent that they monopolized the city’s fruit trade and earned the French Quarter the nickname “Little Palermo.”<sup>74</sup> Writing in 1884 in *Harper’s Weekly*, famed journalist Lafcadio Hearn reported that by that point white New Orleanians had already “mostly abandoned the Carré to the European Latins – French emigrants from the Mediterranean coasts, Italians, Sicilians, Spaniards, Greeks...and especially to the French-speaking element of color.”<sup>75</sup> The turn-of-the-century New Orleans press made frequent use of mafia references as the favored pejorative stereotype for the group. But even this hint of danger did not prevent – and perhaps

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<sup>72</sup> “Like Diogenes Lafaye Seeks Truth in Markets,” *New Orleans Item*, June 1, 1913.

<sup>73</sup> A newspaper article about Lafaye’s visit described Foto (incorrectly listing her first name as Rosa) as having “been in business in the locality for twenty-four years.” “Lafaye’s Visit,” unnamed newspaper, June 1, 1913, Folder 985-1-8: Clippings, June 1913-1916, MS 985, LaRC. The 1910 federal census listed one Annie Foto whose age would have been appropriate for that of a longtime worker in the French Quarter as of 1913. Annie Foto was born in Italy in 1876 and immigrated to the United States in 1879 or 1880. As of the 1910 census, she had five children, two of whom also worked: eighteen-year old Dominick, a chauffeur, and sixteen-year-old Pauline, a roller in a cigar factory. By the 1920 census, Dominick was an electrician in the city shipyard and had become head of the Foto household, implying that his father had died or left the family. Both the 1910 and 1920 censuses listed Annie Foto as having no profession. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (1910); Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States* (1920).

<sup>74</sup> In 1892, Carl Groenevelt wrote of the French Market, “The Gascons rule the meats, while the Sicilians control the fruits.” Most Sicilian immigrants who came to Louisiana lived outside of New Orleans, however, working on sugar cane plantations and strawberry farms in the surrounding countryside. See chapter 6 for a more expansive history of Sicilian immigration to Louisiana and the history of Sicilian and Italian ethnic identity in the state. Groenevelt, *New Orleans, Illustrated in Photo Etching*, no page.

<sup>75</sup> The “Vieux Carré,” or “Old Square,” refers to the French Quarter. Lafcadio Hearn, “Quaint New Orleans and its Inhabitants,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1459, December 6, 1884, 812.

even enhanced – renderings of Sicilians in the market as “picturesque,” as a June 1, 1913, *Times-Democrat* article described Foto and her fellow vendors. Although writers bestowed a conjoined persona of latent violence and the picturesque on the French Market’s Sicilians, their *racial* identity was never in doubt. Unlike Aglaé and her fellow coffee sellers, or the Choctaw sassafras vendor, the Sicilian market seller would be folded into the French Market’s white protagonists and remain part of the market’s future, not just its past.

As with other ethnic groups in New Orleans, Sicilians moved along a trajectory of social and racial classification, though rarely of their own making.<sup>76</sup> A poem published in the *Times-Picayune* on January 4, 1916, acknowledged that a process of familiarization had been at work in New Orleanians’ changing relationship with Sicilian immigrants, which was visible in the public’s evolving slang. In his poem, “Just ‘Wops,’” Robert Bledsoe Mayfield rhymed:

We first called him Italian  
And brought the ‘I’ out strong  
And praised the dark rapsallion  
In romance and in song;

But soon we changed to Dago  
And sang the stuff he eats,  
Spaghetti and sapsago  
And oil infected meats;

Yet even this name was too long  
So once again we chop  
And now in our Italian song

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<sup>76</sup> Similar to most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian emigrants to the United States, emigrants from Sicily came to Louisiana feeling a stronger allegiance to their region or town than to the Italian nation, which unified in 1871. Throughout America and in many other destinations, Italian emigrants famously became “Italian” only as a diaspora community. On the consolidation of an Italian identity, see Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000). Although American authorities always considered Sicilians and Italians to be legally “white,” their poverty, illiteracy, and darker skin tones placed them in a nebulous zone between black and white in turn-of-the-century Louisiana. On Italian Americans’ racial identity, see Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a much fuller discussion of the history of Sicilians in Louisiana, see chapter 6.

We call the Dago ‘Wop.’<sup>77</sup>

Though irreverent, the poet reported on an undeniable process within which the Sicilian persistently belonged. From a romanticized beginning as a “dark rascalion,” he survived an era of scorn due to his “oil infected meats,” which seemed to have concluded now that his present as a simple “wop” had begun. Throughout the poem the Sicilian remained the object and never the subject, but Mayfield’s tone remained one of proximity (even if derisive), not alienation. In the larger narrative of New Orleans’s twentieth-century history – and within the smaller, though symbolically important, frame of the French Market – the Sicilian would become Italian and the Italian would become Creole Italian, a substantiated participant in Louisiana’s history.<sup>78</sup> This transformation was possible because one factor remained constant. In both the 1910 and 1920 censuses, which bookended Mayfield’s 1916 poem, Annie Foto was listed as white.

While travel writing, newspaper reporting, and other texts tracked the changing presence of Choctaws and Sicilians at the turn-of-the-century French Market, they also documented a greatly modified role for people of color. Starkly different from the authoritative shopper and expert, though objectified, coffee seller of the previous century, turn-of-the-century New Orleanians of color were cast as dishonest, dirty, or even depraved when they appeared in texts related to the French Market. In her letter to the editor on May 25, 1913, detailing the

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<sup>77</sup> Sapsago is a cheese. Contemporary sources cite it as being produced only in the canton of Glarus in present-day central Switzerland. “Recipes for Love: Creative Cooking with Swiss Schabziger,” 2005, accessed March 22, 2014, [http://www.schabziger.ch/fileadmin/ablage/downloads/rezepte/rezeptbroschuere\\_05\\_en.pdf](http://www.schabziger.ch/fileadmin/ablage/downloads/rezepte/rezeptbroschuere_05_en.pdf). Robert Bledsoe Mayfield, “Just ‘Wops,’” *The Times-Picayune*, January 4, 1916.

<sup>78</sup> A 1913 newspaper article suggested that New Orleanians claimed some distinction between Sicilian and Italian immigrants, writing, “Many [truck growers] are Italians of the best class which that country sends us. Many more are Sicilians, and with them most of the Italians have no dealings. A few are Americans, who hold themselves aloof from both. In general, it is difficult for such alien peoples to combine in anything.” Julia Truitt Bishop, “People Restive Under Extortion, Must Bring About a Market Change,” *Times-Democrat*, May 18, 1913. See Justin Nystrom, *Creole Italian: How Sicilian Immigrants Transformed the Culture of America’s Most Interesting Food Town* (forthcoming); and Nystrom, “Italian New Orleans and the Business of Food in the Immigrant City: There’s More to the Muffuletta Than Meets the Eye,” in *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* eds. John T. Edge, Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013): 128-154.

housewife's many responsibilities, Fine Arts Club President Mrs. Jacob Ambrose Storck depicted the household's servants as burdens to feed, rather than savvy shoppers themselves. She reasoned, "The servants who are, for the most part, children of a larger growth, must be well fed to keep them in a good humor and to enable them to do the really hard labor which is expected of them."<sup>79</sup> In Storck's depiction, the servants' domain was the household, rather than the market, and they required nourishment similar to children and husbands in order to produce the expected end of "really hard labor."

Also in 1913, Frank Clesi, a French Market stall keeper, confirmed suspicions that such servants could not be trusted as shoppers themselves. "Sometimes the mistress will send a negro woman to the market with a \$2 bill. She will come and buy a half-nickel of this and half-nickel of that, and spend half the money and pocket the rest and go home and tell the lady that it cost all the money she had."<sup>80</sup> A world apart from the shopper depicted in the 1882 *Harper's Weekly* illustration, fully in charge of her market baskets and the money used to fill them, such comments as those made by Storck and Clesi cast domestic workers as deceptive, as they gobbled up the family's food and its loose change. Dishonesty was not the servants' only fault, however.

In the same speeches and articles in which the city's housewives demanded that public market employees wear sanitized white coats, they also cast New Orleans's black population as generally dirty and even the cause of the markets' filth. A June 3, 1914, newspaper article chronicled a meeting of the housewives' Market Committee in which they deplored unsatisfactory market conditions such as sugar barrels without lids and roaming animals. From these concerns, they proceeded to the question of how to deal with the unhygienic habits of the

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<sup>79</sup> Storck, "Market Question in New Orleans," *The Times-Democrat*, May 25, 1913.

<sup>80</sup> "Stallkeepers Have an Inning," *The Daily Picayune*, May 31, 1913.

city's residents of color. "Conditions of a shocking nature had been unearthed in the past few weeks regarding the housing conditions among the colored people," the reporter disclosed. "The first day of May had been set by the Board of Health as a cleanup day among the colored people, and the white population was urged to have a general cleanup day without setting any special time, so that the example might make easier the work among the colored families."<sup>81</sup> Innate cleanliness among whites contrasted with the purported dirtiness that marred the homes of people of color and it was white housewives' duty to teach them how to clean, they claimed.<sup>82</sup> Though the committee had met to discuss the state of the city's markets, they declared an equal sense of responsibility for the public health menace they perceived in black neighborhoods.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "Women's Clubs Consider Market Management," unnamed newspaper, June 3, 1914, Folder 985-1-8, MS 985, LaRC.

<sup>82</sup> In many American settings, Progressive women's pursuits of sanitation, light, and order cast people of color as the victims or perpetrators of purportedly backwards approaches to housekeeping, hygiene, and diet. This research on the French Market demonstrates the centrality of white women reformers to what was a distinctly Progressive campaign, which then led directly to major renovations financed by the New Deal. In a similar vein, Glenda Gilmore investigated the history of contrived "cleanup days" during the 1910s in Salisbury and Charlotte, North Carolina. She found that women of color successfully manipulated campaigns begun with racist motivations to procure much-needed municipal funding and attention for their communities. While Gilmore determined that sporadic collaboration between white and black women reformers was a tide that raised all boats, white women in New Orleans did not collaborate with women of color and successfully excluded people of color from the market space. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 168-174. For histories of women and Progressivism in the South, see William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Progressive pursuits of whiteness had direct implications in realms of food, too. Laura Shapiro saw the Progressives' desire for cleanliness manifesting itself in the advent of white tiles in kitchens and bathrooms and the popularity of white-colored food products, such as white sauces, like béchamel, and Crisco cooking fat. Although he left the French Market largely untouched, Anthony Stanonis explored the work of white women's groups and preservationists in converting New Orleans's French Quarter into a segregated tourist attraction during the interwar years. Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), 91-95, 214-215; Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

<sup>83</sup> Stereotypes of people of color and immigrant communities as supposed bearers of disease were a racist trope with a long history in New Orleans as well as other American cities. Nineteenth-century writers blamed enslaved Africans for introducing yellow fever to New Orleans. In 1845, Benjamin Moore Norman wrote, "The first visitation of the yellow fever was in 1769....It was introduced into this continent...by a British vessel, from the coast of Africa, with a cargo of slaves." Norman, *Norman's New Orleans and Environs*, 62. For other histories linking race and disease, see Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley:

The connection between black New Orleanians' rumored dirtiness and the city's markets surfaced explicitly in a 1916 speech delivered by a representative of the housewives' Market Committee. Reflecting on the Committee's longstanding efforts to improve the markets, the speaker recalled how four years prior, in 1912, "Inefficiency prevailed in the cleaning of the markets....Slovenly negro women prisoners under the charge of five 'keepers of the market gangs' were assigned to clean the principal markets – but the outlying markets where a janitor was employed were far better cleaned." After four years the situation still had not improved. She proclaimed to her listeners, "We are urging...the appointment of one responsible janitor...and to do away with...the gangs of sloppy negroes who are now supposed to keep [the markets] clean."<sup>84</sup> Such a characterization could not have been further from the 1857 article in *Emerson's Magazine* that had asserted the French Market to be "the high place of the blacks." By 1912, black women prisoners cleaned the floors where in previous eras women of color had worked to buy their own freedom from slavery.

The steep narrative of decline imposed upon black New Orleanians at the market surfaced in quasi-fictionalized representations too, as in *The Story of the Old French Market*, a 1916 souvenir booklet produced by the New Orleans Coffee Company. In deeply purple prose, Catherine Cole recounted the market's history from colonial days to the present, not missing an opportunity to hawk the coffee the booklet advertised. Though she filled her essay with blushing Creole maidens and a dashing Andrew Jackson, champion of the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, Cole wove a taut thread of violence through her description of the market. As she guided her reader down the aisles, she described "dear little pig babies...looking awfully cannibalistic,"

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University of California Press, 2001) and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> Speech [at] Round Table Club, ca. December 1916, Folder 985-1-5, MS 985, LaRC.



“green cabbages piled high like so many decapitated heads,” “the still quivering steaks” of “a large sea turtle [that] has just been cut up,” and a nightmarish tangle of “pulleys, ropes, hoops and grappling tackle for handling the half of a huge beef.”<sup>85</sup> Flowery prose aside, Cole’s French Market was one of great brutality and she reserved her most vicious descriptions for the vendors and shoppers of color there. “At one stall porky-looking chunks of meat are being eagerly bought by colored people. It is from a nice, fat alligator that, well boiled, would deceive a cannibal, it is said, so like is it to human flesh.”<sup>86</sup>

Blacks were not only cannibalistic in Cole’s telling; they were cannibalized as well. In addition to Andrew Jackson, Cole titillated the reader with the ghost of Madame LaLaurie, an early nineteenth-century New Orleans resident infamous for torturing her slaves. “When she stopped to order purple fillets of beef even the butcher’s hand trembled as he did her bidding,” Cole confided. “‘*Ma foi,*’ said one, ‘I should think it would remind her too much of how she cuts off them poor niggers’ ears!’...The whole town knew that she tortured her slaves, cut off their ears, nailed them to the floors...why! the blood stains are there to this day!” This gory tale prompted a revolted thrill in the imagined reader, as the narrator chided, “Oh! Do not shrink! It was long ago, my dear!” before describing how LaLaurie escaped punishment by fleeing to France.<sup>87</sup> Cole’s history enacted incredible violence on the people of color she encountered in the French Market. Within the bounds of the market, Cole cast New Orleanians of color as deprived and mutilated, their suffering rendered all the more explicit by the romantic ease, if not escape, of the other figures who floated through the market’s aisles. Cole’s story functioned as a history

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine Cole (Martha Reinhard Smallwood Field), *The Story of the Old French Market* (New Orleans: New Orleans Coffee Company, 1916), 6, 9, 20, 12.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Cole’s story is likewise harshly dismissive of vendors of color at the market, such as the “forlorn, toothless, grizzled negro, tremulous and foolish with age, [who] tries to sell some very bad pineapples, which the fruit-dealer across the way has cast at him for alms.” *Ibid.*

of consumption – one in which thousands of cups of *café noir* were drunk at the market, over hundreds of years – that doubled as an advertisement encouraging readers to keep drinking French Market brand coffee. The bodies of people of color played a central role in her violent fantasies, as both figurative and literal objects of consumption.

As perceived in changing representations of Choctaws, Sicilians, and people of color at the turn-of-the-century French Market, white New Orleanians grabbed control of the public narrative of who belonged at the city’s historic market and what their roles there should be. Citywide debates about cleaning up the French Market took place in an era when the social, political, and legal privileges associated with being white in Louisiana coalesced. Housewives’ efforts to cleanse the French Market fell directly in line with contemporaneous projects to reorganize the South along lines of Jim Crow. In the aftermath of the Civil War, defining a white racial identity had become crucially important in the minds of Louisianians who sought to distance themselves from any suspicion that they descended from a mixed racial heritage. Following the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, in particular, state governments throughout the South used Jim Crow laws to segregate and disfranchise people of color. Thus, defining the bounds of whiteness and blackness in the postbellum South had important political, legal, and cultural ramifications.<sup>88</sup> Members of longstanding Louisiana families claimed exclusive ownerships of the adjective “Creole” as a means to certify their historic status in the state and verify a family tree that had purportedly been purely white for generations.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> On the solidification of racial boundaries throughout the postbellum South and their importance especially in cultural realms, see K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

<sup>89</sup> For a more thorough investigation of the history, use, and abuse of the identifier “Creole” in New Orleans, see chapter 5. Both Creole and Cajun identities have not just racial and ethnic meanings but also hold associations to language, social class, and geography. Sybil Kein argued for an expansive contemporary definition of “Creole,”

Contributing to this project, white-authored texts that depicted people of color at the turn-of-the-century French Market were careful to define the meaning of “Creole” to reserve a distinct racial and ethnic identity for white New Orleanians. Such sources sought to deny people of color a stake in New Orleans’s homegrown Creole ethnicity, an effort that held implications far beyond simple terminology. As the New Orleans economy inclined increasingly toward tourism in the following decades, the term “Creole” would come to be synonymous with the city itself, as well as the people and goods found there. Thus defining *who* was a true Creole had the potential to bestow cultural prestige as well as monetary benefits. For example, in his 1893 *New Orleans Guide*, James Zacharie privileged an understanding of the term “Creole” as essential knowledge for newcomers to the city, inserting a paragraph on its meaning between others detailing the cotton trade and the city Cotton Exchange. “Strangers often make a great error in supposing that the Creole population is a mixed race of whites and blacks,” he warned. To dissuade the reader from such a seemingly silly notion, Zacharie deferred to an authoritative voice, Judge Charles Gayarré, a local jurist and historian, who declared, “Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians never were...entitled to the appellation of ‘Creoles’ in Louisiana.” The term Creole, Gayarré insisted, “signifies only one of pure and unmixed European blood.”<sup>90</sup>

The *Picayune’s Guide* likewise fought against what seemed to be widespread confusion outside of New Orleans as to the purportedly true meaning of Creole. The 1900 edition of the guide informed travelers that “Everything ‘that is good’ in New Orleans is ‘Creole’” and

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writing, “Creoles are the New World’s people, and, given the known historical data, the term should not exclude anyone based on color, caste, or pigmentation.” Kein, “Introduction,” in *Creole: The History and Legacy*, xv. On the tortuous historical relationship between race and a Creole identity in Louisiana, see Shirley Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Virginia R. Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); and Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

<sup>90</sup> Zacharie, *New Orleans Guide*, 174, 176.

“‘Creole’ in these pages means white.” In response to the implied possibility that a Creole person could claim some degree of African heritage, the writer insisted, “Nothing is more erroneous.... There never was a nobler or more pure-blooded race than the Creoles of Louisiana.”<sup>91</sup> This zealous defense of a strictly white perimeter around the term persisted through the guidebook’s final edition, issued in 1924. As the narrator invited the reader on a late afternoon saunter through the French Quarter, the question seemed to casually arise as part of an imagined conversation. “What does ‘Creole’ mean?” the narrator repeated. “No, of course not. I don’t know why tourists always say that. The Creole is not of colored blood....The New Orleans Creole is our finest product.”<sup>92</sup> People of color could not possibly count among the city’s proudest achievements, the writer declared. Guidebooks like Zacharie’s in 1893 and the *Times-Picayune*’s of more than a quarter century later strove to teach readers unfamiliar with New Orleans a deeply racist lesson about whom they should congratulate (and compensate) for creating the Crescent City’s famous culture.<sup>93</sup>

Tension about the meaning of New Orleans’s Creole identity would have significant implications for public narratives of the French Market in the coming decades. Associations between the market’s decline, “diluted” Choctaw vendors, and untidy or dishonest people of color together formed a seed planted at the turn of the century that would bear fruit in the 1930s, when white authorities sought to restore the French Market to its former glory and celebrate it as the centerpiece of the city’s Creole history. In the 1910s, the New Orleans housewives’ Market

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<sup>91</sup> *The Picayune’s Guide*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (1900), 93-94.

<sup>92</sup> *The Times-Picayune’s Guide*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (1924), 17-18.

<sup>93</sup> Such assertions did not go uncontested. Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, a Creole herself, explained in a 1916 essay, “The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition [of Creole], and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique.” Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana: Part I,” *Journal of Negro History* (October 1916): 367.

Committee had achieved the repeal of certain restrictions on private markets as well as the addition of white employee coats, screens, and refrigerators to some public markets. However, these improvements were partial and short-lived and the market buildings continued to decay. The greatest change in the French Market's history would arrive with the New Deal, when white New Orleanians picked up hammer, nail, and pen to definitively transform the market's Babel into a legible open book.

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### **III. A New Deal for New Orleans's "Eternal" French Market**

In the early 1930s, New Orleans's recently created Department of Public Markets flexed its new regulatory powers. Yet shoppers continued to grumble that the French Market seemed dirty and antiquated, especially in comparison to recently renovated smaller public markets and the city's first private supermarket. The press posed romance and sanitation, past and future, and sentimentality and progress as divergent paths for the twentieth-century French Market. When a New Deal federal loan finally made the French Market's overhaul possible in the mid 1930s, city residents suddenly turned deeply nostalgic about the look, location, and history of the market, though not necessarily *who* worked there. Ultimately, the new French Market of the New Deal was built both by and for white New Orleanians. When it reopened in 1937, press articles and promotional materials celebrated the new French Market as "eternal," claiming the achievement of a magical symbiosis between the romantic past and modern present. But in retelling the market's history – in truth, in re-crafting its history to suit their present – writers and officials obscured the reality of eras when people of color had dominated the market experience and the processes through which whites had excluded them.

On June 1, 1932, the Crescent City's new Department of Public Markets published a slim

pamphlet describing the foods that readers could expect to find on their daily shopping excursion. It read like a spliced-together shopping list of the various ethnic groups that had passed through the city and its markets over the years, including items such as hamburger, pretzels, corned beef, raw oysters, olives, pickles, potato chips, peanut butter, kippered fish, sauerkraut, horseradish, chow-chow, and ice cream. The variety seemed exhaustive, and yet the authors were careful to point out that vendors could sell *only* items named in the two-page document, and *only* those for which they had been approved.<sup>94</sup> No longer were the public markets a setting for culinary improvisation; city authorities ordained what could be sold there, who sold it, and how.

A companion pamphlet sought to further regulate the market space, imposing restrictions on sellers' behavior that contrasted sharply with market practices of the previous century. While wearing "either full length white apron or coat, or white overalls and white jacket," tenants were forbidden to "cry out, hawk, peddle or advertise articles about the building," the writer noted. Officials also proscribed "hand wagons [and] push carts," as well as cursing, tobacco use, materials that blocked market aisles, and any behavior that could be considered "boisterous [or]...a nuisance or annoyance" to fellow vendors and shoppers.<sup>95</sup> The Department published these commandments in an attempt to stem the seemingly unrelenting tide of disorder and decay that emanated from city markets, despite the recent efforts of the housewives' Committee. "The roof on the wholesale section of the French Market leaks like a crawfish net," complained a letter in the *New Orleans Item* on April 25, 1933. "In the meat section...are holes in the screens big

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<sup>94</sup> Department of Public Markets, City of New Orleans, "Concessions: Municipally Owned and Operated Enclosed Public Markets, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1932," KT202 1937: Department of Public Markets, Report on Public Market System, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

<sup>95</sup> Department of Public Markets, City of New Orleans, "Rules and Regulations Governing the Municipally Owned and Operated Enclosed Public Markets, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1932," Ibid.

enough to drive an ox through,” another scolded a month later.<sup>96</sup> Public criticism continued to resound in avid newspaper coverage, especially as shoppers began to find or envision more attractive alternatives elsewhere.

As the French Market languished during the early 1930s, its smaller siblings received modernizing updates that, together with the city’s first supermarket, helped paint the “mother” market as especially decrepit in comparison. When six small public markets reopened in summer 1932 after extensive improvements, a *Times-Picayune* reporter gushed, “The markets had truly gone modern.” In place of dim and unscreened stalls, tepid meat, and cement floors, “Mrs. Housewife” discovered “a sanitary scene of glistening white walls, rows of electric lights, tiled floors and green enameled accessories.” Mahogany, marble, and electricity elevated these spaces far above the “dilapidated wooden sheds” of the French Market.<sup>97</sup> The disparities between this new construction and the French Market’s persistent disrepair struck some as perverse. In May 1933, a disgruntled city resident lamented, “Stacks of clinking dollars are being spent building fancy markets all over town while French Market rots....It’s poor progress to gild up a lot of little marts at the expense of the mother of them all.”<sup>98</sup> Yet enthusiasm for these modernized public showcases persisted. Journalists posited that refrigeration, in particular, continued to lure women shoppers away from the more primitive conditions found in the age-old *Halle des Boucheries*. “The rehabilitated city markets...have not been designed to please men, but to please women, since nine out of its 10 customers are women,” a *States* reporter reasoned in

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<sup>96</sup> Brief, pithy letters signed “A. Labas” (possibly a pun on the French, *à la-bas*, or “over there”?) regularly appeared in the *Item*, likely authored by the newspaper staff as pointed editorial remarks on city affairs. These two were addressed to Theo Grunewald, head of the Department of Public Markets. “Theo Grunewald,” *New Orleans Item*, April 25, 1933, and May 27, 1933.

<sup>97</sup> “Rebuilt Markets Opened,” *Times-Picayune*, June 25, 1932.

<sup>98</sup> “Theo Grunewald,” *New Orleans Item*, May 27, 1933.

1936. At updated public markets, “The display cases...are equipped with lights capable of bathing the interior in a flood of light, thus displaying to the fullest advantage the ‘schoolgirl complexion’ of properly refrigerated meats.”<sup>99</sup> The writer implied that shopping women found themselves reflected – in some cases quite literally – in these newly modern public markets, which they had demanded two decades earlier.

A still greater thrill awaited New Orleans ladies elsewhere, however. In the city’s first major private supermarket, opened in 1933, W.A. Green offered women a truly one-stop shopping experience, with amenities including a large parking lot, a women’s lounge and dressing room, and extra customer service for ladies who came alone. A *Tribune* writer lauded the store as a “revelation” and “one of the most unusual groceries in the history of the country.” The supermarket’s proprietor stressed his nearly three decades of experience and familiarity with scientific studies that would save the housekeeper from “lost motion” during her time there. Importantly, he promised a completely sanitary experience, explaining, “Every article in our store, even the canned goods and bottled stuff, will be kept behind glass, in plain view of every customer but protected from handling by the glass cases.”<sup>100</sup> This market of the future, certified by Green’s expertise, decreed the latest technology in illumination, preservation, and extreme detachment from the food for sale. Protected by multiple barriers of aluminum, glass, or refrigerated air – and sometimes a combination – the food at Green’s store contrasted sharply with that fading in open-air trays at the French Market, contaminated by an unknown number of stall keepers and flies.

And yet some observers critical of the French Market’s current state looked backward,

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<sup>99</sup> “Electrical Icers Display Meats in Public Markets,” *New Orleans States*, April 29, 1936.

<sup>100</sup> “Green to Open Novel Grocery,” *New Orleans Tribune*, January 29, 1933.



rather than forward, when trying to articulate an image of the institution's future. To many, the market of the past appeared an attractive alternative to the unsanitary and hard-to-regulate market of the present. "People who visit [the French Market] are often disappointed to find it so dilapidated," declared Dr. Oscar Dowling, former president of the Louisiana State Board of Health. "If it were rebuilt in a way similar to its appearance twenty-five years ago...the city would get a showplace as well as a modern public market."<sup>101</sup> Dowling envisioned a renovation whose result would be simultaneously modern *and* historical. Though a seeming paradox, Dowling's yearning for the market of an earlier era, transferred to the future, surfaced among other New Orleanians as well. A short-lived suggestion to raze the French Market in 1930 was especially effective at prompting a citywide flutter of nostalgia for the market's history. "That Old French Market is probably the most romantic spot on the North American Continent," wrote Meigs Frost in the *New Orleans States* in 1931. "Men know it where men know New Orleans. It lives, immortal in literature and history." Frost recounted the city's past in a way that funneled all local people, flora, and fauna of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries through the French Market. In Frost's telling, the French Market was the great leveler, a democratic meeting place for "rich and poor, high and low," an indispensable model of commerce and culture.<sup>102</sup>

Outside observers perceived the fundamental conflict brewing between proponents of preservation, such as Frost, and modernization. A 1931 *New York Times* article noted, "New Orleans is in need of a genius" if the city wanted to blend "the stern regulations of sanitary science and the delicate precepts of romance in such fashion as to repel germs and lure tourists."

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<sup>101</sup> Dowling maintained a leading presence in public debates about sanitation at the New Orleans markets throughout the 1910s and 1920s. His work ended abruptly in late December 1930, when his body was found cut in two on city railroad tracks. "French Market Change Opposed: Council Members Not to Permit Removal from Location," *New Orleans States*, December 18, 1930.

<sup>102</sup> Meigs O. Frost, "Aroused City Again Saves Old French Market," *New Orleans States*, January 1, 1931.

The French Market posed a unique challenge to city officials and developers, the writer perceived, in both the depth of its history and breadth of its needs. “Have it sanitary if you can, but keep it colorful you must,” the *Times* reporter ordained.<sup>103</sup> Renovating New Orleans’s French Market seemed akin to demanding that a chef combine oil and water.

A chance to tackle this dilemma arrived none too soon for the market’s critics. In 1934, a \$300,000 loan from the New Deal’s Public Works Administration (PWA) finally permitted the city to embark on the first major renovation in the French Market’s history. Significantly, the announcement prompted public concern for the historic building rather than the people who had worked in it. “The promise is made that the reborn structure will retain the figurative, if not all the literal, atmosphere of its historic predecessor,” a *Times-Picayune* editorial had reassured readers in 1932. “So staunch are its cypress beams that there is no need to replace [them].”<sup>104</sup> City residents took comfort in learning that the French Market’s skeleton – the early nineteenth-century beams that held up the roof, the pegs used to join them, and especially the colonnades that flanked each side like ribs – would withstand the renovation process.

The public placed special emphasis on the market’s columns as the site’s trademark feature and evidence of the institution’s solid foundation. “‘The columnar structure is to be retained and repaired.’ We quote that for record,” a 1936 *Tribune* editorial reported gravely. “If this promise be kept, we shall still feel at home...after the first strangeness of plate-glass and new paint has worn off.”<sup>105</sup> Public conversation linked the market’s physical elements with the place’s larger ambiance, trusting that the survival of one must entail the persistence of the other.

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<sup>103</sup> George N. Coad, “New Orleans Fears for French Market,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1931.

<sup>104</sup> “New French Market,” *Times-Picayune*, September 13, 1932.

<sup>105</sup> “Old and New,” *New Orleans Tribune*, June 11, 1936.

No longer was the market's appeal an ineffable quality bound up in the multilingual crowd that filled it; it was tangible, and located in the brick and mortar components of the building's construction. In response to such concerns, the project's lead architect, Sam Stone, Jr., took center stage as the "genius" entrusted with the market's restoration and pledged his support for retaining these particular features. "The new market...will be in appearance and atmosphere essentially of old New Orleans," Stone promised the *Times-Picayune*, as butchers vacated their stalls on June 14, 1936, making way for Stone's crew. "The low broad columns, beloved by New Orleanians for generations, will be preserved."<sup>106</sup> Stone understood the two-faced need for both old and new and declared his resolve to achieve the proper mix.

Although public debate emphasized the French Market's columns, Stone's private plans for the building, coordinated with city officials, encompassed myriad details related to the project's architectural elements and the personnel that would accomplish them. While the market's foundations would remain standing, especially that of the 1813 Meat Market, Stone's planning documents called for "new terrazzo floors and coves...new dormers and cupolas...[and] new skylights and skylight shafts."<sup>107</sup> Stone intended to brighten the space and enhance its appeal from within and without with fine details showcasing an expert level of craftsmanship. He installed electric lighting and refrigerated display cases, as well as new "weather vanes, wrought iron rail, grilles....ornamental hinges, push bars, and thresholds." Stone specified that this new market of the New Deal would be crafted by hand, ordering, "No ordinary machine shop work will be accepted but all work shall be clean and sharp and shall be artistically

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<sup>106</sup> Margaret Dixon, "Today is French Market's Moving Day, Preparatory to Beginning Renovations," *Times-Picayune*, June 14, 1936.

<sup>107</sup> Instructions to Bidders, Specifications for the French Market, Buildings "A" and "B," Public Market System, City of New Orleans, Project No. 9, Sam Stone, Jr. & Co., Inc., Architects, Section II, 2. KT630 1934: Department of Public Markets, Specifications for the French Market, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2, NOPL.

treated by craftsmen. All work shall be forged and finished by hand.”<sup>108</sup> Such an expert degree of work required expert workers, and Stone and the city agreed on this point too. “No alien or foreign unnaturalized labor shall be employed on the work; preference shall be given to home white labor.” Thus, the architect and the city specifically shut out New Orleanians of color, non-citizens, and new or transient residents of the city from employment related to the French Market’s renovation.<sup>109</sup>

The all-white cast of laborers, backers, shoppers, and vendors that planners envisioned for the French Market’s future was readily visible in an editorial cartoon published in the *Times-Picayune* on February 28, 1936. “Let’s Go, for a Better and Equally Picturesque Market,” the title read. A smiling triumvirate representing city authorities, business leaders, and workers – the latter’s sleeves were rolled up, ready to swing a sledgehammer – agreed that plans for the markets’ renovation had met their conjoined approval. A smiling housewife looked on from the side. She had played a role in the lead-up to this historic occasion and now anticipated the renovated product. In the background, peering from behind one of those crumbling, yet essential, columns, was an Italian fruit seller, identified by his recognizable black moustache and hanging clusters of bananas. All figures in the image were white. Purportedly, they represented the full circle of personalities involved in the French Market’s workings and its restoration: consumers, producers, those who planned and financed the renovation, those who would labor to build it, and the authorities who regulated the market and would continue to do so in the future. The faces in this image differed greatly in terms of gender as well as race from those pictured in the 1882

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., Section VIII, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Stone noted that he adhered to municipal guidelines that defined a city “resident,” writing, “Labor employed shall be as per Ordinance No. 15361 Council series, which reads as follows: ‘All contractors doing public work for the City of New Orleans shall employ bona fide residents of the City....The word ‘RESIDENT’...shall mean persons who have resided continuously in the City for at least six months previous to their employment on the public works.’” Ibid., Section I, 5.

*Harper's Weekly* illustration, though the colonnades notably remained the same. Whereas New Orleanians of color had been firmly within the frame of the 1882 drawing, even serving as its focal point, they were left outside of the frame of the 1936 cartoon. The latter work communicated clearly who would be welcome in the renovated market and who would not.

When the French Market reopened in 1937, white shoppers and the press responded positively to Stone's renovation, which seemed to have allowed certain quaint customs to persist in greatly updated surroundings. The first patrons through the door of the new produce market expressed relief upon finding symbolic fragments of the old space but none of its previous grit. Delighted, they watched produce vendors transport heavy baskets of fruits and vegetables on their heads and continue to engage in the Louisiana custom of *lagniappe*, all in spite of their stalls' fresh coat of paint.<sup>110</sup> Tradition persisted without the cobwebs, these initial impressions conveyed.

The French Market's renovated fish market, which opened a few months later, excited shoppers in a slightly different key. "What a Difference!" trumpeted the caption of a prominent photograph in the *Tribune*. Where open trays of crawfish and oysters had sat now stood a row of professional-grade refrigerated tubs, brightly illuminated by hanging electric lamps. "Steel and concrete are everywhere," the caption described. "The concrete is especially treated to reduce the

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<sup>110</sup> *Lagniappe* means a little something extra that a vendor includes with a purchase, such as a bulb of garlic with a pound of potatoes. The 1903 *Picayune's Guide* described the beloved quality of this practice. "Some years ago an effort was made by certain progressive shopkeepers to abolish 'lagniappe.' There was a hue and cry and the old custom remained. It is a sweet and gracious one that the people like, and dealers who seek to ignore it soon find to their cost that their sales are less." Five years later, the 1908 edition of the *Picayune's Guide* mourned that private markets had begun to stop giving *lagniappe*, reporting, "Not more than a year ago the retail grocers of New Orleans decided not to give 'lagniappe' any longer. This was a death-blow to one of the most picturesque customs of the city. *Lagniappe* survives in many places, the street vendors, cake women and bakers generally continue to give it, but the practice is dying out and must speedily disappear." *The Picayune's Guide*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (1903), 71-72, *The Picayune's Guide*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (1908), 52; "New Vegetable, Fruit, Poultry Stalls Entered," *Times-Picayune*, April 3, 1937.

smells.”<sup>111</sup> The room’s emptiness in the photo – devoid of shoppers, sellers, or seafood for sale – accentuated the natural light that filled the space and the whiteness of the walls and ceiling. These qualities, as well as the odorless nature of the materials that composed the room, evoked a market that was antiseptic and almost medical in feel. “Tourists may inspect [the new fish market], as they might view a new model refrigerator,” a *Times-Picayune* editorial declared in November 1937. Post-renovation, the fish market had become a modern appliance; a shopping trip there now equaled a tour around the inside of a refrigerator. Yet many visitors expressed a clear preference for this updated iteration over its slippery, stinking predecessor. In this “clean, white and glistening market,” the *Times-Picayune* crowed, “even an oyster might feel a thrill of gelatinous pride at the thought of being eaten alive.”<sup>112</sup>

Sanitation had likewise been the key feature in a full-page *Tribune* ad inviting shoppers to the French Market’s renovated meat market, once known for its hanging sides of beef and quivering turtle steaks. To entice shoppers, this advertisement carefully blended the old with the new. A photograph of the updated exterior and its beloved columns complemented an image of the renewed interior, now filled with a double row of refrigerated cases. Likewise, the “Original French Market Coffee Stand” proclaimed itself ready to refresh shoppers with cups of *café noir*, as it had for decades, on the same page that General Electric proclaimed itself the new sponsor of the French Market experience, as the manufacturer of its refrigerators.<sup>113</sup> Whether they shopped for produce, poultry, fish, or meat, customers found the market’s modernization to have increased sanitation without subtracting from the institution’s charm, at least in the immediate

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<sup>111</sup> “What a Difference!” *New Orleans Tribune*, October 18, 1937.

<sup>112</sup> “Fish Market,” *Times-Picayune*, November 2, 1937.

<sup>113</sup> “Opening Announcement!” *New Orleans Tribune*, February 20, 1937.

aftermath.

As the city prepared for the French Market's dedication in 1938, the press and market officials extolled the renovation with articles, public events, and promotional literature that imposed an unambiguously progressive trajectory on the market's history, from a romanticized past to a crumbling nadir to a sanitized present. Authorities claimed a seamless fusion of old and new, which had seemed impossible just a few years earlier. "We have succeeded in meeting the demands for public health, sanitation and modern conveniences without injuring the romance and history of the old market," announced J. Richard Reuter, president of the French Market Corporation, in March 1938.<sup>114</sup> The editorial board of the *States* concurred, attesting, "[The market] stands restored to all the splendors of its most glamorous days....Only the dirt, rubbish, litter and odors which have characterized the market in these later years have been banished."<sup>115</sup> The paper neglected to note the *people* who had also been banished from the marketplace in the process.

The obliteration of Gallatin Street, a short thoroughfare adjacent to the market that had long served as an infamous hotspot for mafia-related crime, became the most transparent example of the improving effects of the French Market's modernization. As the architect's laborers demolished various buildings in and near the renovation site, they erased Gallatin St. from the map. The city press bid it a colorful adieu. Gallatin had been "the most sinister street in New Orleans' history" and a dark locale ruled by the Sicilian mafia, claimed the *Item*, where "half of the sailors aboard ships weighing anchor from New Orleans' harbor...were

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<sup>114</sup> In 1932, the French Market Business Men's Association formed the French Market Corporation. Over the coming decades, the city contracted with the Corporation to oversee the day-to-day running of the French Market. The Corporation's Board of Directors oversaw market finances, maintenance, and expansion, among other tasks. "French Mart Work Described to Club," unnamed newspaper, March 15, 1938, KT920n, Department of Public Markets, Scrapbook of news clippings on market-related matters, February 23, 1934-December 1938, NOPL.

<sup>115</sup> "New French Market," *New Orleans States*, March 17, 1938.

shanghaied.”<sup>116</sup> In the press’s telling, all forms of vice seemed to center on Gallatin St., from dancing to prostitution to the mafia to murder. There, “Wine, women and a little song” often ended with a “stiletto in the back,” according to reporter Harnett Kane. Fortunately, the French Market’s renovation provided the necessary excuse for demolishing this blighted riverfront spot. “Civic progress will at last have conquered sinister Gallatin by wiping it out,” Kane announced.<sup>117</sup> In lurid photographs of the trash-strewn street paired with tidy architectural renderings of the coming renovation, journalists celebrated the transition from bloody mafia den to productive American marketplace. “Once Gallatin street...was a narrow passageway that was a reminder of the Old World,” recalled another reporter. “Today it is a scene of activity in vegetable vending.”<sup>118</sup> Stories such as that of Gallatin St. cast the French Market’s renovation as an enlightening tool that would benefit the city as a whole. Just as the market’s chaotic Babel had given way to sanitized order, so had Gallatin’s Old World ways bended to New World productivity.

The French Market Corporation (FMC) offered its own version of the market’s journey from bad to good, casting itself in the hero’s role, in a booklet titled *Glorified French Market: Progressing with Commerce, 1813-1938*. The work blended advertisement with history as it sought to convince the reader of a seemingly impossible notion: “Time marches on but the French Market is eternal,” the authors declared. The French Market had stood on the Mississippi’s banks since before New Orleans was an American city; its stalls had withstood Civil War and a World War and would doubtless stand strong well into the future. Yet despite its eternal nature, the French Market’s history had also been one of enormous change and

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<sup>116</sup> “Civic Progress Purges Sinister Gallatin St. Black Hand Den,” *New Orleans Item*, November 20, 1935.

<sup>117</sup> Harnett Kane, “Gallatin On Way Out for French Mart,” unnamed newspaper, June 21, 1936, KT920n, NOPL.

<sup>118</sup> March 19, 1938, unnamed article in unnamed newspaper, Ibid.



progressive improvement, they claimed.<sup>119</sup> Accordingly, the booklet's essay touched upon the many perceived beneficial effects of the market's present renovation, from the increasing homogeneity of its sellers to the boon of modern technology.

After so many decades, the market's Babel had been tamed, FMC officials proudly declared, and melded into an accented English that offered a romantic hint of Europe (never Africa), but was essentially American. The 1930s market still hosted "the sons and daughters of many nations...giving it a strong European atmosphere," the authors insisted. "Here is the soft Spanish of Spain and Central America, German, Scandinavian, Russian, Greek, Turkish and all blending into varied patois of the American English."<sup>120</sup> Equally praiseworthy, refrigeration now preserved the market's food and electric lights illuminated it. "Here the foodstuffs may be viewed with only the stall operators to handle them," the authors explained, beneath a "lighting arrangement that makes the market just as bright at night as during the mid-day sun period."<sup>121</sup> In this new French Market, the lights were consistently bright and the food never spoiled. Again the reader sensed an emphasis on separating the market's food from both vendors and shoppers, and a greater trust in technology than people (*fig. 2.5*). "The great foreword of 1938 throughout the United States is sanitation," intoned the writers. "This, however, was no easy task, for the world is made up of persons who have varied ideas of sanitation, particularly in the cosmopolitan population of French Market."<sup>122</sup> Standing in the market's renovated central aisle, Mrs. Housewife could hear that the cosmopolitan others of the market's past now spoke English. She

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<sup>119</sup> Emile V. Stier and James B. Keeling, *Glorified French Market: Progressing with Commerce, 1813-1938, A Treatise on the Famous French Market of New Orleans, Louisiana* (New Orleans: French Market Corporation), 3, KTA910 1938, NOPL.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 16.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

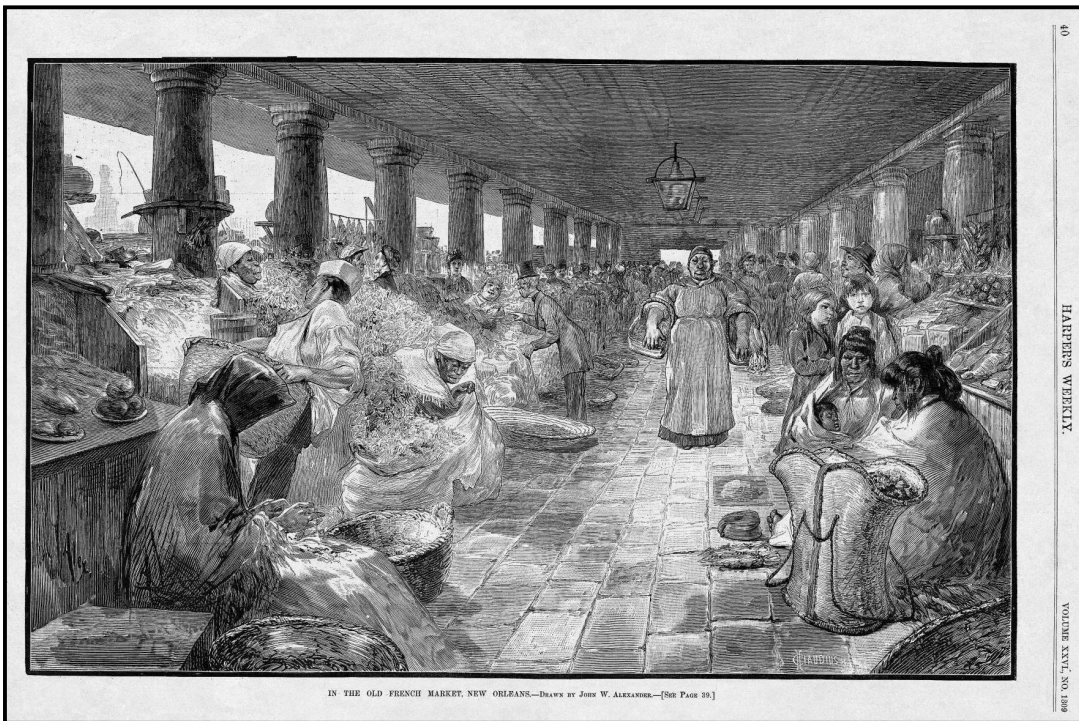


Figure 2.5: Compared to an illustration of the French Market in 1882 (below), a post-renovation photograph (above) of the Meat Market, the original *Halle des boucheries* first constructed in 1813, showed the extent to which the market's New Deal modernization had replaced people with technology, natural with artificial light, and accessible food with "protected" wares. "The completely modernized Meat Market," French Market Corporation, *Glorified French Market* (1938); "In the Old French Market, New Orleans," *Harper's Weekly*, January 21, 1882.

could no longer smell the food for sale, pungent or not. She could see her dinner's ingredients in lighted cases and verify that unsanitary hands no longer touched it.

Both FMC leaders and city officials were highly conscious of the historical significance of the renovation they had just led. During the market's dedication ceremony in March 1938, city officials placed a narrative of the market's history, the FMC charter, a list of the current tenants, and copies of that morning's newspapers in a concrete time capsule under a new flagpole.<sup>123</sup> In the midst of such congratulatory celebration, a *Tribune* editorial evinced a sudden affection for the uglier components of the market's past, now that they had disappeared. "New Orleans was fond of the old market, forgave its sinful smells, inconveniences, and general decrepitude," the writer insisted.<sup>124</sup> With the market's columns freshly painted, the backward view from 1938 made the past no longer seem so grim.

"The story of the French Market is a spirited chapter in Creole history," a *Times-Picayune* reporter had written in 1936, as the market sat on the brink of renovation. She looked forward to the new market's dedication day in the spring of 1938 and predicted, "The market you will enter will be washed and cleaned and shining like a child with its face washed, its teeth cleaned and its hair brushed."<sup>125</sup> The new French Market that opened in 1938 was certainly washed clean and, in most public tellings, its history had received the same treatment. Newspaper articles and promotional materials remembered the market of previous eras as a favorite destination for Creole ladies and their "servants" and an institution first built by "white

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<sup>123</sup> Caption to photograph titled "Prelude to Market Dedication," unnamed newspaper, March 19, 1936, Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> "A New Start," *New Orleans Tribune*, March 19, 1938.

<sup>125</sup> Margaret Dixon, "Today is French Market's Moving Day, Preparatory to Beginning Renovations," *Times-Picayune*, June 14, 1936.

men” in the city’s pre-American days.<sup>126</sup> Although the market’s New Deal renovation seemed a final, triumphant solution to the site’s woes, this was not to be. In the very next year, city authorities sued the French Market Corporation for fish market odors that infected the French Quarter, disgusting residents and tourists. Such efforts were too little too late, however. New Orleans shoppers had definitively turned toward supermarkets and in the coming decades the French Market’s stalls would empty of food and fill with souvenirs. The long era of the public market in New Orleans had ended. “I don’t deal with the public markets,” a housewife declared soon after the renovated market opened, “for the simple reason that I prefer the ‘one stop’ place. This is 1941, not 1841.”<sup>127</sup> It seemed that the elaborate renovation of the French Market, which had estranged sellers and buyers from the food and from each other, obliterating earlier methods of social interaction and sensory experience, had perhaps all been for naught.

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### **Conclusion: Living in the Day-Before-Yesterday and the Day-After-Tomorrow**

In Frances Parkinson Keyes’s 1948 murder mystery novel, *Dinner at Antoine’s*, Ruth Avery was a clever D.C. socialite looking for a husband. Soon after she arrived in New Orleans, Russ Aldridge, a dashing archaeologist soon to be her fiancé, brought her to the Café du Monde at the French Market for coffee and beignets. Ruth decided it was her favorite place in the city, but for a reason less tangible than the plate of doughnuts in front of her. She explained:

This Café du Monde couldn’t be anywhere except in New Orleans.... And it isn’t only unique. It’s – it’s *real*. Not like those so-called ‘quaint’ tea shoppes for lady tourists.... I like the feeling of living in day-before-yesterday and day-after-tomorrow at the same time. Nothing could be more modern than those neon signs just outside on Decatur Street, or the traffic tearing past between us and Jackson Square. But the square itself must look

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<sup>126</sup> Unnamed article in unnamed newspaper, March 19, 1938, KT920n, NOPL.

<sup>127</sup> Harnett T. Kane, “New Orleans’ Housewives Want ‘One Stop’ Stores,” *New Orleans Item*, August 29, 1941.

exactly the same tonight as it did a hundred years ago...I could imagine all sorts of ghosts wandering around, under the palm trees.<sup>128</sup>

Ruth's sense of the Café du Monde and the French Market as an exceptional experience that belonged to both the "day-before-yesterday and day-after-tomorrow" spoke strongly to contemporary histories that evoked the French Market as eternal. As the market gained a reputation of enormous historic and cultural importance over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it transitioned in the public eye into a place distinctly out of time. Its history became a story told by a chorus of voices – travel writers, white city residents, newspaper reporters – but not the voices of those who had made the earlier market a Babel. Whitewashing the market's past during the 1930s erased from public memory the eras when people of color had filled the market as shoppers and vendors, and then were publicly repelled from it by Jim Crow laws and slanderous public health campaigns.<sup>129</sup> Although city officials predicted in the 1930s that the market would continue to be a multilingual place, authorities' emphasis on expertise, regulation, and whiteness left no space for a marketplace that anyone would describe as Babel. Segregated restrooms and restrictions on selling outside of licensed and inspected stalls communicated that the French Market was no longer a site of business and leisure in which all stood on relatively comparable ground.

When city officials renovated and modernized public markets throughout New Orleans in the 1910s through 1930s, all within a larger political context that insisted on racial segregation, they did so in a way that extinguished a distinct set of opportunities for producers and consumers of color. In previous eras, the French Market had played an important role in creating economic

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<sup>128</sup> Frances Parkinson Keyes, *Dinner at Antoine's* (New York: Julian Messner, 1948), 73.

<sup>129</sup> Sandra Frink found a similar, flattened history at play in her study of streets and public spaces in nineteenth-century New Orleans. She wrote, "Many of the public squares in the city...and even the French Market, are typically remembered in static, almost mythical, terms. This serves to strip these places of the more nuanced conflicts, transformations, and meanings that structured their development and use." Frink, "Spectacles of the Street," 154-155.

and social possibilities for the entire range of people who had worked and shopped there. But the means by which twentieth-century New Orleans authorities and the public changed the municipal market system and commemorated the process in print increased barriers between whites and people of color, as they designated one group as welcome in the market space and the other as largely unwelcome. The story of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French Market epitomized a much larger, persistent tension in the history of New Orleans: a compulsion on the part of white authorities and boosters to trumpet the Crescent City as exotic, yet a fundamental inability to embrace the ethnic and racial diversity that such exoticism entailed. Ultimately, the new market of the New Deal was built both by and for white New Orleanians. The French Market's first century and a quarter had tracked an arc of informality to regulation, impassable crowds to symmetric aisles, and Babel to open book, yet one legible only to white New Orleanians and tourists.

Chapter Three: Greetings from the Levee!: Labor and Leisure on the Docks of Postbellum  
New Orleans

Little more than two months after Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Union forces in Appomattox, Virginia, to end the Civil War, a *New Orleans Times* journalist reported on a promising change of direction in the breeze stirring the city's levees. "Since Peace has spread her wings over a reunited country, prosperity with hurried step is revisiting our city....The levee presents a more animated appearance than it has for a long time," he wrote with excitement, on June 28, 1865. Growing mounds of goods on the riverfront steamboat docks offered physical proof that Louisiana fields were once again bearing edible and inedible fruit. "Long rows of sugar hogsheads are to be seen side by side with barrels of molasses," the writer described. Close by sat "bales of hay, barrels of pork and flour, [and] sacks of oats and corn." The reappearance of familiar faces likewise indicated that the city's prosperity was finally returning. Granted the levees were full of the "mirth loving negro...who works like a beaver one moment, [and] sleeps the next," the journalist chided. What excited him more were the wealthier and whiter faces he noticed. "The hotels are crowded with visitors. We recognize the faces of many old planters.... We hope there is a good time a coming," he concluded, somewhat wistfully.<sup>1</sup> After years of reporting on the hardships of Union occupation and battlefield casualties, this local journalist offered a tentatively positive nod toward the city's future and looked first to the levee as a barometer of New Orleans's postbellum fortunes.

Antebellum riches would never return fully to New Orleans, however. By the time the journalist described the bales, barrels, and sacks that he saw on the riverfront, the New Orleans

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<sup>1</sup> "Local Intelligence," *New Orleans Times*, June 28, 1865.

levees were definitively past their prime.<sup>2</sup> Railroads would soon replace rivers as America's most efficient mode of travel. Nevertheless, in the decades following the journalist's visit, city boosters sought to shake off Louisiana's history of slave labor and rebrand the Crescent City as a modernized tourist destination. Unexpectedly, perhaps, the levees would continue to play a role in that story. New Orleans's riverfront had long served as the physical link between rural field and urban factory, where sugar, molasses, cotton, bananas, and other goods changed hands between producers and consumers. As Louisiana reached the twentieth century, the levees served a more metaphorical purpose, as a bridge between past and present where evolving American attitudes about race, wage labor, and political and social inclusion played out. Photographers, writers, businessmen, and tourists put the levees to work again for intertwined processes of modernization and mythmaking: projects that seemed contradictory at face value but coexisted comfortably in turn-of-the-century New Orleans.

During postbellum decades, Americans also experienced a new awareness of the intrinsic spectacle of city life. Guidebooks directed travelers in New Orleans to see not just monuments and churches, but the infrastructure of the city's modernizing industry: its riverfront sugar refineries and cotton warehouses, steamboat landings, and the workers of color who labored

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<sup>2</sup> Louisiana's sugar yields would take three decades to recover from the Civil War, only to be overshadowed by turn-of-the-century imperial activity in Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, as well as a domestic shift from cane to beets. From 1832 to 1841, the average annual rate of sugar production among Louisiana plantations totaled 77,000 hogsheads. By 1852 to 1861, Louisiana's average annual sugar production had climbed to 298,000 hogsheads. In 1861, as the Civil War began, 1,291 Louisiana sugarhouses produced twenty-five million dollars worth of sugar, or 459,410 hogsheads. Walter Prichard estimated that these facilities represented a total investment of 200 million dollars, more than half of which – 105 million dollars – resided in the bodies of enslaved men, women, and children who grew, harvested, and refined Louisiana sugar. The Civil War enacted "almost complete annihilation" on the Louisiana sugar industry, a fact that Prichard attributed largely to the state's freedmen, whom he derided as uncooperative and lazy. In 1894, Louisiana sugar production rebounded with a yield of 568,622 hogsheads, but American consumers would soon shift their focus definitively to sugar imported from abroad or produced domestically with sugar beets. Prichard, "The Effects of the Civil War on the Louisiana Sugar Industry," *Journal of Southern History* 5, no. 3 (August 1939): 315-332; Roy A. Ballinger, "A History of Sugar Marketing Through 1974," Agricultural Economic Report No. 382, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economics, Statistics, and Cooperative Service (1975), accessed February 22, 2016, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1731297/aer382.pdf>. See also John B. Rehder, *Delta Sugar: Louisiana's Vanishing Plantation Landscape* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).



there. Thus, even after river traffic had slowed, the levees and fields that supplied them continued to draw tourists as urban and rural spaces distinctly of New Orleans, where experiences of labor and leisure overlapped. Mementos like postcards and photographs allowed white travelers to claim that these places formerly operated by slave labor had become locations of pleasure and relaxation. Textual narratives complemented visual media to help blur the lines between reality and nostalgic fantasy for consumers near and far. Together, these sources attempted to return Louisianians of color to subservient roles in sugar and cotton fields and on the docks, overwriting national memories of slavery with celebrations of a New South, modern yet romantic.

Three-dimensional stereographs, massively popular from the 1850s to 1920s, were especially effective in allowing Americans to participate in an immersive experience of a purportedly Reconstructed New Orleans. Although African-American men and women continued to fill the ranks of southern laborers, stereographs depicted workers of color on the levee as they napped on barrels of molasses and bales of cotton, seemingly unable or unwilling to contribute to the bustle around them. Images presented by stereographs that showed blacks at work (or not) and whites at play put old prejudices to news ends, as they claimed to prove that freedmen had become unmotivated workers following emancipation. Believing the medium to be infallible, consumers digested stereographs differently than they did guidebooks, short stories, or postcards. Accordingly, purveyors of stereo views were uniquely effective in amplifying the refrain that people of color were unfit to work as independent wage laborers and, by association, ill-suited to be voting citizens.

Thus, with travel narratives, guidebooks, postcards, and stereographs, white Americans in the North *and* South invented a postbellum identity for New Orleans as simultaneously forward

thinking and historical, contemporary and quaint. Texts and visual objects that encouraged the Crescent City's nascent tourism industry delivered messages about people and place during years of rapid change to American perceptions of race, labor, and modernity. When consumers looked at sites of food production via a photographic postcard or through the dual lenses of a stereo viewer, they could *see*, or so they claimed, that New Orleans had modernized but its citizens of color had not.

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### **I. Picturing Progress: The Visual Culture of Tourism in Postbellum New Orleans**

As Reconstruction ended, New Orleans politicians and businessmen trumpeted a reborn, industrialized Crescent City. Visitors responded with trips to New Orleans for reasons of business and pleasure. Like tourists in other urban American locales, they discovered modern New Orleans to be a city of readymade, quotidian attractions, and the men and machinery visible on the great sugar and cotton levees offered special appeal.<sup>3</sup> Guidebooks helped travelers navigate the city's street life and its re-energized docks. To many, the levees and the Mississippi River they held back symbolized the awesome scale of American political and economic potential. At the same time, they doubled as impressive tourist playgrounds, with refined white sugar and laboring black men stretching as far as the eye could see.

Postbellum boosters who sought to attract tourists, investors, and European immigrants to New Orleans often quantified the city's resilience in bunches of bananas and tons of cotton. They reached for import and export statistics as proof of the Crescent City's continued economic

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<sup>3</sup> Louisiana's cotton and sugar industries had long been so thoroughly entwined as to be inextricable. Sugar and cotton production relied on each other so completely that they became virtually synonymous. In 1893 a writer in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* explained, "It is interesting to find that one staple of the South...depends upon the other, for cotton seed meal is extensively used to enrich the sugar lands....At the same time that cotton thus helps sugar, it is in another way benefited, in turn, by sugar. The sugar is put up in sacks and bags made of cotton cloth. A very large business in cotton and burlap sacks has grown out of the sugar-refining in New Orleans." Julian Ralph, "New Orleans, Our Southern Capital," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 86, no. 513 (February 1893): 383-384.

allure. In doing so, they made the city's riverfront into the preeminent symbol of New Orleans's modern wealth and welcome. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* reported that in the spring of 1892 New Orleans had finally trumped New York City in the volume of bananas imported, beating its rival by "nearly 170,000 bunches."<sup>4</sup> Statistics like this needed to be broadcast more loudly, declared the Young Men's Business League of New Orleans, which formed in 1894 for just such a purpose. "The League at its outset discovered that New Orleans possessed the reputation abroad of being a quaint old city," it reported in its first guide to the city's economic milieu. But New Orleans had much more to offer than magnolia blossoms and an aging French Market. "Deeming these facts sufficiently well known, the organization is undertaking to spread other facts.... to bring to the notice of the business world [the city's] material wealth."<sup>5</sup> New Orleans had recovered from war but remained undervalued, the League argued. Nevertheless, such misperceptions could be corrected with a review of the volume of coffee beans, cottonseed oil, and bushels of corn that passed through its port. The Crescent City's levees would spur postbellum wealth just as it had created antebellum riches, League members insisted. Inspired by such promotional statistics and inviting articles in national publications like *Harper's*, travelers and tourists did come to New Orleans after the Civil War to stay in its great hotels, sample its already legendary cuisine, attend conventions and expositions, and see the sights.

What exactly constituted the sights in Gilded Age New Orleans involved a new infusion of the quotidian, modern cityscape that was not necessarily unique to the Crescent City. Decades of Reconstruction and modernization in New Orleans coincided with an awareness among

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<sup>4</sup> Julian Ralph, "New Orleans, Our Southern Capital," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 86, no. 513, February 1893, 382.

<sup>5</sup> Young Men's Business League of New Orleans, *New Orleans of 1894: Its Advantages. Its Prospects. Its Conditions. As Shown by a Résumé of a Year's Record: 1893-1894*, Compiled by the New Orleans *Picayune* for its September 1, 1894, edition (New Orleans: L. Graham & Son, Ltd., 1894), 3.

Americans of the spectacle of urban life readily visible in all of the nation's great metropolises. Suddenly, the sidewalk revealed itself to be a naturally occurring drama that inspired writers, photographers, and artists, in New Orleans as well as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and other places.<sup>6</sup> In 1900, the author of the *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* invoked the city's inherent appeal in an introduction that was downright titillating. "How I envy the sealskin-coated tourist just arrived from Duluth or Penobscot, like a polar bear, panting, transported to the tropics; how I envy this one threading a path between the cotton bales and sugar barrels, sniffing the sugary odors, hearing the greasy, easy, negro lingo," he wrote. Traversing the length of Canal Street, the Crescent City's widest thoroughfare, to its base at the riverfront levee was a trip that contained all the sensory pleasures a tourist could ever desire, he insisted. With a pace bordering on the predatory, the writer reported his lustful envy of the tourist's unsullied point of view. I "regret that I can have no 'first experience' of it all," he claimed.<sup>7</sup> The first view of New Orleans was the best, he explained. His invitation to his tourist readers was clear: journey to New Orleans and enjoy that entrancing first experience of its streets, people, scents, and sounds.

As the *Picayune's Guide* writer intimated, turn-of-the-century New Orleans's avenues offered a visual kaleidoscope of the bizarre, the performative, and the schlocky, plus the technology to record it all. Records of the mayor's office from 1909 help reconstruct just how busy, noisy, and visually oriented New Orleans streets were. Under ordinance 228 A.S., entrepreneurs could apply to the mayor to sell small stocks of food, dry groceries, toys, furniture,

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<sup>6</sup> Turn-of-the-century photographs were "participants in the very modernity they celebrated," Peter Hales argued. "They were, like skyscrapers and streetcars, electrical lighting and Otis elevators, evidence of the nature of the modern city. To view them, to own them was to connect oneself within this matrix of modernity." Hales, *Silver Cities: Photographing American Urbanization, 1839-1939* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 4, 192. On visual culture, modernity, and American cities, see Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Ellen Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines in the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889* (New York: Dover, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans: Revised and Enlarged*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1900), 6.

and other items on the sidewalks or on foot and be exempted from the price of a license as long as the value of their inventory remained under fifty dollars. Vendors hawked oysters, fruit, candy, ice cream, lemonade, bread, peanuts, milk, and the city's renowned Creole cream cheese.<sup>8</sup> People selling, people buying, and those just trying to get from here to there filled streets and sidewalks. On November 6, 1909, Ephraim Phelps, Jr., the owner of a shoe store at 526 S. Rampart St., requested permission to "distribute circulars on [the] street [and] also advertise with [a] banner." One month later, his neighbor at 525 S. Rampart St., J. Schwartz, also a shoe store owner, petitioned to set out a "small, folding wooden sign" to attract customers.<sup>9</sup> City directories dating to 1908 and 1910 show that Phelps and Schwartz operated on a busy stretch of street in the shoe trade. In 1908, ten retailers of boots and shoes existed on South Rampart Street alone. By 1910, their numbers had grown to thirteen, with several situated in the same block.<sup>10</sup>

Among such businesses' banners, signs, and circulars, enterprising – and poor – New Orleanians staked out sidewalk space to sell shoeshines, coal, and wood, and even serenade passersby with a "stand piano," as did Joseph Davi at 1532 Perdido St.<sup>11</sup> At times, the hubbub on these crowded streets became irritating rather than enchanting. On January 26, 1910, the New Orleans Police Department investigated a complaint against a so-called "very impudent negro...shoving circulars in the faces of guests coming out of the Grunewald Hotel and

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<sup>8</sup> See chapters 1 and 4 for more detailed social histories of such vendors. Most were immigrants and people of color. Many were widows who turned to peddling after their husbands had died, suffered an injury or illness, or abandoned them. Despite their poverty, street vendors often served as their families' sole or primary breadwinners.

<sup>9</sup> Permits dated November 6, 1909; December 14, 1909; AA670 1909 Office of the Mayor, Permits under ordinance 228 A.S., "Various Series, Etc." New Orleans Office of the Mayor (hereafter cited as Mayor), New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

<sup>10</sup> *Soards' New Orleans City Directory for 1908*, Vol. XXXV (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., Ltd., 1908), *Soards' New Orleans City Directory for 1910*, Vol. XXXVII (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., Ltd., 1910).

<sup>11</sup> Permit dated September 16, 1909; Mayor, NOPL.

pedestrians passing that locality.”<sup>12</sup> And after repeated complaints, in February 1911 the Inspector of Police issued a telegraph banning all hand organists with monkeys from city streets.<sup>13</sup> The competitive advertisement methods of these sidewalk entrepreneurs constituted visual, olfactory, and auditory interactions that made New Orleans a city to see, smell, and hear.

During these years, visual technology in New Orleans became an entertainment in itself in addition to a means of advertisement, and sometimes to scandalous effect. In 1909, New Orleanians opened three “5 cent moving picture theater[s]” in or near the French Quarter. Employees of professional photography studios sought permits to take photographs on city streets for profit.<sup>14</sup> Some of these entrepreneurs openly catered to the bawdier class of tourists. For example, from his Canal Street postcard shop, Greek immigrant John Scordillo hawked provocative and repeatable visual experiences that earned him a visit from the police. Scordillo stocked cards “with the picture of a woman, with a cloth dress from the waist down,” an officer reported. Furthermore, the officer continued with careful detail, “The dress is attached to the picture in such a manner that it can be raised up, showing the posterior of the woman, with don’t worry, and other mottos printed on.”<sup>15</sup> Scordillo’s interactive postcard suggested a ribald sense of humor on the part of both the sender and receiver, in which manipulation of the image would

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<sup>12</sup> January 26, 1910; New Orleans Police Department, Office of Inspector of Police, Correspondence, 1899-1913 (hereafter cited as NOPD); Box 1, Series 2, Folder: January 1910, NOPL.

<sup>13</sup> On February 18, 1911, an NOPD officer reported his revocation of the license of T. Polito to “have a hand organ and monkey to play on streets but not on principle streets,” despite the fact that the license had been guaranteed from January to July 1911. NOPD, Box 2, Series 3, Folder: January 1911, NOPL.

<sup>14</sup> Permits of L. Loeb, dated January 6, 1909, and July 10, 1909, and permit of Margaret Hirsch, dated May 31, 1909; W.E. Noll & Co. applied for a permit to take photographs on January 13, 1909; Mayor, NOPL.

<sup>15</sup> March 12, 1910. Ibid., Box 1, Series 2, Folder: March 1910, NOPD, NOPL.

result in a shared joke and naughty view.<sup>16</sup> Whether confronted with a sandwich board advertising shoes or a passing glance of lewd postcards, tourists and residents in turn-of-the-century New Orleans had much to look at. Older methods and objects of visual communication, such as signs and banners, competed for space with newer items, like photographs, moving picture shows, and postcards (fig. 3.1). In New Orleans as in many other cities, Americans had



Figure 3.1. This photograph showing postcards, illustrated news magazines, and tropical fruit available for purchase at a stand in downtown New Orleans captured a moment of transition between older and newer forms of visual media in American cities. Detroit Publishing Company, Smallest news & post card stand in New Orleans, La., 103 Royal Street, 1900-1915, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup> Brooke Baldwin argued that the risqué humor and racist jokes that often appeared on postcards of this era created a sense of community among postcard senders and receivers. Baldwin, “On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 22, no. 3 (Winter 1988): 21, 15.

never before encountered such a volume and variety of visual experiences reminding them that they were consumers.

City guidebooks like the *Picayune's Guide* were one form of newly prominent authority that dictated the paths taken by visitors who plunged into this overwhelming mix. Because many early travel guides were published by local businesses, newspapers, and other actors invested in a revitalized city, they frequently directed tourists to visit New Orleans's industrial structures, hoping to impress them with their efficiency now weaned from slave labor. If the lively streets of New Orleans were the city's veins, then its steamboat levees, cotton-pressing plants, sugar refineries, and storage sheds were its organs.

Postbellum guidebooks elevated these sites, especially the sugar and cotton levee, to the same status as more typical tourist destinations like cemeteries and monuments, communicating the idea that the New South's industry stood in equal importance to its culture and history. *Jewell's Crescent City Illustrated* was one such volume that blended biographies of local businessmen with recommendations for the traveler, in the hopes of "engag[ing] the attention of the casual reader and command[ing] the serious consideration of capitalists, immigrants, and the commercial world." The Crescent City basked in an "unrivalled" geographic and economic position, Jewell claimed, and nowhere was this more visible than on the levee. There, "hundreds of immense floating castles and palaces, called steamboats," stretched for five miles along the shore. "The transportation, by some three thousand drays, of cotton, sugar, tobacco and the various and extensive produce of the great West, strikes the stranger with wonder and admiration."<sup>17</sup> A similar guide published by the mercantile firm A.B. Griswold & Co. dismissed the postbellum city's libraries, art galleries, and public parks as "noticeably deficient," and urged

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<sup>17</sup> Edwin L. Jewell, ed., *Jewell's Crescent City Illustrated: The Commercial, Social, Political and General History, Including Biographical Sketches of Its Distinguished Citizens* (New Orleans: 1873), Introduction, 19.



the tourist to instead visit the steamboat landing, for its “series of sights always attractive to strangers.” More than one million tons of goods and almost 3,500 steamboats had touched its docks in 1872 alone, the writer marveled.<sup>18</sup> There, New Orleans’s recovery could be seen and counted.

Despite postbellum guidebooks’ overt attempts to lure tourists to the riverfront, the New Orleans levee had long served as a source of special fascination for visitors. Both before and after the Civil War, white observers marveled at the levee as a site of massive abundance, technology, and organization. Lewis Webb, a young man from Rockingham, North Carolina, who worked as a clerk in a New Orleans mercantile firm in 1853, frequently wrote in his diary about his saunters along the levee. A devout teetotaler, Webb shirked the many bars and gambling houses that filled the city’s blocks, instead passing time by writing in his diary, reading newspapers in the lobby of the St. Charles Hotel, checking at the post office for family letters, and walking the city’s streets. In Webb’s record, steamboat arrivals and departures drew large crowds who shouted to passengers, inspected the boats’ luxurious interiors, and watched the workers’ actions from shore. On April 8, 1853, Webb wrote, “About 10 o’clock being unemployed I walked down the Levee to see a new boat just arrived and going on board inspected in [a] cursory way her interior & exterior arrangements.”<sup>19</sup> Visits to the levee often satisfied Webb’s boredom, for there was much to see. Webb scrambled up to the ships’ hurricane decks to watch steamers come and go and then descended to marvel at men’s and ladies’ saloons outfitted with “elegantly carved & gilded” ceilings, stained glass windows, “glittering

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<sup>18</sup> A.B. Griswold & Co., *Guide Book* (New Orleans: 1873), 10, 30.

<sup>19</sup> April 8, 1853, Record Group 49: L.H. Webb Diaries, 1853 (hereafter cited as Webb), Louisiana State Museum (hereafter cited as LSM).

chandeliers,” and “soft carpets & luxurious furniture.”<sup>20</sup> Locals and visitors considered the levee and the steamboats that docked there to be thoroughly public spaces, such that sightseers wandered freely among passengers and laborers.

To Webb, the levee offered as many things to see as did the mighty steamboats, and its tumult sometimes overwhelmed him. “Umbrellas overcoats carriages cabs baggage waggons [*sic*] & wheelbarrows were mingled together...with the noise of the owners, drivers, occupants & operatives with the squalling of children...& the blowing of the escape pipe,” he recorded in his journal. In Webb’s breathless telling, the goods, people, and noises flowed together into one great river of objects and sound that intruded, sometimes rudely, on his presence there.

“Thumped & pushed & elbowed off the gangway plank,” on January 16, 1853, Webb finally escaped the crowd, only to return many times during the levee’s peak winter and early spring season.<sup>21</sup> The levee offered Webb a visual and auditory experience he could not resist.

Despite the levees’ fundamentally tangible nature – as the site where American and Caribbean riches were made manifest – they also inspired Webb to reflect philosophically on more abstract themes. The scale of New Orleans’s ports and the wealth they digested convinced this young, modestly educated North Carolinian of America’s political and geographic destinies, despite hints of sectional crisis that surely filled the newspapers he read. On January 25, 1853, Webb confided to his diary that the New Orleans levee and its sumptuous steamboats made him reflect on:

The supremacy of the Americans in this respect over all the world, of the fact that 50 years ago the stream upon which this monster now ploughs was navigated only by the solitary canoe or idly floating flat boats.... What a mighty country is ours – and what a

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<sup>20</sup> Here, Webb described the steamboat *Eclipse*. January 25, 1853, *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> January 16, 1853, *Ibid*.

glorious destiny awaits her in the future – what is impossible with a people living in the unrestricted Liberty that characterizes this great republic [?]<sup>22</sup>

Standing on the levee or onboard a steamship allowed a unique perspective. To Webb, the New Orleans levee distilled the nation’s agricultural, industrial, and political potential into a single panorama. The levee’s abundance convinced Webb that the system by which it ran was correct and good, even if it relied on the labor of enslaved people.

Many published descriptions of the New Orleans levee offered a perspective similar to Webb’s: one of near intoxication and inspiration due to the staggering array of goods and frenetic pace of work there. “The very dust we breathe here is rich, it is the essence of disintegrated cotton and sugar; the gutters flow with molasses and syrup, and the air is redolent of pine-apples and bananas,” raved a *Daily Picayune* journalist of the levee in 1873.<sup>23</sup> The volume and sensory appeal of the levee’s spoils were so intense, this writer claimed, even almost a decade after the war’s end, that their essence had expanded beyond their ordinary physical containers. Cotton and bananas had evaporated into the air; their imprint lingered on the levee long after steamboats had left to carry them to Boston or Liverpool. For other writers, the foods and things shipped to and from the levee became aggressive objects that gobbled up the space where humans would ordinarily walk. The *Illustrated London News* had reported that New Orleans “overflow[ed] with wealth to such an extent as to have no room for storage. The street pavements actually do service for warehouses, and are cumbered with barrels of salt, corn, flour, pork, and molasses, and bales of cotton, to such an extent as to impede the traffic.”<sup>24</sup> Humans seemed to not really belong here, these descriptions implied, though they greedily demanded the

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<sup>22</sup> January 25, 1853, *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> “Loafs Along the Levee,” *Daily Picayune*, December 28, 1873.

<sup>24</sup> *Illustrated London News*, Vol. XXXII, No. 921, June 5, 1858.

levee's commodities for their tables and looms. In these writers' descriptions, the levee was a kingdom of barrels and bales and machinery, not men. It filled and emptied according to the whistle of the steamboat and the agricultural season. Man's authority was not immediately apparent in those schemes.

This sense of mysterious organization – of a place that seemed to run virtually automatically – inspired a heady mix of trepidation and awe that placed visitors and the levee within a broader, contemporaneous tradition of the industrial sublime.<sup>25</sup> “‘Tis a busy, driving, dreadful place,” an *Emerson's Magazine* writer marveled of the New Orleans levee. “You, yourself – a man, a stranger – you are useless, and you are jostled...and are in danger of having your legs broken by machinery, your head mashed by swaying hardware, or of being rolled into the river by casks of whisky or sugar.”<sup>26</sup> On the postbellum New Orleans waterfront, 10,000 men worked on levees that stretched for six continuous miles.<sup>27</sup> An illustration printed in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on January 8, 1881, communicated the impressive and overwhelming nature of this scene (fig. 3.2). Steamboat smokestacks receded endlessly into the distance, their black clouds casting an apocalyptic shadow on the crazed field below. Mules and men carried, rolled, and stacked barrels into rectangular phalanxes. Elevated high above the shoreline, the artist captured thousands of entities in motion. Titled “The Business Boom in the

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<sup>25</sup> This wary fascination with modernity's machines implied a distinct racial perspective. Locals and tourists who wrote about the New Orleans levee as awesome and frightening were white. For the most part, they gazed but did not engage. In contrast, men of color and European immigrants who labored on the levee experienced the site as a place of work. On the turn-of-the-century American industrial sublime, see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower, and Panama Canal* (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope, 2012); David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); John R. Stilgoe, “Moulding the Industrial Zone Aesthetic: 1880-1929,” *Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 1982): 5-24; Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> “Up the Mississippi,” *Emerson's Magazine and Putnam's Monthly* V, no. 41, October 1857, 436.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism, 1892-1923* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 44.

South,” the image evoked a martial atmosphere that declared: this is the South’s new war, both modern and productive. To some, this was a distinctly unexpected view of the famously romantic Crescent City. New Orleans’s “people are fond of idleness yet build up and sustain a great

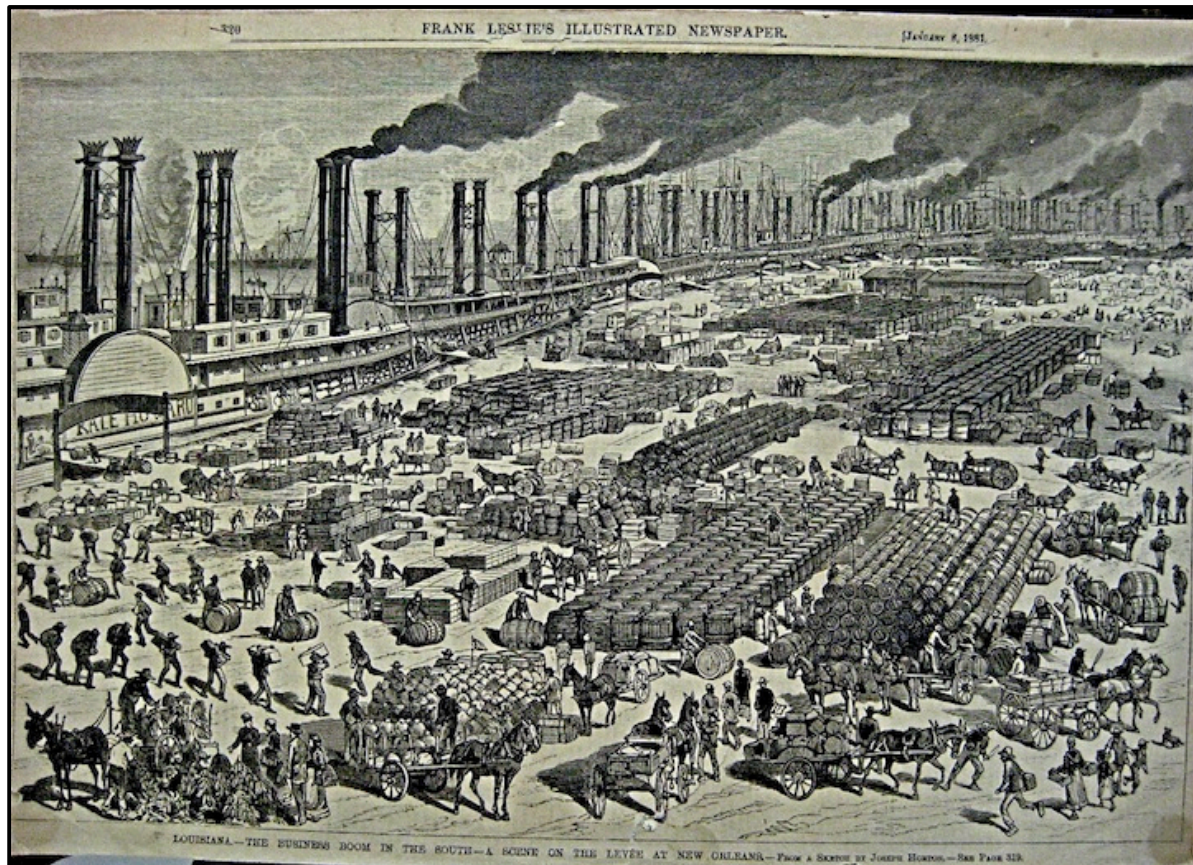


Figure 3.2. In this vision of the industrial sublime, the artist evoked the hordes of laboring people and animals, edible and inedible goods, and modernizing technology that drew locals and tourists to the New Orleans levee before and after the Civil War. “Louisiana – The Business Boom in the South,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, January 8, 1881, 320.

commerce. It is an enigma,” claimed a writer in 1889.<sup>28</sup> Agriculture in the Mississippi River valley had reached such a massive scale, these textual and visual descriptions indicated, that the pace and means of the greater Caribbean’s production had become mechanical.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph H. Beale, “City of New Orleans,” in *Picturesque Sketches of Great American Cities* (New York: Empire Co-operative Association, 1889), 76-77.

While the postbellum levee had modernized, its workings were far from purely mechanical and there should have been no “enigma” to observers as to who sweated to create the Crescent City’s wealth. In the same class as the vessels, sugar, and cotton that characterized the waterfront, the *people* who worked there also became sources of great interest to travelers, due to the mesmerizing precision with which they labored and the immense feats of strength that they accomplished. On the levee, a complex hierarchy of skilled and unskilled workers created order out of seeming chaos. Cotton and sugar graders, always white men, presided as the aristocrats of the docks, inspecting and ranking the quality of Louisiana’s two great staples.<sup>29</sup> Below them, thousands of white and black Americans and European immigrants labored as screwmen, longshoremen, cotton yardmen, coal wheelers, and teamsters. Earning a variety of wages according to their work, they pressed, packed, weighed, and distributed the levee’s products among steamships, carts, and railroad cars. By 1880, this multilingual, multiethnic assortment of laborers had organized into twenty unions. Despite managers’ constant efforts to disrupt them, workers maintained a careful, biracial balance of power that distinguished New Orleans’s waterfront laborers of this era as unique within the segregated South.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Observers often perceived the great distance separating the dock’s “aristocrats” from its roustabouts in their clothing. In a 1949 re-issue of sketches of New Orleans “characters” completed in the decade after the Civil War, Léon H. Grandjean described nineteenth-century cotton classers and sugar graders as fastidiously dressed. “A gentleman first, last and all the time, the classer affected a white linen shirt, wing collar and bow tie....Never a trace of lint appeared on them to betray his profession when he left the salesrooms.” In contrast, unskilled “roustabouts” could be observed “clad in the most forlorn and ragged clothing, in the most outré and fantastic hats. Clothing is nothing to them, money represents nothing more than so many glasses of whisky,” alleged a journalist in 1873. In these descriptions, the highest caste of white levee workers avoided any hint of physical contamination by the products they graded, whereas roustabouts could not help but show their poverty in their dress. Grandjean, *Crayon Reproductions of Léon J. Frémaux’s New Orleans Characters and Additional Sketches by Léon H. Grandjean* (New Orleans: Peerless Printing, 1949); “Loafs Along the Levee,” *Daily Picayune*, December 28, 1873.

<sup>30</sup> Alliances between white and black levee workers were neither altruistic nor consistent, however. White workers maintained a constant, privileged position in larger social and political realms throughout the city, which carried over onto the levees. During the port’s slow season, unionized laborers competed for work, sometimes violently. Although unions often did cooperate, they remained segregated internally and, until 1902, black and white workers who did the same kind of work, such as screwmen, labored on separate levels of the same ship. Managers made a practice of telling one group that the other was working faster in order to motivate them. However, in 1902, unions collaborated to form the famous “half-and-half” agreement, which demanded that white and black workers be

The levee's "roustabouts," though, stood outside this story. Non-unionized and all black, with the least secure jobs and lowest pay, New Orleans's roustabouts worked on the lowest rung of the levee's social ladder.<sup>31</sup> Their labor was unskilled but thoroughly necessary: to move sugar, molasses, and cotton on and off ships, along the entire length of the Mississippi. Following the schedules of steamboats and railroads, roustabouts worked around the clock, day and night. They labored on docks filled with rats, cockroaches, sewage, mud, and humidity.<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, they counted as the most vulnerable of freedmen, yet tourists rarely failed to comment on their virtually superhuman physical strength. Compressed into a rough cube, a cotton bale weighed 500 pounds. A hogshead of sugar weighed 1,500 pounds, and a hogshead of molasses, 140 gallons. The cargo of the port of New Orleans, even if sweet, moved in awkwardly dangerous, cumbersome units.<sup>33</sup> Even as New Orleans's levees modernized, they continued to require human hands and legs as the final link between field and factory. Roustabouts' brawn and dexterity drew tourists to the levees as if they were performers on a stage.

Responding to roustabouts' extraordinary physical strength as well as their skin color, white observers often cast them as more animal or food than human, referencing persistent, racist associations between New Orleanians of color and consumable commodities. In 1893, a writer in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* watched more than one hundred black workers load the

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allowed to work side by side, forcing steamship managers to stop playing one set of laborers against the other. Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 22, 32, 54-55; and Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), ix.

<sup>31</sup> Social divisions within New Orleans's African-American community determined who worked on the levees. Descendants of enslaved people who were more likely to be poorly educated, impoverished, live Uptown, and have darker skin worked as unskilled laborers on the docks. In contrast, descendants of New Orleans's Creoles of color tended to work in skilled trades. Residing in downtown neighborhoods, better educated, and with lighter skin tones, these New Orleanians of color disdained unskilled work on the levees. Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Government Printing Office, *Monthly Consular and Trade Reports* 24, nos. 85-87 (1887), 266.

steamboat *City of Providence*. “They interested me,” Julian Ralph mused, as he watched from the deck as the men worked. In Ralph’s telling, roustabouts formed a humorous parade of conjoined people and goods. “The long, zigzagging, shambling line was metamorphosed into a wriggling sinuosity formed of soapboxes, or an unsteady line of flour-bags, each with ragged legs beneath it.” Ralph’s mirth resulted partly from the fact that the roustabouts all looked the same, he decided. “Their coffee-colored necks and faces matched their reddish-brown clothes....When a huddle went off the boat empty-handed they looked like so many big rats.”<sup>34</sup> To a national readership, Ralph described the roustabouts as an indistinguishable crowd while in the midst of their labor, transformed literally into flour-bags and coffee, and when separated from their burdens as nothing more than rats.<sup>35</sup> Textual representations such as this laid the groundwork for a broadly diffused white understanding of workers of color as belonging to a variety of “types.” They were alternatively ragged spendthrifts or mythically strong, they worked according to exotic, foreign cadences, and they were most comprehensible to white onlookers as a laboring, animalistic mass, not a group of individuals.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Julian Ralph, “The Old Way to Dixie,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* LXXXVI, no. DXII, January 1893, 166.

<sup>35</sup> Two decades earlier, a *Scribner’s Monthly* writer had described New Orleans’s roustabouts as animals of another sort, who “swarm[ed]” as an insect-like cloud, descending on steamers that needed to be loaded or unloaded of goods. This lack of individual variation continued into moments of rest, as “Whenever there is a lull in the work they sink down on the cotton bales, clinging to them like lizards.” “The Great South: Old and New Louisiana – II,” *Scribner’s Monthly* VII, no. 2 (December 1873), 135, 133.

<sup>36</sup> For example, writing for *Leslie’s Weekly* in 1902, Eleanor Franklin marveled at “a crowd of magnificent black men, each built on the lines of an Ajax...keeping time to their rhythmic movements with a weird swinging melody that might have come down through generations from an ancient tribe in the heart of Africa.” Turn-of-the-century popular culture sources frequently emasculated black men as thieves or dandies or vilified them as predatory sexual beasts; maternalized black women as “mammies”; and objectified black girls as shabbily dressed, playful “pickaninnies.” Franklin, “Strolling About the Quaint Old City of New Orleans,” *Leslie’s Weekly*, December 11, 1902, 558. On the generation of such stereotypes, see Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).



Even a child tourist could agree that black roustabouts in motion formed a highly entertaining component of the New Orleans levee scene, creating a diversion for others with the very fact of their labor. In an 1897 handwritten essay titled “What One Sees in New Orleans,” possibly intended for a school assignment, an unnamed fourteen-year-old traveler recounted his trip to the Crescent City and disclosed his recommendations to the reader, dwelling most on his time at the levee. “It is quite a comical sight to watch the unloading of steamboats. Sometimes you see a negro coming down the gangplank on a full run, with a cotton bale on a truck, bouncing like a rubber ball,” the boy wrote. “If he should trip and fall it would be almost certain death for once they get started they cannot be stopped until they hit the wharf.” This engrossing scene, purportedly one of life or death for the worker but physical comedy for the viewer, had occupied the boy for “a few hours,” after which he proceeded to Canal Street for subsequent adventures.<sup>37</sup> For this young observer, the chance to gaze at roustabouts in motion had proved the highlight of his time in the Crescent City.

This tourist was one of many travelers who trekked to New Orleans in the years following the Civil War to experience a modernizing city. Like other American metropolises, the Crescent City offered teeming streets that enticed, delighted, and irritated. But tableaux such as those visible on the New Orleans riverfront levee resounded with observers as uniquely exciting. To viewers, the levee was simultaneously specific to New Orleans and enmeshed in greater political and social themes. Exoticizing and objectifying views that rendered black workers as laboring objects in motion, part human, part commodity, and fully entertaining, would reach an even greater number of consumers when translated into photographic form.

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<sup>37</sup> MSS 362, What One Sees in New Orleans, 1897, The Historic New Orleans Collection (hereafter cited as HNOC).

## II. Playing with Cane and Cotton: Excursions Downriver and Postcards from the Levee

When travelers spent time in postbellum New Orleans, they used a variety of means to commemorate and share their experiences. Print narratives of excursions through cane and cotton fields modeled how white travelers could appreciate black laborers, now emancipated, as picturesque spots of color in Louisiana's rural-industrial landscape. Postcards helped spread fascination with the levee's fearsome, modern might and simultaneously demonstrated how a tourist could savor this industrial site as a locus of relaxation. Together, nostalgic texts and photographic postcards created the relaxed, appreciative gaze through which white southerners and northerners claimed authority over a newly romantic Old South and its people.

Not all travelers in late-nineteenth-century New Orleans stayed on the levee. The postbellum rural Louisiana landscape – the green satellites of urban and worldwide markets – offered a particularly alluring blend of the modern and romantic that seemed rarely to trouble visitors' consciences. Because America's slaves had been granted their freedom and ushered into a wage-earning economy – so many voices loudly announced – white writers and tourists felt free to use these people and the places where they worked as inspiration for a newly romanticized Old South.<sup>38</sup> Observers continued to enjoy as sites of leisure and sensory pleasure the settings where black slaves had labored – and impoverished freedmen continued to labor – to produce white sweets for white tables and white cotton for white backs.

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<sup>38</sup> Following the Civil War, northern and southern white Americans embraced nostalgic depictions of an uncomplicated antebellum world reliant on the labor of enslaved people. At the same time, the larger public demonstrated an unwillingness to engage with slavery's economic and social repercussions for African Americans. See K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Rebecca Cawood McIntyre, *Souvenirs of the Old South: Northern Tourism and Southern Mythology* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); and George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

In an 1891 essay printed in the *Daily Picayune*, Catharine Cole reported on a trip to a sugarcane plantation during which she gloried in a nostalgic blend of old and new that only the postbellum Louisiana food industry could provide. “When one is riding along the levee road...it is hard to realize that this is country life,” she described to her readers. “It is rather as if the country were given over to large factory interests, with its clouds of smoke, its veils of steam and shrill whistles.” Louisiana’s agricultural landscape had transformed more visibly but no more significantly than its people, according to Cole. Following emancipation, workers of color had become fully integrated into this mechanized new world. “Under the big wheels that grind the juice...there waits a little nigger with a wood paddle and a big wicker basket,” Cole wrote. “It is a picturesque detail of the mammoth machinery – that curly-headed nigger lad scraping up wisps of dry cane stalk.”<sup>39</sup> Liberated from the constant antebellum fear of slave rebellion and the duties of an imagined paternalism – invented yokes hardly as heavy as that of the slavery imposed on blacks – whites could now appreciate people of color in the food industry as aesthetically pleasing reservoirs of nostalgia, Cole demonstrated.

Accordingly, the “picturesque” boy who labored at the cane-pressing machine distracted Cole from the very modern dollars and cents that determined whether the operation surrounding her was profitable. After touring the plantation, “As I sit here, with a little nigger at my feet, with another doing my hair...I forget the intricacies of that \$40,000 machinery,” Cole prattled. Neutralized by the supposedly benevolent gift of freedom, the African-American sugar worker created a pleasant, lazy amnesia for the writer. The simple sensation of a child of color arranging Cole’s hair rendered her immune to the pecuniary realities of the present as well as the distasteful memories of a slavery-tainted past. Cherry-picked remnants of history blotted out the violent inequities that saturated postwar Louisiana and created a nostalgic new world for Cole and her

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<sup>39</sup> “Catharine Cole’s Letter: The Charm of Traveling,” *Daily Picayune*, November 1, 1891.

readers. “What a royal, cosy, genial, and kindly life is that which goes on at Point Clear plantation,” Cole sighed. “How comforting it all is with little niggers, and flowers and thoroughbred puppies and Persian kittens in all the rooms.”<sup>40</sup> During years when southern whites wielded disfranchisement and lynching as the new weapons of enslavement, soft gazes such as Cole’s also committed malicious violence against Louisianians of color.<sup>41</sup>

Southern writers also facilitated openly fictionalized journeys into such places, situating tales of romance and humor in sites previously characterized by scenes of war and slavery. On February 17, 1895, the *Daily Picayune* published an anonymously written short story, “How Marie Picked Cotton.” The tale chronicled a party hosted by the Baker family at their Louisiana plantation, Retreat, one October week in the 1890s. As the story opened, Mr. Baker sat at his dinner table with his guests, complaining about the slow rate at which his African-American employees picked his cotton. Marie, a young visitor from the North, asked:

“How much can a laborer pick in one day?”  
“Not less than 200 pounds” [Mr. Baker replied....]  
“Do you consider that much, Miss Marie?” asked Tom Mundy. “I’ve heard it said, before the war, 400 or 500 was nothing unusual”....  
“Much? No indeed....Why I’m sure if I were a negro I could pick much more.”  
“O, Marie, a negro?” exclaimed Corinne, chidingly.<sup>42</sup>

In this exchange, Marie committed two errors. First, she revealed herself to be outside a specific circle of knowledge at the table. The southerners around her shared the common understanding,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> In his study on pejorative stereotypes of emancipation and emancipated people in American and British visual culture, Marcus Wood wrote, “I had no idea of the ingenuity, and frequently the poisonous beauty, with which the memory of slavery was lovingly repainted by the dominant cultures of the slave diaspora. In the natural world venomous things frequently advertise their nature with a flamboyant beauty.” Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), x. See also Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

<sup>42</sup> The estate’s name, Retreat, suggested a withdrawal from urban life but also from the present. Retreat’s inhabitants enjoyed an imagined excursion into Louisiana’s past. From the subject matter and tone, it is possible that Catharine Cole also authored this piece. Catherine \_\_\_\_, “How Marie Picked Cotton,” *Daily Picayune*, February 17, 1895.

assumed to be fact, that wage-earning black workers picked half as much cotton as had enslaved people. In suggesting that she could pick more cotton than even a fully productive slave – she boasted she could gather 700 or 800 pounds in one day – Marie earned the delighted scorn of her dinner mates. “What a laugh there was at this inexperienced little Yankee,” the narrator recounted.<sup>43</sup>

But it was comparing herself to a worker of color and suggesting what she could accomplish if she stood in his or her shoes that earned the most shocked gasp. Naïve Marie had ignored the line that separated the social, economic, and racial roles of whites and blacks, if only in imagination. However, the remainder of the story’s plot turned on the enactment of exactly that seemingly absurd scenario. Mr. Baker pounced on Marie’s claim and invited her and all the young women at the table to pick his cotton and see if they could measure up to Marie’s bluster. Tittering, they agreed. This was no slavery game, however. Mr. Baker negotiated the price he would pay per pound, offering the incentive of a doubled rate once they picked more than twenty-five pounds. The planter sought to motivate the girls with the same logic he had tried on his purportedly lazy employees. What followed reinforced contemporary racial and gender roles and suggested that remnants of Louisiana’s slave-based economy remained very much in play.<sup>44</sup>

Marie and her friends embarked on a farcical performance complete with costumes and an audience, traipsing into the cotton field in dresses as their young male companions ogled from the sideline. After just a few hours, the girls realized that they had vastly underestimated the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Americans notions of gender, as well as race, transformed rapidly in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); John Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

nature of the work and the tools required to do it. Picking only a scant amount, they dressed the next morning in “faded calico, a well-worn gingham...[and] old gloves,” determined to tackle the cotton again. Most members of the party returned to the scale that evening offering ten pounds of cotton, but Marie had snagged a far more impressive and expensive prize: a husband. Serendipitously, amongst the cotton rows Marie had stumbled across Jack Jones, a long-lost Yankee paramour, transformed by his time in the South from a “fair, slender and beardless” northerner into a “stout, bronzed creature,” who promptly proposed marriage. Leaving the field, Mr. Baker celebrated Marie’s find but nevertheless required his due. “How much do you value your life?” Mr. Baker asked Jack. ““A round million,” responded Jack, coolly.” Mr. Baker then calculated, “Miss Marie...you owe me exactly \$999,999.91...Mr. Jones values himself at \$1,000,000. You picked 4 ½ pounds – and also picked Mr. Jones in my field, and as you seem to hold him in your possession, the balance is due me.” Mr. Baker’s arithmetic caused merry laughter, though the narrator acknowledged Marie’s reaction to be “somewhat disconcerted.”<sup>45</sup> Unsure if Mr. Baker’s math was truly a joke, Marie left the field awkwardly exiled from the group’s mirth, just as she had begun the party exiled at the dinner table.

To New Orleans readers, this tale offered improbable comedy and unexpected romance, though lessons about race, gender, and labor also sat imbedded not so subtly between the lines. A marriage proposal concluded and rectified the visual farce at the center of the story: that of white women trying their hand at cotton picking, dragging empty sacks down the rows behind them. The women’s failure verified that a cotton field was no place for white workers, and certainly not white women. African-American laborers had distinguished their clear expertise at the task, even if under the duress of enslavement. With the girls’ pathetically small yields, the Bakers and their friends also justified their derision of Marie and her Yankee brashness. Southerners understood

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<sup>45</sup> “How Marie Picked,” *Daily Picayune*.

the nature of southern labor, the tale confirmed. Northerners who attempted to interject would soon discover themselves to be aliens in this well-tuned world of cotton, sugar, and laborers of color in the field. And though Marie ultimately won a comfortable lifetime of ease by catching a husband, one fortuitously improved and rendered more masculine by his time in the South, she also came up short in a most unsettling way. According to Mr. Baker's arithmetic, even decades after slavery had ended, a man's life could still very much be quantified in dollars and cents. Laborers who left the field and delivered less than they had promised found they owed a balance.

In this story, African-American characters played minor, unnamed, and distinctly aesthetic roles that characterized them as consumable commodities. Upon arriving at the Bakers' plantation, one guest described a woman of color leaving the cotton gin's lint room as "resembling a frosted chocolate," the edible product of an estate where vacationers gathered pecans, persimmons, and fish prior to their experiment in the cotton field. At the story's conclusion, Marie's pouty discomfort with Mr. Baker's joke clashed with the sounds of "a number of dusky pickers whose care-free laughter wafted in the idle breeze."<sup>46</sup> The pickers' mirth indicated that all was right in the world, exactly as it was. Marie's precocious meddling had failed. New Orleans readers presumably laughed at Marie just as her companions had laughed at her. They would have been fluent in the dinner conversation about labor and cotton picking and the new, postbellum bottom line. Tales like this birthed nostalgia for the Old South. They also encouraged a sense of community among its readers, confirming in both subtle and overt ways why and how Louisiana's whites and blacks belonged in the roles they did. These literary conquests of Louisiana's cane and cotton fields – in these cases, printed as a blur of fact and fiction in the same New Orleans newspaper – helped build a newly imagined world very

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

different from that intended by the federal government and the Freedmen's Bureau after the Civil War.

In the years surrounding the turn of the century, however, textual reporting and travel narratives of sites of food production and transportation segued into more directly experienced and represented form. "Most bankers realize that if Jack is not to become 'a dull boy,' he must sometimes unbend, cultivate his social nature," reported the journal *Banking and Mercantile World* in the fall of 1902. To avoid such a fate, American bankers and their families converged on New Orleans in November 1902 for the twenty-eighth annual convention of the American Bankers' Association. As the convention's highlight, 2,700 people boarded the steamer *Chalmette* for a "delightful outing on the river" and chugged southward to Braithwaite, a sugarcane plantation.<sup>47</sup> Plunging into the rural-industrial world that Catharine Cole had fetishized in her essay of a decade earlier, these northern tourists left equally enchanted.

At Braithwaite, the travelers marveled at a modern southern cabinet of curiosities: men, women, and children of color and the sophisticated equipment that they operated to convert pressed cane into white table sugar. "Many Northern visitors thought they had seen 'darkeys,' but they changed their minds when they surveyed the animated scene which was enlivened with more varieties of negroes than they had dreamed of as existing," the writer recounted. "From white-haired 'mammies' and tottering 'uncles' to the most diminutive of 'pickaninnies,' the gamut of the black race seemed to run complete." Far more exciting than the vendors on New Orleans's Canal Street, it seemed, these people "decidedly interested the ladies and gentlemen of the North, and many a coin was cast into the air to provoke an animated scramble." To a nationwide readership, the writer described the intriguing power of activating the plantation's

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<sup>47</sup> W.Y. Barnet, "New Orleans Entertains," *The Banking and Mercantile World* 4, no. 6, (November-December 1902), 232, 246.



residents with a few coins tossed in the dust. The party toured the sugarhouse and paper mill, rode on horse-drawn wagons, and returned to the steamboat, “armed, almost to a man and to a woman, with a stalk of cane” (*fig. 3.3*).<sup>48</sup> Forty years earlier, Union forces had fought to liberate enslaved laborers from this very site. Now, northern tourists delighted in canes of sugar and photographs of impoverished sharecroppers as souvenirs. Just a generation’s time had converted Braithwaite from a battleground to a tourist’s playground, whose residents and commodities offered parallel entertainment.<sup>49</sup>

A similarly relaxed white gaze enjoyed urban New Orleans’s sugar and cotton levees. Yet photographic representations of these places, specifically in the form of postcards, generated newly unequal relationships between white consumers, black producers, and sites associated with the city’s food industry. Postcards of Crescent City scenes repeated themes present in textual sources, but the visual medium allowed for especially engaging, full-color evocations of the modernizing South. Massively popular at the turn of the century, postcards encouraged many Americans to take an active role in circulating images within a consumer culture that had been dominated previously by daguerreotypes and illustrated magazines. Because they were cheap and diminutive in scale, postcards permitted a repeatable sense of possession of the people, places,

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 247-248.

<sup>49</sup> Despite these fanciful representations of postbellum Louisiana sugarcane plantations, harvesting and refining sugar cane was atrociously brutal work, even as sugar makers began to mechanize some portions of the process. In 1888, Frenchman Prosper Jacotot published an account of his journey through the Mississippi Valley of the United States, which included a tortuous stint harvesting sugar cane. In humid heat, workers cut cane in fields full of insects, snakes, and rats, with bug-infested warm water to drink. Due to a compressed harvest season, managers forced laborers to work at a rapid pace, such that cane cutting and the sugarhouse ran twenty-four hours a day. When workers of color committed a “misdeed,” Jacotot recalled, “The whites gathered together, arrested the guilty ones, and hung them from the nearest tree, without further ceremony. One day, I saw five negroes swinging on the same tree.” Jacotot concluded his narrative by warning European readers away from immigration to America, advising them to search for work only in France or its colonies. My translation. Prosper Jacotot, *Voyage d’un ouvrier dans la Vallée du Mississippi, du Saint-Louis à la Nouvelle-Orléans: Scènes de mœurs* (1888).



Figure 3.3. Attendees at the 1902 convention of the American Banker's Association in New Orleans delighted in a tour of a Louisiana sugarcane plantation, where they marveled at the array of "darkeys" they found before leaving with souvenir canes of sugar. W.Y. Barnet, "New Orleans Entertains," *The Banking and Mercantile World* 4, no. 6 (November-December 1902).

machines, and commodities they depicted and allowed senders and receivers to share a common set of impressions about New Orleans.<sup>50</sup>

Turn-of-the-century postcards of bananas and sugar on the New Orleans levee, for example, showcased edible commodities and the modern machinery involved in their transportation, while often removing workers from the frame (*fig. 3.4*). These postcards represented visually what some writers claimed in print: that the Crescent City's levees and steamboats had become a modern, automated wonder, so efficient that fruit moved and sugar barrels replicated as if by magic, devoid of human intervention. In the foreground of the first postcard, bananas ascend the ship's steam conveyor, their clusters lying in neat horizontal rows amidst an angled mass of masts, tackles, and pulleys. One figure visible in the background stands indifferently to the action, his jacket slung casually over a shoulder. He is not needed here; the fruit moves itself. Though the sugar barrels in the second postcard sit inert on the levee, their enormous quantity – completely filling the frame, receding far into the distance and advancing into the foreground – inspires the viewer to a similar sense of wonder at modernity's awesome output. Just as white sugar crystals were a refined product, many times distilled and forcibly whitened, so did the New Orleans levee represent to visitors the distillation of many hours of labor, miles of travel, and dollars bought and sold. Pictured on these postcards were the purified

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<sup>50</sup> A 1904 article in *The Living Age* reported on Americans' obsessive compulsion to collect postcards, explaining, "Cases are known where women in very humble life have spent their pence in the collection of picture-cards." During this era, postcards were not always relics of travel; rather, Americans frequently exchanged postcards for their aesthetic or humorous appeal. *The Living Age*, July 30, 1904, 310-314, as cited in Edward W. Earle, *Points of View: The Stereograph in America – A Cultural History* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1979), 76; Baldwin, "On the Verso," *JPC*, 16. For studies of postcards as tools that broadcast carefully crafted depictions of ethnicity and culture, see Annette Pritchard and Nigel Morgan, "Mythic Geographies of Representation and Identity: Contemporary Postcards of Wales," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 1, no. 2 (2003): 111-130; and Marion Markwick, "Postcards from Malta: Image, Consumption, Text," *Annals of Tourism Research* 28, no. 2 (2001): 417-438. Scholars of American history and culture have devoted greater attention to souvenirs and household objects than postcards. See Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles*; Anthony Stanonis, ed., *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Richard D. Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2003); and Patricia Yaeger, "Edible Labor," *Southern Quarterly* 30, nos. 2-3 (Winter-Spring 1992): 150-159.

products of the Mississippi watershed. They showed commodities on the move, on a thoroughly mobile canvas. Modernity was both the subject and the medium of these visual objects.

Some postcards did not eliminate humans from their story, however, and as a result communicated intriguing evidence of the clash between the levee's function as a site of work for blacks and leisure for whites. On July 31, 1909, a female tourist addressed a postcard to a young woman in Alsace Lorraine Germany (*fig. 3.5*). The photograph on the front of the card shows stacks of pressed cotton on the levee, with bits of white fluff escaping from the bales' seams. A group of men faces the camera. From their suits, hats, and white faces, most are presumably experts engaged in weighing and grading the cotton. "*Chère petite Hélène,*" the writer began, on the verso. "This [is] a card I bought in La Nouvelle Orléans, when I was there. It is '*le quai,*' where they put the cotton on the boat. It is so hot here, all we do is fan ourselves."<sup>51</sup>

Superficially, the writer's note was a complaint about the immobilizing New Orleans heat. But in this short message, the writer drew an effortless distinction between her touristic experience of the levee and that of the thousands of people who worked there. Seemingly unconsciously, she differentiated the "we" who only fan ourselves – it is "all we do," she explained, implying it was the only action they could manage – from the "they" who worked, who "put the cotton on the boat." Assuredly a white woman and outfitted elegantly enough to be equipped with a fan, the sender visited the New Orleans levee, watched as others labored, and purchased this postcard in order to share her perspective with someone else. In doing so, she duplicated her inactive, un-working gaze in the mind of the recipient, who had not seen the New Orleans levee and perhaps never would, but now understood the racial division between labor and leisure there.

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<sup>51</sup> Postcard dated July 31, 1909. Sub-folder: Loading Cotton; Folder: Wharves, Docks, and Shipping; New Orleans Print File, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC).



Figure 3.4. Postcards such as these emphasized the modern machinery and edible commodities of the turn-of-the-century New Orleans levee, rather than the people who worked there. Detroit Publishing Company, “Unloading Bananas (Steam Conveyers)” and “Sugar on the Levee, New Orleans, La.,” ca. 1900, Sub-folders: Loading Bananas and Other Fruit; and Loading Sugar; Folder: Wharves, Docks, and Shipping, New Orleans Print File, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC).



Figure 3.5. On the verso of this postcard the sender complained to the recipient, “It is so hot here, all we do is fan ourselves,” distinguishing her touristic experience of the New Orleans levees from that of the thousands who labored there. Detroit Publishing Company, “Weighing Cotton,” July 31, 1909, Sub-folder: Loading Cotton; Folder: Wharves, Docks, and Shipping; New Orleans Print File, LaRC.



Figure 3.6. Pictured on this postcard, white women transformed the New Orleans cotton levee into a playground. The women’s actions attempted to render this site where thousands labored into a lighthearted, interactive tourist attraction. “Fun on the Levee in New Orleans,” ca. 1912, Sub-folder: Loading Cotton; Folder: Wharves, Docks, and Shipping; New Orleans Print File, LaRC.

Still, some turn-of-the-century visitors went beyond merely gazing at the levees' machinery and workingmen. They engaged with the levee as a site of play and in doing so mocked the labor of those who toiled there, as did the bankers on their trip to Braithwaite sugarcane plantation. A postcard with the caption "Fun on the Levee in New Orleans," produced around 1912, offers just such an example (*fig. 3.6*). A line of white women in skirts and blouses smiles broadly at the camera, mouths open and eyes squinting in the sunlight, as they tow cotton bales on carts toward the photographer. The colorful ribbons on their hats make this a gaudily cheerful parade. The bales are enormously heavy, as it takes three women to lift the front handles of the cart pictured in the foreground, but the scene is one of uproarious fun. Seemingly inspired by the levee's excitement, the women could not help but jump into the fray, the postcard implies. African-American dockworkers appear in the background, but they seem at ease and one even sits on a stack of bales, watching the women. In this image, the levee is far from threatening and chaotic. Rather, the women's excited smiles show that this is a place where white tourists, even genteel women in ankle-length skirts, are welcome to come and intervene. Postcards such as this offered a dramatic message of engagement in and ownership of the space. Grab the handles of the nearest cart, this postcard beckoned the viewer, and discover that work here may not be so taxing after all.

Textual accounts of excursions to Louisiana cane and cotton fields had presaged postcards such as "Fun on the Levee." Over the course of decades, New Orleans's modernizing industrial sites titillated, awed, and entertained the increasing number of travelers who ventured south. Locals and tourists used nostalgic essays and stories, photographs, and postcards as entertaining methods to share their experiences with an ever-widening audience. Melding fact and fiction, they encouraged white consumers to enjoy a reconstructed fantasy world of black

laborers and the white sugar and cotton that they continued to produce. Still, the technology of stereography offered an even more impactful way of seeing postbellum Louisiana, to the social and political detriment of New Orleanians of color.

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### III. Picturing the Levee in Stereo: Roustabouts' Naps in Three Dimensions

Postcards sent from New Orleans showing bananas, sugar barrels, and the workers who moved them circulated within broader currents of images mailed from coast to coast in postbellum America. By 1911, a writer in the journal *Photo Era* observed, "Picture-Postcards are now like the poor – we have them always with us."<sup>52</sup> Despite postcards' popularity, however, three-dimensional stereography delivered the most exciting and intimate visual experience to Gilded Age Americans. Frequently depicting New Orleans roustabouts at rest, casting them as quaint figures who napped on levee cotton bales, stereographs complemented contemporary textual sources that berated black laborers as lazy and immature. In doing so, stereographs of New Orleans levee scenes contributed to widespread, contemporaneous public debate about the quality of free black labor. Moreover, because stereography fans claimed that the technology delivered an infallibly accurate rendering of reality, stereo views proved especially threatening to public perceptions of freedmen's social and political potential.

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<sup>52</sup> Scholars estimate that nearly one billion postcards were sold *annually* in the decade from 1905 and 1915. Visual ephemera like postcards, trade cards, and greeting cards played a crucial role in the expansion and personalization of consumer culture during the country's postbellum industrial boom. Although postcards and stereographs rose to prominence at virtually the same moment, only postcards persisted in popularity. Stereographs died out suddenly in the 1920s and 1930s because of the advent of radio, movies, and the car, which promised new, multisensory diversions in the family parlor and far from it. Baldwin, "On the Verso," *JPC*, 21, 15; Robert Jay, *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987); Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Ricia Anne Chansky, "Time to Shop: Advertising Trade Card Rhetoric and the Construction of a Public Space for Women in the United States, 1880-1900," *Atenea* 29, no. 1 (June 2009): 151-166; "Picture Postcards," *Photo Era* (April 1911), 192, as cited in Earle, *Points of View*, 82. On the cross-class appeal of early-twentieth-century popular media, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).



In order to create the three-dimensional effect of a stereograph, photographers used a specially formatted camera or took two photographs in quick succession, shifting the camera a couple of inches between shots. They then mounted the resultant images side by side on glass or cardboard. When a viewer inserted the card into a stereoscope, he or she perceived the pictured scene in three dimensions.<sup>53</sup> Popularized by Scottish physicist Sir David Brewster in the mid-nineteenth century, stereographic technology spread throughout England and France before achieving cross-class enthusiasm in the United States. In 1861, physician and intellectual Oliver Wendell Holmes invented a stereoscope, the device used to view stereographs, that could be manufactured easily and cheaply, expanding the medium's reach to a wide range of consumers.

Stereography invited a fundamentally new way of seeing for consumers accustomed to the visual offerings of illustrated magazines. A woman who wanted to reflect on a birds-eye perspective of downtown San Francisco, for example, raised the hooded viewer of the stereoscope to her eyes in order to block out the light around her. Though producers easily replicated stereographs thousands if not millions of times, viewing was a private experience during which the individual consumer could ponder an image for an instant or an hour. Americans sat among an audience to view a moving picture show and could share postcards and daguerreotypes with companion onlookers, but the stereo view demanded a relationship with only one viewer at a time, encouraging intimate experiences of reflection and understanding.

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<sup>53</sup> On stereography as entertainment and educational and travel tools, see Earle, *Points of View*; Shelley Staples, "The Machine in the Parlor: Naturalizing and Standardizing Labor and Industry Through the Stereoscope," American Studies Program, University of Virginia (Fall 2002), accessed February 23, 2016, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA03/staples/stereo/home.html>; Paul Wing, *Stereoscopes: The First One Hundred Years* (Nashua, NH: Transition Publishing, 1996); Jib Fowles, "Stereography and the Standardization of Vision," *Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 2 (June 1994): 89-93; Robert J. Silverman, "The Stereoscope and Photographic Depiction in the 19th Century," *Technology and Culture* 34, no. 4 (1993): 729-756; William C. Darrah, *The World of Stereographs* (Gettysburg, PA: Darrah, 1977); and Darrah, *Stereo Views: A History of Stereographs in America and Their Collection* (Gettysburg, PA: Times and News Publishing Co., 1964).

Originally intended to render daguerreotype portraits more lifelike, stereographs depicted a truly massive range of subject matter that appealed to the rich, poor, old, and young. From the comfort of their living rooms, American families witnessed travel scenes of Europe and the American West, earthquake destruction, civic parades, staged religious tableaux, and humorous tales of bashful country lovers or naïve urban immigrants.<sup>54</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, stereographs also served explicitly educational functions, illustrating skin and lung diseases for medical students and American plant life for schoolchildren, all in three dimensions.<sup>55</sup> In *how* the consumer looked and *what* he could choose to see, stereography involved a new sense of personalization and independence and imparted a special sense of adventure.<sup>56</sup>

Among the many kinds of stereographs from which turn-of-the-century Americans could choose, they reached most frequently for travel scenes, seeking experiences of wondrous and immersive detachment. Promising to transport the viewer far away, from a Boston loveseat to the ruins of Pompeii or the shores of the Mississippi, stereographs transcended reality in a way that postcards, photographs, and textual narratives could not. “The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out,” Oliver Wendell Holmes

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<sup>54</sup> Among hot air balloons and railroads, “The American Negro has been the subject of interest, humor and derision” in stereo views, Darrah wrote in 1964. “A majority were done in a manner that today is considered objectionable or in poor taste. In proper perspective, however, he was treated no different from an Irishman...the ‘country rube,’ or the cleric,” Darrah decided. This chapter argues, however, that such depictions of laborers of color were far from “gentle” in intent or result. Stereotypes spread by stereographs punished the African-American subject much more drastically than the Irishman or “country rube.” Darrah, *Stereo Views*, 169.

<sup>55</sup> In 1911 and 1916, the *Times-Picayune* reported on doctors’ use of stereoscopic images to illustrate the effects of tuberculosis on the human lung and understand how deeply a bullet had implanted in a patient’s body. As for the medium’s educational uses, a 1922 Louisiana student related his class’s enthusiasm for the stereoscope, explaining, “Looking through a stereoscope is very interesting.... We look at pictures of the mountains, rivers, lakes, and Porta [*sic*] Rican farms and schools. The people look as though they were standing in front of you.” “Antituberculosis,” *Times-Picayune*, February 10, 1911; “X-Ray in Surgery,” *Times-Picayune*, August 20, 1916; Edgar Maresmar, “Franklin School Pupils Like Stereoscope Views,” *Times-Picayune*, April 30, 1922.

<sup>56</sup> Stereographs also offered a way to simply kill time, as common fixtures of many living rooms. A journalist wrote in 1858, “It were strange indeed if many parlors were without [stereoscopes]; what is better adapted to enlarge the attention of a visitor whilst temporarily delayed, waiting for the appearance of the lady of the house? What better interlude during an evening party than to fill up a pause with a glance at a fine stereoscopic view?” *American Journal of Photography*, August 1, 1858, 82, as cited in Earle, *Points of View*, 32.

marveled of stereographs' sense of physical proximity. "The elbow of a figure stands forth so as to make us almost uncomfortable."<sup>57</sup> Reality was so tangible, Holmes remarked, that the medium nearly frightened. While some Americans traveled virtually to the postbellum New Orleans levee via textual narratives, photographs, or postcards, stereographs offered a way to experience the city and its people more deeply and, it seemed, more accurately.

From the 1850s until the 1920s, large and small American photography studios produced stereographs by the millions.<sup>58</sup> An 1890 newspaper article noted as the all-time best-selling stereo view a scene of the White House dining room, with the table set for a "young ladies' lunch" to be hosted by first lady Lucy Hayes. Americans had purchased between ten and twelve million copies of this stereo view alone.<sup>59</sup> The United States population in 1890 totaled almost sixty-three million people. Such figures translated to one out of roughly every five to six Americans buying this view, with an untold number more in homes throughout the nation immersing themselves in the first lady's table set for lunch. Stereography thus generated visual experiences among Americans that were massively *common* well before the era of radio and television. Exposing millions of consumers to the same perspective on a set of people, places,

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<sup>57</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly* (1859), in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 177.

<sup>58</sup> In 1900, approximately fifty percent of American households – eight million families – owned a stereoscope and set of stereo cards. As of 1901, Underwood & Underwood, a leader in stereographic production, produced 300,000 stereoscopes ever year and 25,000 stereographs per day, totaling seven million per year. Fowles, "Stereography," *JAC*; Darrah, *Stereo Views*, v, 109.

<sup>59</sup> An 1890 *Washington Star* article reprinted in the *Daily Picayune* reported that, aside from the stereo view of the first lady's dining room table, "The next best seller [of the nation's largest stereograph producer] is the east-room at the white house, with not a soul in it. Next to that such favorites as London bridge, Ludgate hill, St. Mary's Church, Ireland; the Giant's causeway, the market place in Cologne and the interior of Westminster Abbey. Comic stereoscopic views are great favorites, representing such scenes as a husband with a bottle of whisky in the bedroom being lectured by his spouse, a Dutch courtship, a pillow fight, and so forth." "Photographs by Wholesale," *Daily Picayune*, August 30, 1890.

and experiences, these diminutive objects of popular culture possessed an extraordinary degree of social and even political potential.<sup>60</sup>

New Orleans newspapers demonstrated the extent to which stereography truly appealed to both high and low consumers. In 1873, the *Daily Picayune* published an itemized list of household items to be sold at an estate auction in a Garden District mansion. The deceased man's possessions included "elegant household furniture, in rosewood, mahogany, oak and black walnut, choice Victoria bedroom sets...a superbly carved oak sideboard, a costly 300 view stereoscope," and much more.<sup>61</sup> The same paper also ran advertisements for Levy's Great Southern Dollar, which offered an impressive variety of items for that single sum: "very fine Southern Birds Stuffed, under a glass globe...ladies' and gents' underwear... stereoscopes."<sup>62</sup> In 1910, Maison Blanche department store even promised customers a free stereoscope with the purchase of a boys' wool suit.<sup>63</sup> Thus, stereoscopes could be "costly," one dollar, or, in the case of Maison Blanche, given as *lagniappe*. The wide spread in price and quality of stereoscopes and stereographs indicated that consumers of a truly broad range of ages and incomes enjoyed the medium. Stereography gained a reputation for blending the realms of entertainment and education in a democratic, wholesome way.

In stereo view, New Orleans's steamboats and city streets offered themselves to viewers in all their noisy, crowded, humid detail, appearing singly and in sets produced by both local and nationwide studios. A stereograph titled "Along the Docks, New Orleans, La.," produced by a Philadelphia company around 1880, showed a scene similar to that which would appear in the

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<sup>60</sup> Fowles argued, "For the first time in human history...a large proportion of a population was looking at an extended but finite set of carefully produced secular images." Fowles, "Stereography," 91.

<sup>61</sup> *Daily Picayune*, October 20, 1873.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Picayune*, January 15, 1874.

<sup>63</sup> *Daily Picayune*, May 29, 1910.

1912 “Fun on the Levee” postcard.<sup>64</sup> Similar to the postcard, the stereo view featured cotton bales on carts. But here, African-American workers – not women tourists – transported them to or from an enormous, docked ocean steamer. Viewed with a stereoscope, the angled handles of the carts thrust forward toward the viewer’s eyes as the ship receded into the misty background. The detailed array of goods and people sitting on the levee, plus the shadows cast by the workers, enhanced the experience of seeing this scene in three dimensions. The stereograph froze impressions of movement, depth, sunlight, and shadows that the photographer perceived when standing in that very location. Far from a posed, quiet daguerreotype portrait, this stereograph aimed to give the viewer the experience of presence in the midst of action, impressing him with the vigor of New Orleans’s modernizing port.

Although this particular stereograph displayed African-American men at work, most photographers who focused on black roustabouts in New Orleans in the decades after the Civil War took the opposite perspective, showing them relaxed, idle, and often fast asleep. A stereograph titled “A Roustabout’s Nap,” produced by Swiss-born, New Orleans-based photographer Thomas Mugnier, offered an excellent example of this theme. Here, a worker slouched against a pile of tarps, almost blending into them. Head bowed, his hat shielded him from the sun but also from the viewer’s gaze. Though the only subject of the photograph, he appeared a completely inert figure, unseeing and, as far as he knew (perhaps), unseen.<sup>65</sup> The

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<sup>64</sup> Certain images had to be omitted from the dissertation at the time of submission until adequate permissions to reproduce them could be obtained. Please consult the author with questions related to images referenced in the text.

<sup>65</sup> Many, if not most, stereographs of napping roustabouts seem posed. The tarp stretched behind Mugnier’s subject even suggested the careful setting of a studio backdrop. If stereo subjects did pose, it is possible – perhaps – that they received some form of minor compensation. Scholars who have considered photographic representations of impoverished immigrants and African Americans have wondered about the nature of compensation and the dynamic of their participation in photographic production. See Hales, *Silver Cities*, 354-370.

view presented a curious scene: a worker, in a place of work, apparently completely disengaged from the levee as well as the photographer who captured his image.

The roustabout's unseen and unseeing nature existed in stark contrast to the layers of seeing that surrounded him. Following the original encounter between the photographer and his subject, the studio replicated this representation hundreds or even thousands of times, for the gazes of an unknown number of consumers. In addition, the advertisement on the card's verso proclaimed that this object could be purchased from E. Claudel, "leading optician of the South," who specialized in "fine spectacles, opera glasses, drawing instruments," and "a fine collection of views of characteristic scenery of New Orleans and vicinity, embracing views of streets, shipping, cemeteries...moss trees, sugar plantations, &c."<sup>66</sup> Thus, the card characterized the sleeping roustabout and Louisiana sugar plantations as comparable components of the city's "characteristic scenery," as it also promoted the optical tools necessary to enhance their perception. In assembling a boxed set of Crescent City views that comprised the levee, its cargo, and its purportedly lazy laborers, the photographer entered this roustabout into a fixed catalogue of things to see and understand about New Orleans. "Caught Napping," produced in 1884 or 1885 by Philadelphia's Centennial Photographic Company, offered a second example of the trope of the sleeping laborer. Like Mugnier's roustabout, this worker appeared blind to the action that surrounded him and slept – illicitly, the title implied – next to the very things he should have been moving. Multiplied a thousand-fold by the technologies of stereography and the

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas Mugnier, "A Roustabout's Nap," 1880, Louisiana State Museum, Louisiana Digital Library, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://cdm16313.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/RSP/id/198/rec/387>.

mechanisms of advertisement and consumption, these workers' naps no longer seemed so solitary.<sup>67</sup>

Additional stereographs showing idle roustabouts on the levee toyed with associations between black men and the products involved in their work, implying, sometimes quite overtly, that all could be interpreted as commodities. A stereo view dating to approximately 1880, titled "Sample of Wool 105 Years Old," showed two elderly African-American men sitting on sugar barrels. The title jokingly referred to the men's hair but clearly referenced cotton, the levee's most precious commodity, "sample(s)" of which required grading in order for experts to set its price. Less than a generation before this stereograph was produced, white men graded and sold black men in the New Orleans marketplace and this supposedly humorous view alluded to that era. Of the twenty-three stereographs included in this boxed set, whose titles appeared on the card's verso, all but two offered images of the levee, the river, and steamboats. Only this stereo and another displaying a cobbler (also a man of color) featured humans as their focus. The boxed set thus cast the levee's African Americans as entertaining components of the landscape, comprehensible primarily as features of the surrounding scenery rather than as individual, independent workers. A consumer who purchased this set could switch between views of the steamboat *Robert E. Lee*, a cotton gin, and "Sample of Wool," treating the men as movable experiences in this predetermined set of Mississippi River scenes.

A 1900 stereograph featured an even more aggressive example of this perspective, with levee roustabouts sprawled on cotton bales, their bodies virtually attached to the cotton (*fig. 3.11*). Two men lounged in the foreground of the image, one stretched out over two bales as if it were a divan. At least a third shadowy figure in the background reclined fully, apparently

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<sup>67</sup> See Appendix B for additional photographs of African-American men sleeping on the levee, taken by amateur photographer Wilson S. Howell in 1890.

comfortably asleep. Paradoxically, the action in this stereo view resided in the sea of cotton bales, as the title announced with three exclamation points – “Cotton! Cotton! Cotton!” – rather than the levee workers. The verso text declared, “In the South, Cotton is King; that is, cotton is by far the most important single product of the Southern States.” If cotton was king, then roustabouts were his servants – or slaves – according to the perspective taken by this stereograph. “Bale after bale of cotton, each weighing 500 pounds, is stacked here ready for shipment.... The cotton here piled up has been unloaded from such steamers as these. It will be

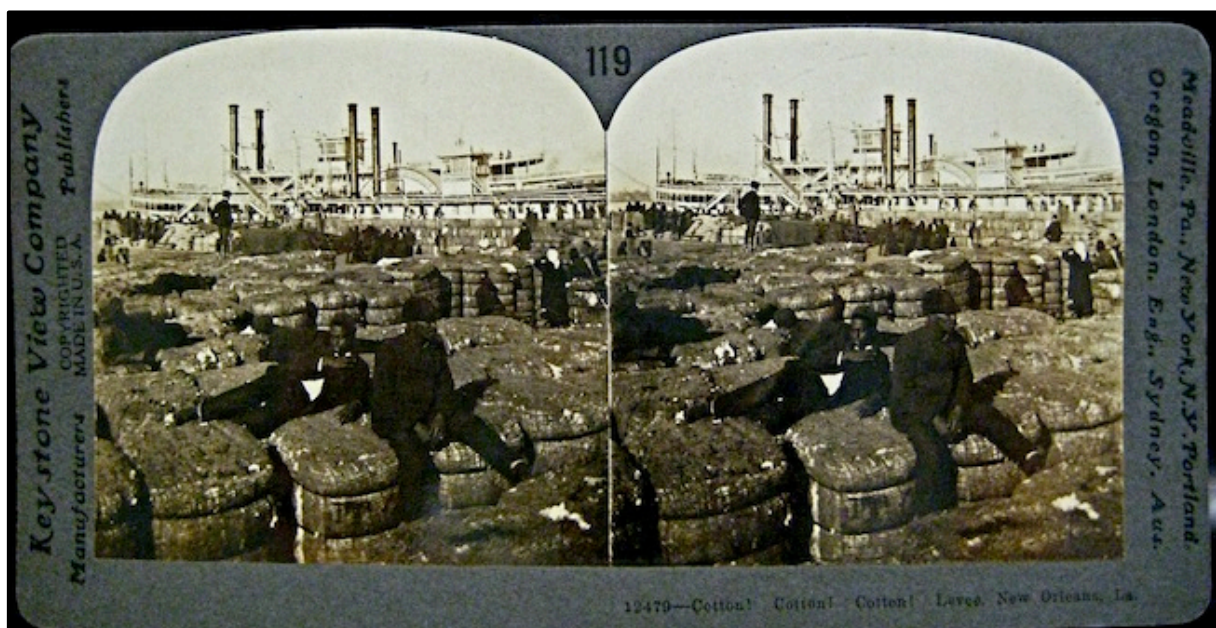


Figure 3.7. Cotton bales were the primary actors in this stereograph, rather than the roustabouts who reclined on them. Keystone View Company, “Cotton! Cotton! Cotton!” 1900, Sub-folder: Miscellaneous; Folder: Wharves, Docks, and Shipping; New Orleans Print File, LaRC.

loaded on oceangoing vessels which carry it to the mills of the Middle Atlantic and the New England states,” the writer explained.<sup>68</sup> In the card’s passive telling, the cotton loaded, unloaded, and stacked itself. No subject clarified that these idle roustabouts were responsible for any part of the process. Asleep or awake, roustabouts appeared in one stereograph after another as

<sup>68</sup> Keystone View Company, “Cotton! Cotton! Cotton!” 1900, Sub-folder: Miscellaneous; Folder: Wharves, Docks, and Shipping; New Orleans Print File, LaRC.



unproductive, cocooned in sleep and beds of cotton. Their blind and recumbent poses placed them at odds with the actively modern levee that surrounded them. With a subtlety that seemed accidental, these stereographic images complemented contemporary textual sources that berated roustabouts as unreliable and lazy.

Such stereographs that depicted emancipated laborers of color as passive adhered to longstanding conventions of pictorial representations of enslaved people, but the nature of stereography's production and consumption made these objects uniquely damaging.<sup>69</sup> In other words, the modern medium of stereography put old tropes about race and labor to new ends. Stereo views that depicted black men asleep neutralized any sense of threat they posed. At the same time, the objects derided their work ethic, adhering to a racist tradition of European and American encounters with the so-called indolent other, typically in exotic or tropical settings.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, stereographs presented specifically static views – which nevertheless claimed to be immersive, generating a feeling of being present, in the present – during an era when American ideas about race, gender, and political inclusion were changing rapidly. Twenty years separated

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<sup>69</sup> The visual culture of slavery almost always emphasized the bodies of enslaved people as subjected and deferential, whether prostrated by torture or the moment of auction, or kneeling and imploring, as in the famed late-eighteenth-century abolitionist medallion created by the Wedgwood company. On the prejudiced iconography of enslavement and emancipation, see Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*; Maurie McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Kay Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); and Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (London: Routledge, 1999). An alternate, though related, tradition cohered depictions of enslaved people with the products they were forced to cultivate and the money that their labor generated. See Michael O'Malley, *Face Value: The Entwined Histories of Money and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). The specific pose of the sleeping roustabout adhered to tropes in classical art, in which sleeping subjects appeared passive, vulnerable, and even outside the bounds of rationality. Sheila McNally, "Ariadne and Others: Image of Sleep in Greek and Early Roman Art," *Classical Antiquity* 4, no. 2 (October 1985): 152-192.

<sup>70</sup> Mid- and late-nineteenth-century white Americans recycled racist stereotypes related to black men as alternately docile or rapaciously violent. Frederickson, *The Black Image*, 276. On white perceptions of the indolent or "indifferent" other, see Klas Rönnbäck, "'The Men Seldom Suffer a Woman to Sit Down,': The Historical Development of the Stereotype of the 'Lazy African,'" *African Studies* 73, no. 2 (August 2014): 211-227; Jennifer Roberts, "Landscapes of Indifference: Robert Smithson and John Lloyd Stephens in Yucatán," *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (September 2000): 544-567; and David J. Langum, "Californios and the Image of Indolence," *Western Historical Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (April 1978): 181-196.

the production of “Sample of Wool 105 Years Old” (1880) and “Cotton! Cotton! Cotton!” (1900). During that span of time, the federal government ordained segregation in public spaces, Louisiana disfranchised its citizens of color, and white lynch mobs initiated more than seven decades of violence in the state, exceeded only by similar groups in Georgia and Mississippi.<sup>71</sup> Yet stereographs of the New Orleans levee depicted southern people and scenes as easeful and unchanging, rendering them captive and available for nostalgic gazes decades after emancipation. Each time an American consumer slipped a stereograph into its viewer, he perceived workers of color in the midst of a perpetual nap, withdrawn from the dynamic industrial sites around them.

Representing laborers asleep on the levee was thus significant for both historical and contemporary reasons. The subject’s pose propelled the viewer backward, evoking longed-for memories of the supposedly submissive, owned slave. But the trappings of modernity that surrounded him – molasses barrels, cotton bales, and steamship smokestacks – simultaneously pushed the viewer into the present. The combination of registers forced him to conclude that this old subject could not function productively within the urban new South.

In contrast to representations of roustabouts as unseeing or asleep, New Orleans newspapers and boosterish publications repeatedly used the adjective “wide-awake” to characterize entrepreneurs whom they claimed were laboring diligently for the city’s recovery.

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<sup>71</sup> Between 1877 and 1950, white mobs lynched 540 African Americans in Louisiana. During the same years, white Georgians lynched 586 African Americans and white Mississippians murdered 576. Violence was uniquely *concentrated* in Louisiana compared to many southern states. Seven Louisiana parishes ranked among the fifteen counties (or parishes) with the greatest number of lynchings in the entire South. These were Caddo (fifty-four lynchings), Lafourche (fifty), Tensas (forty), Ouachita (thirty-five), Bossier (thirty-two), Iberia (twenty-three), and Tangipahoa (twenty-two). Between 1877 and 1950, white citizens of Phillips County, Arkansas, committed *four and a half times* the number of lynchings compared to the next most violent region of the South (Caddo County, LA), murdering 243 African Americans. Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Report Summary, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.eji.org/files/EJI%20Lynching%20in%20America%20SUMMARY.pdf>.

This term filled the pages of *Some Telling Facts of the Second District and the Famous French Market of the City of New Orleans*, a promotional booklet published in 1912 by business owners in the city's Second Ward. "James B. Rosser, Jr., is a prominent Lawyer and Notary Public.... He is a wide-awake citizen and thoroughly believes in the future greatness of New Orleans," the writer announced. "Dady's Café," a billiards house and oyster saloon, "is conducted by L.P. Alfred and J. Macaluso, two wide-awake and progressive young business men. They handle a fine line of Fancy Liquors, Cigars, Tobacco, etc." Similarly, "Frank J. Reyes & Co., Leading Florists...are wide-awake, progressive, young business men, who strive to do all in their power to please their patrons."<sup>72</sup> Alertness translated to business success, these short biographies illustrated, whether one was a florist or ran a saloon. This book reminded readers that every man in the New South had to be an entrepreneur, whether he was a Sicilian immigrant, a Confederate veteran, or a freedman. The man who was "wide-awake" looked to the future and to his customer's needs. A view through the stereoscope revealed that black roustabouts did neither.<sup>73</sup>

Stereography counted as a specifically persuasive medium in late-nineteenth-century America because of the means by which photographers created stereographs and how viewers

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<sup>72</sup> A variety of Louisiana newspapers also used this adjective to evoke cleverness, resourcefulness, and industrious energy. For example, a 1912 *Daily Picayune* article declared, "I can think of no daintier arrangement for holding toilet necessities than one suggested by a wide-awake young woman who had learned to utilize every possible space at her command." The same year, a *New Advocate* article detailing the value of paved streets identified "a good road [as] an infallible sign that some of the people in the neighborhood are wide awake and determined to prosper and make the best of life." *Some Telling Facts of the Second District and the Famous French Market of the City of New Orleans, Issued as a souvenir of all the live, up-to-date features of this important section. Within the enclosed pages will be found personal sketches of many of the progressive and enterprising business men and leading citizens* (New Orleans: National Publishing Company, 1912) 24, 26; "Hygienic Home Treatment," *Daily Picayune*, February 11, 1912; *New Advocate*, April 29, 1912.

<sup>73</sup> Americans who gazed at napping roustabouts accomplished the double work of sophisticating themselves while ascertaining that the black worker remained distinctly unsophisticated. Fowles argued that the look and experience of visual alertness translated to much broader ideas about personal success in postbellum America, explaining, "The initial impetus behind stereograph viewing was, for many, the staunchly Protestant one of self-betterment through learning.... The person who gained visual familiarity with things distant was more learned and thus a better candidate for success. For late-nineteenth century Americans, visual sophistication was another causative element in personal achievement and, more pointedly, a marker of it." Fowles, "Stereography," *JAC*, 91.

consumed them. Compared to other visual media, stereographs generated knowledge, its proponents claimed. Postcards functioned as mementos of a place or experience, but “Stereographs may really build up new concepts in the mind and not serve merely for a reminiscence,” wrote Mark Jefferson in the *Journal of Geography* in 1907.<sup>74</sup> No one argued more for the stereograph’s value than Oliver Wendell Holmes, who claimed that they had trapped the very essence of visible objects. In his description, all things – people, trees, Rome’s Colosseum – constantly shed invisible, yet physical, films. Like the scales of a fish or bark of a tree, as Holmes explained, these “forms, effigies, membranes, or *films*...have no real existence, separable from their illuminated source, and perish instantly when it is withdrawn.”<sup>75</sup> Vision results from sunlight striking an object; humans can see a rose in sunlight but not in darkness. Daguerreotypes had achieved the marvelous feat of trapping these sloughing films during a momentary exposure to light, capturing them in an enduring state. But stereography had leapt beyond such technology and delivered a veritably miraculous gift. “The *stereograph*...is to be the card of introduction to make all mankind acquaintances,” Holmes predicted, in that it allowed for a deep, thorough familiarity between people and things that would ordinarily never meet.<sup>76</sup>

For Holmes, the fact that the photographer composed a stereograph of two photographs, taken from two slightly different angles at two marginally separated moments of time, created the object’s novelty and potential. “We see something with the second eye, which we did not see with the first,” Holmes explained. “By means of these two different views of an object, the

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<sup>74</sup> Mark Jefferson, *Journal of Geography* (December 1907), 153, as cited in Earle, *Points of View*, 78.

<sup>75</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *Atlantic Monthly* (1859), excerpted in *Classic Essays*, ed. Trachtenberg, 72.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

mind...*feels round it* and gets an idea of its solidity.”<sup>77</sup> Biologically, humans’ eyes create depth out of two separately seen images. This fact allows for the stereograph’s three-dimensional quality. But to Holmes, the object’s method of composition also permitted a more profound, rounded, conceptual knowing. The amalgamation of two perspectives, captured a split second apart, enhanced the stereograph’s fundamentally truthful nature. More than doubly accurate than a photograph and an unquestionable improvement on a painting, the stereograph offered “such a frightful amount of detail, that we have the same sense of infinite complexity which Nature gave us,” he declared.<sup>78</sup> The stereograph offered a glimpse of Nature so true, Holmes reasoned, that it could only be the subject’s own “film,” preserved for all to see.

Enthusiasm for stereography climaxed in assertions that viewing a stereograph could substitute for witnessing the subject in person and declarations that the medium repelled any attempts at corruption.<sup>79</sup> Such arguments certainly held important implications for stereo views of New Orleans roustabouts. In 1856, Sir David Brewster had avowed that with a collection of stereo views, “A score of persons might, in the course of an hour, see more of Rome, and see it better than if they had visited it in person.” Stereographs not only duplicated the experience of traveling to Rome and feeling the coolness of the Colosseum’s shadow, their inventor declared;

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>78</sup> Holmes drew the reader’s attention to the secondary flutters and blurs that differentiated the two images composing a stereograph, as well as the limitless potential contained in the split second *between* the two images, writing, “It is common to find an object in one of the twin pictures which we miss in the other...There is before us a view of the Pool of David at Hebron, in which a shadowy figure appears at the water’s edge, in the right-hand farther corner of the right-hand picture only. This muffled shape stealing silently into the solemn scene has already written a hundred biographies in our imagination.” Though New Orleans roustabouts remained distinctly motionless throughout both photographs, producing none of the shadowy movement that fascinated Holmes, they nevertheless conjured layers of meaning beyond the action (or inaction) captured in the photographs’ frames. *Ibid.*, 77, 79.

<sup>79</sup> In 1858, a writer described the accuracy of a set of stereo views of the Holy Land in rapturous detail. “We have only the plain unvarnished truth; the actual is absolutely before us, and we know it. There has been here no possibility of either adding or subtracting. The sun is a rare truth-teller, which cannot lie to produce effect, nor err to lead astray.” *Art Journal* (1858), 375, as cited in Earle, *Points of View*, 30.

they actually improved upon it. “Those who are neither able nor willing to bear the expense...would, in such a panorama...acquire as perfect a knowledge of its localities ancient and modern, as the ordinary traveler.”<sup>80</sup> Holmes agreed in stereography’s “perfect” nature, asserting the “impossibility of the stereograph’s perjuring itself.”<sup>81</sup>

Such statements confirmed to many consumers that the experience of walking along the New Orleans levee, witnessing the place and its people, and understanding it all, could be shared by many consumers, even far beyond New Orleans, and for just a few pennies. Americans had no need to go to the trouble and expense of suffering the Louisiana heat. Stereographs rendered obsolete a trip to the levee to see, hear, smell, and judge it for oneself.<sup>82</sup> The moment had already been captured in all its infallible truth. Steamboats chugged, cotton bales sat in profitable, messy stacks, and lazy black roustabouts napped, stereo views announced. These so-called characteristic views would be true tomorrow as they had been true yesterday and were true today. Stereographs delivered stereotypes about laborers of color in a medium that claimed to be a perfect rendering of reality, in an educational, entertaining, and massively prevalent manner.

Despite such effusive salesmanship, however, stereography, like photography, was of course a highly corruptible and malleable medium.<sup>83</sup> Sir David Brewster may have claimed that a

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<sup>80</sup> Sir David Brewster, *The Stereoscope: Its History, Theory, and Construction, with its application to the fine and useful arts and to education* (London: John Murray, 1856; Hastings-on-Hudson: Morgan & Morgan, 1971), 164.

<sup>81</sup> As proof of the stereograph’s infallible nature, Holmes offered, “A lady’s portrait has been known to come out of the finishing-artist’s room ten years younger than when it left the camera. But try to mend a stereograph and you will soon find the difference....No woman may be declared youthful on the strength of a single photograph; but if the stereoscopic twins say she is young, let her be so acknowledged in the high court of chancery of the God of Love.” Holmes, “Sun-Painting and Sun-Sculpture; With a Stereoscopic Trip Across the Atlantic,” in *Soundings from the Atlantic* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), 174-175.

<sup>82</sup> In his study of late nineteenth-century tourism in the Wisconsin Dells, Steven Hoelscher argued for the primacy of stereography in helping faraway viewers feel knowledgeable about a place. Hoelscher, “The Photographic Construction of Tourist Space in Victorian America,” *Geographical Review* 88, no. 4 (1998): 548-570.

<sup>83</sup> Landscape photographer James Mullen offered an example of photographic manipulation that bordered on the ludicrous, writing in 1874, “Let me advise you here to always have with you on your photographic trips, a spade and

stereo view of the Colosseum could substitute for a trip to Rome, but he never claimed that stereography was impervious to tampering. Rather, the photographer had an endless list of tricks he could play, Brewster revealed. By manipulating his subjects in the moment between the two photographs, the photographer could easily make a person appear twice in the finished stereo view or even disappear, creating a “spiritual appearance” to a subject who had merely ducked out of the frame. The photographer could also meddle with the viewer’s perception of the assembled view by reversing the two photographs so as to make concave out of convex and distance into proximity.<sup>84</sup> Such admissions indicated that three-dimensional views of a roustabout’s nap likely resulted from a photographer’s clever planning rather than a serendipitous, stolen moment.

In addition to these mechanical manipulations, the stereo view, like the photograph, also committed sins of omission as well as sins of commission. That is, as with all photographs, what lay outside the frame of the stereo view often proved just as significant, if not more so, than the subjects at the center of the work.<sup>85</sup> Napping white teamsters, dozens of black roustabouts energetically loading sugar barrels onto ships, and hordes of crudely gawking tourists: all existed as potential alternative perspectives on the levee scenes analyzed here. Looking for what lay outside the frame can also be interpreted in a more conceptual way, however. When stereographs represented a shabbily-dressed black man asleep on the job, they referenced an invisible, yet attendant, set of racist notions that circulated within contemporary popular culture: that he was

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a good axe...I remember on one occasion finding it necessary to cut down four large forest trees, in order to get a view of a peculiar formation of rock-work.” Mullen, “Landscape Photography,” *Anthony’s Photographic Bulletin* (January 1874), 55, as cited in Earle, *Points of View*, 52.

<sup>84</sup> Brewster, *The Stereoscope*, 205, 208.

<sup>85</sup> On photographic truth and the thin line of a photograph’s frame, see Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Errol Morris, *Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); and John Berger, “Understanding a Photograph,” in *Classic Essays*, ed. Trachtenberg, 293.

also illiterate, that he could not or did not care to provide for his family, that he wasted his money on whisky because his clothes were patched. These visual objects purported to offer proof to viewers that this single man, and the many others like him for whom he stood, could not transition from slavery to wage labor.

Delivering these messages in photographic and stereographic formats was especially insulting considering that African Americans had long understood and sought to harness the power of photography to assert their political independence and social worth. In 1849, Frederick Douglass had written in the *North Star*, “Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists.”<sup>86</sup> Prominent Americans of color, including Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others, sought to disseminate photographs that characterized them as financially secure, refined in their dress, and highly educated.<sup>87</sup> But these representations competed with an avalanche of others that committed both overt and subtle violence against the public image of African Americans. Photographs and postcards of southern lynchings confronted viewers with horrifically naked brutality, whereas stereographs and postcards often delivered racist messages in a humorous, quaintly picturesque guise.<sup>88</sup> Still, both classes of objects accomplished similar

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<sup>86</sup> As cited in Laura Wexler, “‘A More Perfect Likeness’: Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photographs and the Making of African-American Identity*, eds. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>87</sup> See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Enduring Truths: Sojourner’s Shadows and Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art in association with University of Washington Press, 2006); Wallace and Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress*; Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990).

<sup>88</sup> Amy Louise Wood’s analysis of lynchings as inherently public, visual, and socially powerful acts could describe stereographs as well. She wrote, “These spectacles produced and disseminated images of white power and black degradation, of white unity and black criminality, that served to instill and perpetuate a sense of racial supremacy in their white spectators....The cultural power of white supremacy...rested on spectacle.” Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2-3. On overt and subtle violence committed by visual objects, see also Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle



work. Because they were nationally popular, cheaply available to the rich and poor, and valued as educational tools for the young and old, stereographs delivered their messages in the way of a Trojan horse. They bore harmful and heavy cargo for a small square of cardboard that even a child could hold.

Thus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stereographs joined postcards, photographs, and fictional and non-fictional textual narratives to portray Louisiana's emancipated laborers as disheveled, lazy, animalistic, and mythic. Yet such racist notions about free black men as workers were far from new. Debate about the quality of free black labor had been playing out in newspapers and other public forums around the country since before the end of the Civil War. With postcards like "Fun on the Levee" and stereographs of idle roustabouts, photographers joined a conversation that had begun before they took to the streets and docks of New Orleans and helped it increase in volume. They did this because images and other forms of popular culture that derided African Americans, especially African-American men, were good business during this era of symbolic slavery.<sup>89</sup>

During Reconstruction and its aftermath, a variety of public voices, north and south, claimed that free people of color were proving themselves unable to answer the demands of wage labor. In 1866, reports of mountains of goods piling up on steamboat levees drove the New Orleans *Abeille* into a wrathful frenzy. "After one year, two years, three years of freedom, we know perfectly what the negroes are worth and can do," the writer declared to his francophone

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Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Wood, *The Horrible Gift*. On the broader importance of visual culture to evolving definitions of race and ethnicity during this era of imperialism and immigration, see Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*.

<sup>89</sup> See Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008); Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*; and Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

readers. “For slaves, freedom has not been an encouragement to work but an encouragement to indolence.”<sup>90</sup> The *Bee* delivered the same message in more florid prose to its English-speaking readers. “This unexampled institution [of wage labor] has very much the appearance of an immense castle of indolence, a sort of paradise of *lazzaroni*, deriving support from the body of society as cancer and leprosy draw their loathsome sustenance from the wasted frames of their victims,” he raved.<sup>91</sup> Here the editorialist reached for a European analogy – *lazzaroni* were an impoverished, reputedly slothful social caste in nineteenth-century Naples, Italy, famous for lazing on the quays – to describe New Orleans’s dockworkers.<sup>92</sup> As cancer gnaws at the body, so did *lazzaroni* feed on society like a parasite, the *Bee* described, hollowing it out from within.

These seeds of early, local complaints blossomed into dangerous fruit: purported confirmation from sources beyond New Orleans of freedmen’s widespread laziness, which stemmed from specifically nefarious or emasculated motivations. Following an extensive Mississippi River flood in 1884, the President of the Red Cross Relief Association reported to the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* of troubling trends he had observed while surveying inundated regions. “The plantation negroes will not work when they know they can get rations for nothing.... Tempted by the prospect of free flour and coffee and sugar, [the negroes] actually began cutting the levee to let in the water and flood their plantations.”<sup>93</sup> If true, this blatant sabotage – of a most blasphemous sort, for communities that relied on the Mississippi River

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<sup>90</sup> My translation. “Etablissements dans le Sud,” *Abeille*, January 19, 1866.

<sup>91</sup> “Labor-Vagrancy-Slavery,” *Abeille*, January 25, 1866.

<sup>92</sup> In her 1851 novel, Amalie Winter described, “There are about forty thousand men in Naples...[whose] happiness consists in doing nothing. A large portion of their time is spent lying upon the quay; or stretching themselves in the hot sun, in the most exposed places....As soon as they have gained a coin sufficient to provide them with [a] meal, nothing will induce them to make any further exertion. These people are called Lazzaroni.” Amalie Winter, *Michaelo and the Twins: A Tale of the Lazzaroni in Naples* (Bath: Binns and Goodwin, 1851), 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> Reprinted in the *Daily Picayune*, April 28, 1884.

staying within its banks – would mark freedmen as maliciously indolent. If they preferred to destroy the structure that sheltered their community rather than work, what must that imply about their understanding of the American social contract, now that they were free men? Upsetting dispatches arrived from even farther upstream, too. “The gang of lazy and insolent rousters that infest the saloons and dives about the levee were offered work on the *State of Missouri* this morning. They, of course, refused,” reported the *Republican* of Mount Vernon, Indiana, in February 1893.<sup>94</sup> African-American men’s reported cowardice in the face of disaster resurfaced in Jacksonville, Florida, as well. In the wake of an enormous fire, later termed the Great Fire of 1901, the newspaper lamented, “Many negroes are hiding behind the skirts of their wives, who they are sending for provisions, and who claim either to be widows or else to have been left alone by their husbands.”<sup>95</sup> In all of the aforementioned cases, New Orleans newspapers chose to reprint reports from a variety of cities that denounced laborers of color as treacherously, pathologically lazy. Such slanted reporting seemed to confirm to New Orleans readers that their fears of freedmen becoming selfish takers bent on sabotage were justified.

New Orleans roustabouts figured prominently in these conversations, though always as subjects, never participants. On November 22, 1890, a reader who called himself “An Ancient Mariner” wrote to the *Daily Picayune* to complain about a decline in the character and quality of work he perceived among levee roustabouts. “The laboring man on the river to-day does less work than he has done on boats any time in the past forty years,” the Mariner grumbled. He suggested that the change had much to do with skin color and age. “They do not do one-half the work that was done by white men in former days. Nowadays it takes four men (!) to load a sack of cotton seed, average about 100 pounds....White men did all this kind of work and two men

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<sup>94</sup> Reprinted in news section entitled “The River,” *Times-Picayune*, February 25, 1893.

<sup>95</sup> Reprinted in the *Daily Picayune*, May 11, 1901.

would load salt sacks weighing 210 pounds all night.” The Mariner noted that he objected specifically to the younger African-American men he noticed on the levee. Their fathers’ generation had been “honest, hard-working men” in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, he claimed. In contrast, their sons “are of the very worst class of citizens. They are shiftless, uncomfortably clad, lazy, will not work while they have a dollar to spend, and they are profane, vulgar and dishonest.”<sup>96</sup> The writer spared little venom for workers whose weakness could be quantified in sacks of cottonseed and visualized in the stereo views of Mugnier.

Two very different postbellum voices testified best to the damaging reach of this slanderous public discourse about the nature of freedmen’s labor. A child and a northern clergy member – entities that should have seemed the most innocent of or resistant to such defamatory ideas – concluded that workers of color *were* unequivocally lazy and better motivated as slaves. The fourteen-year-old boy who visited New Orleans in 1897 and amused himself by watching the levee’s roustabouts already understood that the levee was a place where the white visitor could and should watch and draw conclusions. The steamboat landing “is where we get an insight of the negro laborer,” he wrote in his essay. Here was a place where the actions of a few stood for the character of many. Belonging to the “we,” he declared himself prepared to seek “insight” on the larger potential of all freedmen as workers. “When he is hired to unload the steamboats he has to be driven along or he will do but a poor days work, and when they have no ‘job’ they gather in groups on cotton bales and engage in idle talk and laughter and there they stay for hours.”<sup>97</sup> Even at his young age, the boy already understood how to observe and judge “the negro laborer” as an undivided type.

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<sup>96</sup> Reader letter, *Daily Picayune*, November 24, 1890.

<sup>97</sup> MSS 362, What One Sees in New Orleans, 1897, HNOG.

Just a few years later, Dr. S.D. McConnell, rector of All Souls Church in New York City – a northern, white, educated, religious man – wrote of African Americans, “They are unassimilable....They stand as a race isolated and impossible.” In a sermon printed in the *Daily Picayune* in August 1903, McConnell assured Crescent City readers that their great angst over freedmen’s potential was rational. Work “is precisely what they will not do, except under compulsion. They are idle, shiftless, worthless,” the rector declared. He sympathized with the plight of the South and asserted its labor conundrum to be a problem of national importance. Crucially, McConnell united freedmen’s political status with their social worth, arguing:

A republic....assumes that every member is capable of entering into every relation in life with every other member of it. If there be an alien or an outlaw or an impossible person present, he may indeed live in a republic, but he cannot be of it.... Life is too complex and intricate an affair to permit it to be parceled out into political and social areas.<sup>98</sup>

The freedman was the paradoxical “impossible person,” McConnell decided, being in America, but not of America. Even European immigrants eventually melted into “the great American blend,” but not “the African,” he declared. According to his logic, people of color had played a role in the American scheme as slaves, but now that freedom had arrived, their political existence could not be rationalized. Because their social worth was abysmal in McConnell’s eyes, and the social could not be divorced from the political, the solution to this dilemma would have to be political. The clergyman confirmed, “It is by a true instinct that the whites of the South...have made up their minds to take away from [African Americans] the citizenship which they have theoretically enjoyed for the last forty years.”<sup>99</sup> People who did not properly exist within the boundaries of the United States, according to this religious man, could not enjoy its citizenship.

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<sup>98</sup> “Make Him Work by Law: Dr. McConnell’s Clear Statement and Wise Solution of the Negro Problem,” *Daily Picayune*, August 9, 1903.

<sup>99</sup> In different eras, both postbellum freedmen and twentieth-century undocumented persons challenged the definition of American citizenship. McConnell’s word choice anticipated the terminology and legal and political

Tortured and torturing logic such as these examples illuminated the breadth and depth of conviction held by an extensive range of postbellum Americans that the freedman was intrinsically ill-suited to freedom. Little distance separated intimations that he did not contribute to a city's economic wellbeing from assertions that his disfranchisement was an urgent political necessity. Freedmen were blind, lazy, and weak, a growing chorus of voices in turn-of-the-century America declared. How could they possibly be granted the vote?

Other voices, though few and far from the photographer's frame or the pages of the *Daily Picayune*, confirmed the excessive demands and frenzied pace of roustabouts' labor in a way that disproved slanderous depictions of them. African-American voices were sparse on this subject, but a *Harper's* writer recorded that of a steamship barber in 1893. "Ef I got rejuiced so's I had to do manual labor, I'd go to stealin' fo' I'd be a rooster" the barber swore. "Certain su' I would, 'cause dey couldn't wuk a man no harder in de penitentshuary ef he got caught dan dey do on dese boats."<sup>100</sup> Granted the writer mediated heavily the barber's commentary and reported on nothing nobler than thieving as an alternative to levee work, but the barber confirmed that roustabouts endured a job so tortuous that others would choose prison over the Crescent City docks. Roustabouts on the barber's boat did "more work than a white man," the *Harper's* writer acknowledged. "There were nights on the *Providence* when the landings ran close together, and the poor wretches got little or no sleep. They 'tote' all the freight...on their heads or shoulders, and it is crushing work."<sup>101</sup>

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frameworks used by the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 to create the "illegal alien." Mae Ngai defined him as "an 'impossible subject,' a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved." Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ralph, "The Old Way to Dixie," *Harper's*, January 1893, 176.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

Famed jazz musician “Jelly Roll” Morton, born and raised in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, likewise corroborated the backbreaking nature of roustabouts’ work. Roustabouts “weren’t treated like other fellows,” Morton remembered. They “had a captain over them with a whip or lash in their hands....They would carry on their backs all kinds of things...Looked like a man couldn’t carry so much....They were just like in slavery.”<sup>102</sup> Although roustabouts labored under excruciating conditions, they were excluded from the benefits of union membership enjoyed by many other workers on the New Orleans docks. Still, at least twice, in 1901 and 1907, roustabouts refused to break dockworker strikes. “We wouldn’t tech a bale of that cotton, ‘cus we promised our ‘sistance and wouldn’t hurt the screwmen’s cause. No boss, not f’r a dolla bale,” one roustabout told a *Times-Democrat* reporter in October 1907.<sup>103</sup> Roustabouts were diligent laborers and loyal to their kind in the face of much derision. If stereographs and postcards that depicted napping roustabouts were in fact unposed, then it is certain that they slept exactly because of the unrelenting work they *did* do, rather than the tasks they shirked.<sup>104</sup> Most viewers who lifted the stereoscope to their eyes did not receive this message, however. Depicting idle roustabouts next to hulking steamships, mounds of goods, and ebullient white tourists, stereographs and postcards showed clearly – infallibly, many would argue – that emancipated workers of color could not cope with the demands of wage labor in modern New Orleans.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> As cited in Martin Williams, *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 44.

<sup>103</sup> As cited in Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 130-131.

<sup>104</sup> Arnesen offered one other possible explanation for the presence of napping roustabouts on the levee, explaining that when steamboats docked in New Orleans, roustabouts sometimes had to step aside to allow unionized dockworkers to unload and load ships. Thus, photographers who captured idle roustabouts may have caught them during a brief pause between punishing river trips. Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 38.

<sup>105</sup> Though steamboats are long obsolete, the job category of “roustabout” persists. Roustabouts are manual laborers onboard Louisiana’s many offshore oil rigs. As of this writing, advertisements listed a roustabout’s average salary as \$50,000 and described the work as requiring no education but plenty of elbow grease. “Even if [the] position of roustabout is the lowest ranked and responsibilities include doing the dirtiest work, which no one else would wish to do, none of the high tech processes aboard the rig is possible without roustabouts’ participation,” an ad specified.

Widespread, racist perceptions of African-American freedmen as lazy, dishonest, and ignorant provided the fodder that triggered Louisiana's disfranchisement of its black citizens at a special meeting of the state's constitutional convention on March 25, 1898. Though the legislation avoided any mention of race, the "Grandfather Clause," as it would later be named, unambiguously stripped Louisianians of color of the right to vote.<sup>106</sup> In order to cast a ballot, voters had to prove that they could read and write, or if not, furnish documents that demonstrated they owned property worth more than three hundred dollars. Such a measure easily excluded the vast number of people who had escaped enslavement only a generation earlier. To avoid the mass disfranchisement of the state's many illiterate white voters, legislators guaranteed the ballot to men able to vote on January 1, 1867, as well as their sons and grandsons.<sup>107</sup>

Public opinion had encouraged disfranchisement of Louisiana's African Americans in the exact same terms used to describe the levee's purportedly lethargic workers. Attendees at a New Orleans public meeting in January 1898 had argued for the "necessity for eliminating from the political life of the State a large mass of ignorance, shiftlessness, and degradation in the persons

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The port of New Orleans continued to employ thousands of men until the mid-twentieth century, when technological advances finally automated the loading and unloading of most ships. On changes to the twentieth-century New Orleans riverfront and video excerpts of recorded oral histories with former longshoremen, see Justin Nystrom, "The Vanished World of the New Orleans Longshoreman," *Southern Spaces*, March 5, 2014, accessed October 20, 2014, <http://southernspaces.org/2014/vanished-world-new-orleans-longshoreman>; "Roustabout job openings in Louisiana," Rig Jobs Online, accessed October 27, 2014, <http://rigjobsonline.com/industry/005.html>.

<sup>106</sup> In 1890, 127,923 Louisianians of color were registered to vote. Following the 1898 convention, that number dropped to 5,320, and continued to decline precipitously each year. By 1903, only 600 citizens of color in New Orleans could vote. Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 20. For comparative political histories of post-emancipation slave societies, see Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>107</sup> The *Daily Picayune* printed the full text of the legislation on March 25, 1898, under the relieved headline, "Suffrage Settled." The *Abbeville Meridional* recognized the sticky nature of disfranchising illiterate blacks but maintaining the franchise for illiterate whites, writing, "There is wellnigh unanimous sentiment that the [outcome of the upcoming constitutional convention] must be so shaped as to eliminate the ignorant and corrupt negro vote, but in order to accomplish this it will be necessary to cut off the white man who stands in the same category. Right there is where the shoe pinches. We are in favor of saving every white man possible." Reprinted in the *Daily Picayune*, January 31, 1898.



of the illiterate and propertyless negroes,” the *Daily Picayune* reported.<sup>108</sup> To its northern Louisiana readers, the Bienville *Bell* likewise editorialized, “Born to serve...[The negro] has not been, nor will he ever be, fit for politics, hence he should be removed from its uncongenial influences, and considered as an industrial factor, when his true relation to the south will be determined.”<sup>109</sup> White Louisianans who rejected blacks from the voting booth spoke in terms of servility and indolence.<sup>110</sup> Following the passage of Louisiana’s Grandfather Clause, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Virginia disfranchised African Americans on similar grounds. Ultimately, just as a stereograph combined two images to generate a three-dimensional whole, pejorative visual depictions of people of color united with racist, printed debate to form one, disharmonious result: disfranchisement, social exclusion, violent repression, and decades of Jim Crow.

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### **Conclusion: To Believe or Not to Believe? Something’s Rotten in the Crescent City**

In his 1885 *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans*, William H. Coleman recounted a bizarre scenario that had troubled one of his colleagues. “A short time ago, a writer engaged in preparing sketches of New Orleans scenes had a photograph taken of a swamp lying in the exact geographical centre of New Orleans,” Coleman recalled. “The photograph was so weird and gloomy that the magazine declined to print it, confessing that it was a fine sketch, but

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<sup>108</sup> “Who Should Not Vote,” *Daily Picayune*, January 4, 1898.

<sup>109</sup> Reprinted in the *Daily Picayune*, February 7, 1898.

<sup>110</sup> Twenty-five years earlier, in 1873, a journalist had described a sense of connection to the New Orleans levee that was both sentimental and political. He explained, “People may talk of the beauties of Canal street...but, as for me, give me the levee. I feel as if I had a sort of ownership in the wealth lying there, as if I had a hand in their production. For am I not a voter, a citizen of Louisiana [?]” The journalist’s belief that his status as a voting Louisianan tied him to the levee demonstrated a thorough blindness to the realities of the workers of color who labored there but would be disfranchised in 1898. “Loafs,” *Daily Picayune*.

declaring, at the same time, that no one would believe for a second that such a melancholy spot existed in the centre of a great city.”<sup>111</sup> Photography recorded truth, Coleman’s contemporaries understood, yet who would believe that such a soft, rotten wound gaped at the heart of this romantic, modern city? The image satisfied neither the magazine’s planned array of “scenes” nor the views that readers expected to find. This photograph of the muck that anchored the Crescent City’s core was thus an impossible thing: a representation of the truth, but one that could never be received as truth. It depicted the inconceivable and editors judged it wiser to expunge.

Paradoxically, the very visibility of African Americans in textual and photographic representations of postbellum New Orleans encouraged a literal and figurative blotting out in political, social, and cultural realms. When white Louisianans excluded African Americans from the polls, they deleted from those spaces in a real, physical way the people who had cast ballots there previously. White viewers interpreted black dockworkers photographed with their eyes closed, unseeing, as the purportedly indolent opposite of the New South’s “wide-awake” citizenry. This perspective stretched far outside of New Orleans, even well beyond the South.

In 1913, supporters of San Francisco’s candidacy to host the 1915 International Exposition, which would celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal, published a booklet to argue their cause. New Orleans also competed to host the fair, but San Francisco’s boosters declared that their city offered more sunshine, less rain, and milder temperatures. Their trump card, however, rested on the cities’ respective census numbers. New Orleans should not host the World’s Fair, San Francisco’s boosters argued, because its black residents were too numerous and too poor. “Bear in mind that in this fair competition color counts,” the writers explained, “not because of a difference in skins, but as an indication of poverty and inability to keep up the

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<sup>111</sup> William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map. Illustrated with many original engravings; and containing exhaustive accounts of the traditions, historical legends, and remarkable localities of the Creole city* (New York: William H. Coleman, 1885), 4.

local support of an exposition.” In tallying each city’s residents, the boosters equated blackness with poverty with undesirability. People of color should be effectively deleted from the city’s population numbers, they argued, because they were too impoverished to benefit the fair. Unfit to participate in this celebration of modernity, blacks must be crossed out of the city’s ledger books. “If there are 100,000 negroes in New Orleans today they must be practically counted out of the population as supporters of the fair,” the writers reasoned. “San Francisco’s population is practically all white.”<sup>112</sup> San Francisco’s candidacy ultimately succeeded. New Orleans would have to wait many more decades, until 1984, the hundredth anniversary of the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, to host another world’s fair.

By the time the 1915 International Exposition opened its doors, photographic postcards and stereo views had expanded by factors of thousands, if not millions, the means by which racist stereotypes related to workers of color had become familiar cultural terrain to Americans. These objects of visual culture bridged one era of illustrated news with a coming deluge of photographic communication: moving pictures, television, and the advertisements that sustained these media. As the twentieth century matured, an explosion of visual sources taught New Orleanians and tourists how to think about the links between people, place, and race in the modernizing city. Savage, nostalgic representations of workers of color would spread like a disease from the levee’s docks to the souvenirs, travel guides, menus, and cookbooks that would continue to define the Crescent City as a consumable city.

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<sup>112</sup> “San Francisco, the Exposition City, 1915.” Vertical Files; Descriptions, New Orleans, 1903-1918; LaRC.

#### Chapter Four: Creole Uncanny: Embodied Nostalgia in the Vargas Dolls of New Orleans

At the 1884 World's Industrial and Centennial Cotton Exposition in New Orleans, visitors to the Louisiana exhibit found proof that wartime southern scarcity had definitively ended. An obelisk of rice and pyramids of oranges rose next to bottles of mineral water and jars of honey and gumbo. A stuffed fifteen-foot alligator lurked near glass tanks containing live fish. Two pelicans, preserved by the taxidermist, preened next to silkworms and samples of the shining fabric they had made.<sup>1</sup> Such a menagerie celebrated the breadth and depth of Louisiana's natural resources and the human industry that converted them into consumable goods. In doing so, the exhibit offered visitors a perspective that bordered on the magical. For the Exposition's five-month run, Louisiana's forty-square-foot garden flowered continuously, the state's famed cotton plant sprouted in every stage of its development, and sugar tempted viewers in all phases of processing, from raw, green cane to fine, white crystal. This oasis of living and lifelike objects proclaimed that the state's riches were perennial.

The Louisiana exhibit's ceaseless fertility was a carefully composed illusion. To build the booth, the state commissioner had contracted not with a skilled farmer, but an artist: Francisco Vargas, who had immigrated to New Orleans from Mexico less than a decade earlier. For the fair, Vargas and his daughter, Concepción, produced nearly one thousand wax objects, including 587 pieces of fruit, violets, daisies, and magnolia and plum blossoms, which they appended to the boughs and stems of real trees and plants.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Louisiana's greenery was true-to-life, but its colorful flowers offered no scent. "The fruit display...is considered a master-piece of the art,"

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Commissioner for the state of Louisiana, *Report of the U.S. Commissioner, and a List of the Collective Exhibit of the State of Louisiana, at the World's Industrial and Centennial Cotton Exposition, Held at New Orleans, 1884-1885* (New Orleans: A.W. Hyatt, 1885), Fairs & Festivals, World's Fair (1884), folder 1, Ephemera Vertical Files, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Francisco Vargas Sr. to Mr. E.A. Burke, August 18, 1884, Artist file, Vargas (family) (hereafter cited as Vargas), Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as HNOC).

the Louisiana commissioner raved to the governor. “[T]he collection of natural fruits preserved in alcohol are sufficient proof that the artificial ones are no exaggeration.”<sup>3</sup> Vargas’s wax oranges substituted for crops lost to drought, but viewers found the artist’s fruit just as delightful, if not more so, than the real thing.

Vargas’s success at the 1884 Exposition led to similar commissions at fairs in Buffalo, New York, in 1901 and, most dramatically, at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1904. There, Mississippi Commissioner R.H. Henry designed a bombastic tribute to agriculture in the reconstructed South. Henry commissioned Vargas to create “one colossal...statue to be known as King Cotton.” The thirty-foot tall monarch would be made entirely of wax, clothed in cotton garments and sitting on a throne. At his feet, five life-sized black cotton pickers, also in wax, would pay him homage. “These figures are to be properly placed in a miniature cotton field before the colossal statute and are also to be real works of art and as life like as possible,” Henry decreed.<sup>4</sup> King Cotton erupted out of the Mississippi exhibit, its crown threatening to graze the hall’s ceiling and its massive scale shrinking the field hands and tourists below to the size of dolls (*fig. 4.1*).<sup>5</sup> This enormous figure, lifelike with waxen skin but impossibly huge, announced to the public that Delta cotton production had roared back to life. Southern agriculture and the labor that generated it demanded renewed respect as a titanic force of nature. Vargas was instrumental in delivering this message with his art. For the publics

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Commissioner, *Report of the Commissioner*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Agreement between R.H. Henry, State Commissioner to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition from the State of Mississippi, and Francisco Vargas Sr., for his contributions to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (April-December 1904), October 20, 1903, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>5</sup> I thank John Mangipano for bringing this image to my attention in his master’s thesis. Mangipano, “Remolding Mexican Identity: The Wax Art of Francisco Vargas in 19<sup>th</sup> Century New Orleans” (master’s thesis, University of New Orleans, 2011).

in New Orleans, Buffalo, and St. Louis, the South's unfailing flowers and formidable King Cotton bloomed out of wax at Francisco Vargas's fingertips.

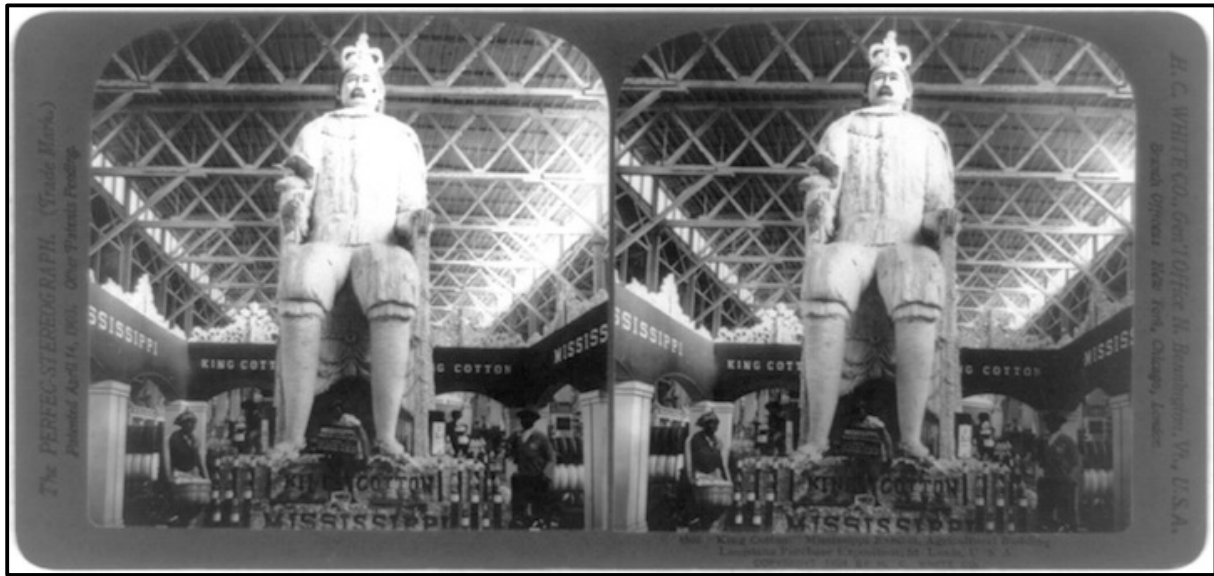


Figure 4.1. In this stereograph of Francisco Vargas's wax King Cotton at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the enormous scale of the king proclaimed the triumphant return of southern cotton production while dwarfing the cotton pickers at its feet. H.C. White Co., "King Cotton," Mississippi exhibit, Agricultural Building, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, U.S.A., 1904, Library of Congress.

With these commissions, Francisco Vargas, a newcomer to American history, politics, and culture, quickly became enrolled in the work of image-making for the Reconstruction South. Such fairs and expositions took place during an era when southern politicians, writers, and artists predicted a glorious future for their region while they simultaneously attempted to memorialize only the most romantic aspects of its history. Vargas's waxwork gave tangible substance to the South's recovery to an extent that words and even photographs could not.

The waxwork of Francisco Vargas and his family serves as a lens through which to perceive the the overwhelming economic and cultural allure of selling representations of the food producer of color during the apex of a long age of symbolic slavery.<sup>6</sup> Though civil war had

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<sup>6</sup> On overt and covert forms of symbolic slavery, see Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina,

halted the American slave trade decades earlier, the Vargas family discovered a new market in the black body in turn-of-the-century New Orleans: one of visual and material representations, whose racism was masked by pleasurable contexts of consumption and leisure. Vargas's early commissions at expositions and world's fairs convinced him and his family to shift away from their earlier work – figurines of Catholic saints and Mexican peasants – to concentrate on souvenir wax dolls of New Orleans's African-American food vendors. Produced primarily from the 1920s through 1940s and sold throughout the country, the "Vargas Dolls" represented men and women of color who vended pralines, coffee, watermelon, and other foods in the city streets.

The dolls, alongside other commodities like postcards, stereographs, and cookbooks, objectified people of color in the food industry as carefree purveyors of delicious tastes and as consumable things themselves. But because they were made of wax, the dolls purported to be uniquely lifelike, distinct from all other souvenirs, and convinced consumers that they held in their hands an accurate rendering of a historical personality. In confining African Americans to an ahistorical realm of romanticization, the vendor dolls encouraged nostalgia for pre-modern systems of labor and the use of public space during years of rapid change to New Orleans's population and its streets. The dolls declared people of color who produced and sold food to embody the essence of the Crescent City, even during decades of segregation and mounting poverty for New Orleans blacks. Nevertheless, municipal licenses issued to turn-of-the-century food vendors and New Orleans Police Department records help uncover the true histories of flesh-and-blood food vendors, whose biographies were far more fraught than those suggested by the dolls.

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2009); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008); Psyche Williams-Forsion, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Steven C. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," *Social Problems* 34 (April 1987): 122-140.

Focusing on the Vargas family's wax dolls also opens the door to alternate histories of resistance in the realms of both things and people. The miniature scale and material properties of the Vargas dolls – the fragility of their wax, the similarities between wax and skin that had intrigued and repulsed viewers for centuries – forced a distinctive sense of care and attention to the dolls that flesh-and-blood street vendors were refused. Ultimately, the Vargas dolls resisted facile consumption in ways that distinguished them from other black collectibles. During the same era that the Vargas dolls rose to popularity, modern street vendors learned to capitalize on consumers' nostalgic hunger for their work. Praline sellers, in particular, sought to claim control over the multiplying representations of their profession that filled local souvenir shops and candy stands. If the market sought to make these women into things, the women declared that they would profit too.

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### **I. Making People into Toys, Sculptures, and Souvenirs**

Francisco Vargas and his children worked during an era when there was money to be made in objects, texts, and images that represented New Orleanians of color in the food industry. Stereographs of workers on the sugar and cotton levees helped visitors delight in a growing array of “mammy” and “uncle”-branded trinkets, packaged sweets, and menus found in French Quarter shops, hotels, and restaurants. These objects combined New Orleans's famous foods and the people of color who made and served them into a single consumable good. Skilled in waxwork, the Vargas family offered a new kind of commodity that appealed to collectors and tourists alike as refined aesthetic objects and pleasing mementos of the city and its inhabitants.

In June 1887, a journalist recounted his visit to the “picturesque” French Quarter studio operated by Francisco Vargas and his daughter, Concepción. The duo offered customers an



eclectic assortment of wax objects – Catholic saints, Mexican peasants, animals, and vegetables – as well as pottery, rugs, and baskets imported from Central America. The shop impressed the journalist as a decidedly foreign and, until recently, unpopular place. “For years the artist labored away....but curiosities were not in vogue,” he recalled. “[T]he brown, gaudily clothed Indians peopling the long shelves stared unavailing through their glass casements.... [T]he crowd passed by unheeding.”<sup>7</sup> When Francisco Vargas emigrated from Puebla, Mexico in 1873, he had already shipped his wax art to buyers in the northern United States and Germany.<sup>8</sup> But during his first few years in New Orleans, locals and tourists paid him little notice.

When Vargas settled in the Crescent City in the late 1870s, he entered a market whose shoppers were familiar with wax. Newspapers published regular advertisements for wax artisans and announced the sale of wax dolls, especially in the weeks prior to Christmas. Among “the most recherché Presents for the Holidays” of 1858, the *Daily Picayune* recommended French “Wax Dolls of all sizes...surpassing nature in beauty and magnificence,” as well as stereoscopes, Turkish pipes, and English cutlery.<sup>9</sup> In the years after Vargas opened his studio in 1879, he hosted several public raffles of his art, perhaps as a marketing device. For one such contest in 1881, the *Daily Picayune* announced the winning numbers for a Vargas-made wax rose and wax

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<sup>7</sup> Unnamed article, *The Times-Democrat*, June 12, 1887, 12, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>8</sup> Letters of introduction carried by Francisco Vargas in 1873 described his growing fame. After learning wax sculpture from his parish priest in Puebla, Mexico, Vargas traveled to New York City before settling in New Orleans. Vargas belonged to streams of immigrants who journeyed north and east, rather than south or west, to nineteenth-century Louisiana. Borders between Louisiana and Mexico were porous before and even after the Mexican-American War. See Julie M. Weise, *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South Since 1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) and Carl A. Brasseaux, ed., *A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1996). Letters of recommendation in English and French by F. Giraud of San Antonio, Texas, to Reverend Joseph A\_\_\_\_, New Orleans, and M.A.J. Toutant de Beauregard, New York, January 19, 1873, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement, *Daily Picayune*, December 21, 1858, 2; other listings for wax exhibits or wax artists appeared in *The Courier*, March 17, 1834; Advertisement for “Vannuchi: maker of wax figures,” *The Daily Orleanian*, November 23, 1852, 1; and Advertisement for Dollar Store, *Daily Picayune*, October 5, 1871, 3.

pear and alerted readers to a forthcoming raffle of a life-size wax doll.<sup>10</sup> Still, the Vargas studio did not achieve substantial local fame until after the 1884 Cotton Exposition.

World's Fair commissions served as a turning point not so much for Francisco Vargas, however, but for his children, who worked at his side and witnessed the public's interest in their representations of people of color in connection to southern agriculture and food production. A 1913 newspaper article clarified that Francisco's daughter, Concepción, had in fact created most of the fruits and flowers featured in the 1884 Louisiana exhibit.<sup>11</sup> When their work won first prize and a gold medal, both Francisco and Concepción toured throughout the North, showcasing their sculptures and meeting other American artists. For the 1904 St. Louis exposition, Francisco crafted the monumental King Cotton, but Concepción was responsible for the African-American field hands. "It was...one of the most difficult productions my father and I had ever tried," she later remembered. "Our models...posed for us for fully a year."<sup>12</sup> At highly public events in the South *and* North, Francisco Vargas earned rewards and media attention that would keep his studio afloat for the rest of his life. Simultaneously, his children came to understand the subject matter and consumer audience that would generate careers for themselves.

"'Ole Mammy' with her basket of vegetables poised securely on her turbaned head and Mose of the cotton field...are the newest departure of the Vargas family, in wax work models," a newspaper reporter announced in 1918.<sup>13</sup> Three years after Francisco's death in 1915, faced with

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<sup>10</sup> "Lottery of Wax Works of Mexican Art," *Daily Picayune*, July 17, 1881, 2.

<sup>11</sup> August Alfaro, Concepción's grandson, remembered her as being particularly skilled in rendering flowers, fruits, and vegetables in wax. He said, "I...recall vividly a platter of oysters [that she made], in fact they glistened they looked so real." Interview with August Alfaro conducted by HNOC curator, May 17, 1984, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>12</sup> "Only One Sculptress Here Carries Out Father's Work; Honors Have Come to Both," *New Orleans Item*, October 11, 1913.

<sup>13</sup> "Darkies of Old Days Are Latest Models in Wax," unnamed newspaper, ca. 1918, Vargas, HNOC.

lagging sales of their studio's Mexican figurines, Francisco's daughter Adelina introduced a new concept for the family business.<sup>14</sup> Small wax dolls of the city's famous street vendors, who had peddled fruits, vegetables, coffee, sweets, and chickens throughout residential neighborhoods, would become the family's new claim to fame (*fig. 4.2*). "It was her brainchild," declared August Alfaro, great-grandson of Francisco and grandson of Concepción.<sup>15</sup> Adelina, August, and his mother, Lucy Rosado, became the trio largely responsible for crafting the vendor dolls from the 1920s through 1940s.



Figure 4.2. The Vargas dolls represented a variety of nineteenth-century New Orleans street sellers, including vendors of pralines, sugarcane, chickens, and bananas. This set of ten vendor dolls by the Vargas family sold recently for \$1,700 at auction. "Outstanding Collection of Ten American Wax Figures by Vargas," Theriault's Antique Doll Auctions, accessed May 9, 2015, <https://www.theriaults.com/node/741666>.

<sup>14</sup> The *Times-Picayune* honored Francisco Vargas with a respectful obituary when he died, calling him "one of [the city's] most valuable citizens." Vargas's plaster model of his 1904 King Cotton was on display at his home while his family received mourners. "Francesco [*sic*] Vargas, Noted Artist, Dies," *Times-Picayune*, December 1, 1915.

<sup>15</sup> "Adelina decided to capitalize on the local scene and see if there was a market for [African-American vendor dolls]," Alfaro explained to an HNOG curator. "Once the family began the Negro characters they became very popular to the exclusion of the others." N.B. These quotes reflect paraphrasing of the HNOG curator, rather than transcriptions of Alfaro's words. HNOG interview with Alfaro, May 17, 1984, Vargas, HNOG.

Superficially, the Vargas dolls were like many other racist collectibles of the day in that they reduced African-American workers both literally and figuratively to consumable objects. Mounted on a square wood base, each doll was made of filtered beeswax. The Vargases dipped patterned cotton scraps in warm wax to create the colorful dresses and aprons that fell in naturalistic folds from the dolls' bodies.<sup>16</sup> Vendors offered chickens, fish, stalks of sugarcane, and baskets of bananas, lettuce, and oranges, all rendered in wax. Many of the dolls carried or sat on burlap sacks of fluffy cotton, while others shouldered miniature gray clouds of Spanish moss. In the praline seller's basket, careful pools of caramel-colored wax appeared as true-to-scale pralines, dotted with tiny seeds that represented pecans. Several dolls combined more than one reference to products commonly associated with laborers of color in the South, as in the case of dolls holding an alligator on a leash or selling watermelon while also sitting on a cotton bale. The dolls depicted men and women of color and the objects of their trade as unified entities, composed of the same substance.

With benevolent facial expressions and poses, the Vargas dolls appealed to buyers as acquiescent personalities offering delectable and ephemeral things for sale. Slight smiles and an upward turned gaze assumed that the viewer looked down at the dolls from above. Many dolls appeared in the midst of offering a half-consumed object, such as a wedge of watermelon, or a food that threatened to spoil or cool – a fresh fish, a cup of coffee – unless it was purchased and eaten without delay. Though representing workers who plied the streets, the Vargas dolls sat or stood with feet flat, motionless, as if paused to entertain the viewer's request. The scale of the dolls' bodies, too, allowed for a fuller interaction with the buyer compared to the earlier

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<sup>16</sup> A 1918 reporter described, "The expression on the tiny figure is most lifelike....The sleeve is modeled to the arm in a dozen folds and creases....The coloring is most exact and one can imagine the delight of having such a remembrance of some loved child or friend." "Darkies of Old Days," unnamed newspaper, ca. 1918, Vargas, HNOC.

generation of dolls created by Francisco Vargas, which had been larger, often twelve inches tall, and encased under a glass dome. In contrast, the vendor dolls rose to only five or six inches in height. Their small size invited viewers to pick them up for a closer look and pack or ship them in a box or suitcase.<sup>17</sup> Together, the dolls' gazes, poses, edible offerings, and small scale dictated a purposeful engagement with the viewer, as if the vendors sought to connect with a prospective buyer. In crafting the dolls, the Vargas family made an ambulatory subject effortlessly mobile, in a physically diminished, possessable way.

A surprisingly wide variety of consumers purchased the Vargas dolls. A 1918 journalist identified northerners as the dolls' earliest fans, specifying, "'Yankee' tourists are pleased with the cotton field negroes." Nevertheless, the dolls attracted New Orleans buyers too.<sup>18</sup> Newspaper reporting in the 1940s and interviews with Lucy Rosado and August Alfaro specified that local sales of the dolls took place in the St. Charles and Roosevelt Hotels, Solari's specialty grocery store, Kate Latter's praline shop, and a handful of French Quarter souvenir stores. Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille, actress Jane Withers, and Pittsburgh banker and philanthropist Richard Mellon maintained "complete collections" of the Vargas dolls, according to the *Times-Picayune* in 1946.<sup>19</sup> In addition, from the 1930s through 1960s, August Alfaro shipped dolls to the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, F.A.O. Schwarz toy store in New York City, and other

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<sup>17</sup> The Vargas family's gigantic King Cotton and miniature Vargas dolls directed reverent and nostalgic sensations, respectively, toward southern agriculture and southern workers. Scale has much to do with viewers' reactions to objects, Susan Stewart argued. "The gigantic becomes an explanation for the environment....Hence our words for the landscape are often projections of an enormous body upon it: the mouth of the river, the foot-hills, the fingers of the lake, the heartlands." In contrast, the miniature points the viewer inward, to unseen and imagined phenomena. "That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life...is a constant daydream that the miniature presents. This is the daydream of the microscope: the daydream of life inside life." Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 71, 54.

<sup>18</sup> "Darkies of Old Days," unnamed newspaper, ca. 1918, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>19</sup> Ken Gormin, "Wonders," *Times-Picayune*, December 22, 1946, 104; Frances Bryson, "Fourth Generation of New Orleans Family Carries on Historic Artistry in Wax," *New Orleans Item-Tribune*, February 16, 1941, 2; interview with Mrs. J.T. [Lucy] Rosado conducted by HNOC curator, May 8, 1965, Vargas, HNOC.

customers throughout New York and California. One Tennessee cotton grower, with the trade name of “Cotton Blossom,” kept a standing order for eight to ten dozen dolls per year. Alfaro also claimed to have sent more than a few shipments to Mary Lee Dickinson, proprietor of a specialty doll shop who was later convicted of spying for the Japanese during World War II by inserting messages into dolls.<sup>20</sup> Auction house publications indicated that Vargas dolls resurfaced singly and in groups on New Orleans auction blocks from the 1960s through 1990s.<sup>21</sup> Together, such sources offered a comprehensive estimate of the dolls’ widespread appeal, from the immediately local to the far-flung, and from tourists to businessmen to wealthy collectors.

The geographic and occupational spread of midcentury consumers of Vargas dolls boosted the objects’ classification uniquely between toy, sculpture, and souvenir. The items were not dolls in the traditional sense, that is, playthings for children. Rather, they fit more appropriately within the narrower category of collectible dolls for adults.<sup>22</sup> Still, they also functioned unambiguously as souvenirs for tourists seeking a remembrance of their time in New Orleans. Yet unlike the typical souvenir, the dolls appealed equally to Crescent City residents and people far away, unassociated with any tourist visit to the city. And on a most cursory level,

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<sup>20</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation tagged “Velvalee” Dickinson the “Doll Woman.” “Velvalee Dickinson, the ‘Doll Woman,’” *Famous Cases & Criminals*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/velvalee-dickinson-doll-woman>; HNOC interview with Alfaro, May 17, 1984, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>21</sup> Sample listings included: Auction of “estate of old New Orleans family” with a “collection of Varga [*sic*] wax figures under glass domes”; these four Vargas dolls made by Francisco Vargas sold for \$624 on August 25, 1969, auctioned by Ben B. Matthews, Inc; Auction handbook for New Orleans-based Neal Alford Company listed twelve Vargas vendor dolls, purchased by a New Orleans resident between 1930 and 1945 at the Monteleone and Fairmont souvenir shops, expected to fetch \$150 to \$250 each, May 11, 1985; multiple other listings for assorted New Orleans auction houses in the 1990s reflected estimates of \$400 to \$600 per pair of vendor dolls; Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>22</sup> Black dolls have a very different history than white dolls in terms of time and place of production, audience, and intended use. See Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Tavia Nyong’o, “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2002): 371-391; and Myla Perkins, *Black Dolls 1820-1991: An Identification and Value Guide* (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 1995).

the dolls shared some characteristics of other black collectibles, like mammy dolls, although such items typically appeared in much cruder guise.<sup>23</sup> Handmade production methods limited the figurines' supply, which ensured that the dolls' sales would be tracked to a more careful extent than if they had been cheap, mass-produced trinkets.<sup>24</sup> The objects' inherent artistry also confirmed that the dolls would ultimately find their way to museums, archives, and auction houses – where they enjoyed a longer, more public history – rather than the second-hand store.<sup>25</sup> As refined representations of a kitsch subject, the Vargas dolls floated between genres and within a wide pool of consumers.

The Vargas family's conversion from figurines of Mexican peasants and saints to portrayals of New Orleanians of color in the food industry proved a savvy decision. Newly arrived in America, they had witnessed the public's tangible hunger for southern fruits and the people who grew them. From their 1904 construction of the hyperbolically huge King Cotton and his life-sized fields hands, the Vargas family diminished the scale of their representations to the miniature and in doing so expanded their audience. A more detailed analysis of how the vendor dolls appealed to consumers and why they did so during this particular era reveals a diffuse, deeply racist nostalgia for people, place, and tastes in the modern Crescent City.

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<sup>23</sup> See Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Maurice M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); and Kenneth Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> A 1941 article specified that August Alfaro and Lucy Rosado could complete about twelve vendor dolls each day when they worked together. Bryson, "Fourth Generation," *Item-Tribune*.

<sup>25</sup> Institutions with significant collections of Vargas dolls include HNOC and the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans, as well as the Louisiana State University (LSU) Rural Life Museum in Baton Rouge, thanks to the donation of longtime collector and philanthropist Ione Burden. Fragment, likely from *Dixie* magazine, advertising an exhibit of Vargas dolls in the Louisiana Room of the LSU Library, ca. 1966, Vargas, HNOC.

## II. Diminishing History and Romanticizing People, Place, and Taste

When Barbara Haspel was born in New Orleans in 1938, her grandfather marked the occasion by buying her a doll, beginning a large and lifelong collection. Muriel Haspel, Barbara's mother, told a reporter that she understood the dolls to be educational tools rather than frivolous playthings. "Barbara never really played with the dolls," Haspel explained. Instead, "[S]he learned a lot about history and geography from them. The dolls help 'personalize' the folklore of a country. They are like little pieces of the places they come from." Finely made dolls transmitted the prints of their maker, too, in a way that rendered them "just as much of a work of art as a fine painting or work of sculpture," the journalist recorded. At her home in Dallas, Texas, in 1977, Mrs. Marvin (Barbara Haspel) Lewis proudly pointed to her favorite pieces: a cluster of Vargas-made vendor dolls, which stood on a table in her living room. "The group provides a little touch of New Orleans Mrs. Lewis says she enjoys having with her in her home away from home," the writer described.<sup>26</sup> This brief interview with Lewis and her mother pointed to the multiple levels on which a single consumer could engage with the Vargas dolls. To the Haspel family, they were educational objects, fine art, and aesthetically pleasing souvenirs that stood in for their creator and place of origin.

At a more abstract scale, the Vargas dolls appealed to buyers with layers of nostalgic messages related to the changing use of public space in New Orleans and romanticized systems of labor and race relations. The dolls commemorated New Orleans street vendors in a single, ahistorical register: as happy-go-lucky black laborers, content with their modest lot. Yet municipal records detailed the hardships endured by flesh-and-blood street vendors, exposing the degree to which the dolls referred to a fully invented person, time, and place. In prolonging racist

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<sup>26</sup> Lorena Dureau, "Dolls Galore," *Times-Picayune*, December 4, 1977.



fantasies about the subservient person of color in the Old South, the dolls encouraged consumers to romanticize the past and ignore the spatial and social segregation of the present.

As representations of workers situated specifically within the streets of New Orleans, the Vargas dolls catered to intertwined strains of nostalgia for place and people during an era of rapid modernization. “Socially as well as commercially New Orleans is in a transitive state,” Charles Dudley Warner had informed readers of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1887.<sup>27</sup> During Francisco Vargas’s first decade as a wax artist in New Orleans, city industry pivoted away from the riverfront and toward its railway lines, reducing the levees’ prominence as a site of large- and small-scale economic activity.<sup>28</sup> Peddlers and proprietors of makeshift sidewalk food stands filtered inland, joining others who had worked for decades in residential neighborhoods, on major thoroughfares like Canal Street, and in the vicinity of public markets. Turn-of-the-century municipal improvements chipped away further at peddlers’ territories. “The streets are torn up all over the city for electrical subways and sewers and a new water-supply,” reported a journalist in 1899.<sup>29</sup> Records of the New Orleans Police Department detailed the chaotic conditions created by such incessant work. People and horses regularly fell into the holes dug for new sewage lines. Horse-drawn wagons collided with obstructions. Even as the city built modern sanitation systems, residents continued to dispose of dead calves, hogs, and dogs in

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Dudley Warner, “New Orleans,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, LXXIV, no. 440 (December 1886 to May 1887), 192.

<sup>28</sup> On postbellum changes to the New Orleans cityscape, see Richard Campanella, *Delta Urbanism: New Orleans* (Chicago: American Planning Association, Planners Press, 2010); and Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

<sup>29</sup> W.A. Rogers, “Sketches in New Orleans,” *Harper’s Weekly* XLIII, no. 2245, December 30, 1899, 1327.

drainage canals.<sup>30</sup> The people, animals, vehicles, and businesses accustomed to New Orleans's cobblestoned and unpaved streets suffered from the city's messy transition to asphalt avenues.

Whereas construction work threatened to physically displace turn-of-the-century food vendors, Progressive-era improvement efforts, automobiles, and supermarkets brought more philosophical menaces. By the 1920s, when the Vargas family began to produce their vendor dolls, advocates for a clean, attractive city decried contemporary New Orleans street sellers as unsanitary obstacles to foot and car traffic. "Rigid enforcement of the sidewalk encroachment ordinance will be made beginning March 1," announced the *Item* in 1921. Members of the "city beautifying committee" had complained that "fruit vendors display their wares on the sidewalks, that retail merchants sort goods in front of their stores and that wholesale merchants use the sidewalk as a shipping ground."<sup>31</sup> Their concerns harkened back to similar criticisms of public markets voiced during the previous decade. In the writings and artwork of residents and journalists, street vendors had always been inseparable from the streets, and modernization of city infrastructure logically appeared to spell doom for vendors too. A pamphlet produced for the St. Charles Hotel Pralines Company around 1920 seemed to confirm this threat (*fig. 4.3*). On the reverse, author Flo Field offered a brief history of the praline, "those luscious cakes [that] have nourished the Social romance of Louisiana." Speaking with "Marie," one of the two remaining praline sellers in the city, or so Field claimed, Field recounted that she could barely hear Marie's

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<sup>30</sup> A police report filed on January 23, 1911, noted that a white woman had fallen into a hole in the sidewalk created by the Sewerage & Water Board and was helped out by two "colored" men. A complaint on March 13, 1911, referenced canals filled with decomposing animals. Report dated January 23, 1911, Folder: January 1911, Box 2, Series 3, New Orleans Police Department, Office of Inspector of Police, Correspondence, 1899-1913 (hereafter cited as NOPD), New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL); report dated March 13, 1911, Folder: March 1911, Box 2, Series 3, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>31</sup> "Sidewalk Encroachment Ordinance to be Enforced," *Item*, March 1, 1921.



Figure 4.3. With advertisements such as this, commercial candy makers in New Orleans used the image of the stereotypical “praline mammy” to lend a sense of historical authenticity to their products. “Where and How ‘Ole Mammy’ Pralines are Made,” pamphlet for St. Charles Hotel Pralines Co., ca. 1920, Folder: Handbills, 21-, Rare Vertical Files, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La., (hereafter cited as NOPL).

words, because “her voice fade[d] into the traffic roar.”<sup>32</sup> Quite literally, the modern city had devoured the woman’s voice. Field’s history portrayed Marie as the final, faint whisper of a profession once known for its boisterous street cries. To tourists who had certainly traveled to New Orleans by train or car, a Vargas-made wax vendor doll recalled a time when the city had been more pre-modern than modern. Romanticizing pre-modern New Orleans, though, implied a longing for much more than quieter streets.

This was because the Vargas dolls appealed to consumers’ long-building nostalgia for vanished systems of production, consumption, and race relations in the Crescent City. With their figurines, the Vargas family sought to revive a seemingly romantic, yet wholly invented relationship that had expired with the Civil War, in which the black food producer stood always ready to please the white consumer. In 1895, local writer Henry C. Castellanos had lamented the disappearance of antebellum women *marchandes* and, by association, the purified commercial experience he claimed they had offered. “Their stock was always fresh and abundant,” Castellanos recalled. “They filled all orders...and came regularly every morning to their customers’ doors.” But, he reported, “This class of traders is now extinct. The Sicilians have crowded them out,” offering instead an “offensive species of peddling and ‘dago’ shops” that he alleged to be “hot-beds of infection, disease, and filth.”<sup>33</sup> In the decades surrounding 1900, New

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<sup>32</sup> “Where and How ‘Ole Mammy’ Pralines are Made,” pamphlet for St. Charles Hotel Pralines Co., ca. 1920, Folder: Handbills, 21-, Rare Vertical Files, NOPL.

<sup>33</sup> Between 1880 and 1910, Sicilian immigrants grew from 5% to 39% of the state of Louisiana’s total population. Many Sicilians found their first jobs in the fruit industry, whether as street sellers of oranges and bananas in New Orleans, strawberry growers in Tangipahoa Parish, or within Sicilian-owned import-export operations, like Vaccaro Brothers and Company, later known as Standard Fruit Company. As early as 1865, an editorialist in the *New Orleans Times* declared, “We wish to call the attention of the authorities to what has for years been a crying evil to our citizens – the extortion in fruit by the majority of Spanish and Sicilian dealers who have long held an almost perfect monopoly over the business.” As I will discuss further, New Orleanians’ wariness of street vendors, regardless of era, often seemed to constitute a resistance to ethnic or linguistic difference. For a fuller history of Sicilian immigrants, see chapter 6. Kit Harger Lipps, “Italians, New Orleans Style,” *Dixie*, March 19, 1978; “Local Intelligence,” *New Orleans Times*, June 28, 1865; Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1990, repr. 1895), 163.

Orleans's racial and ethnic composition changed in addition to its streets. Castellanos idealized the *marchandes* of color as reliable and responsive in contrast to the immigrant entrepreneurs who replaced them, but in doing so he privileged a labor system in which many of the vendors had been enslaved.

Like Castellanos, many New Orleanians associated street vendors with their childhood and so representations of them tended to look backward, casting peddlers as benevolent figures who delivered delicious treats. In her 1912 memoir, Eliza Ripley recalled growing up in the Crescent City in the 1840s. In her advanced age, she yearned for “that dear, fragrant brown sugar no one sees now,” which had been provided by “the *Mesdames* of that date [who] are gone; gone also, no doubt, are the *marchandes* they sent forth.” When antebellum street vendors vanished they took with them specific tastes, but also modes of labor and payment that had favored the needs of the consumer over the producer. “[L]abor did not count,” Ripley recalled, “for one was not paying \$20 a month for the reluctant services of a chocolate lady.”<sup>34</sup> Such a casual statement contained a stratified bitterness. Ripley longed for the time when she could pay workers by the piece: a fresh fig here, a laundered sheet there. During her antebellum childhood, a person of color’s “labor did not count” – it was essentially disposable, Ripley reminisced – because she did not have to render an hour’s set wages for grudging work. In Ripley’s memory, the vanished “chocolate lady” was the perfect consumable thing. For many whites, street vendors prompted sensations of nostalgia because they symbolized transactional relationships that were monetarily and socially privileged and therefore pleasing.

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<sup>34</sup> This particular vendor sold violets, nougat, candied oranges, and macaroons, but not chocolate. Ripley derived the nickname from the woman’s skin color. She referred to the vendor as both a “chocolate-colored *marchande*” and a “chocolate *marchande*,” confusing a description of the woman with her edible goods. Eliza Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans: Being Recollections of My Girlhood* (New York: Arno Press, 1975, repr. 1912), 25, 26.

By the time the Vargas family cast their first molds of street vendor dolls in 1918, those who pined for the Old South fetishized the former slave as a genteel personality who was being rapidly replaced by the insolent wageworker. “An ideal servant is the old Creole mammy,” recounted Belle Hunt in *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* in 1891. “The type is well-nigh extinct nowadays, and, sad to relate, has left small impress upon its descendant representatives.”<sup>35</sup> In the depictions of many travel writers, journalists, and especially authors of the Plantation School, the slave had been quiet, clean, cheerful, and proud of her labors, whether in the kitchen or field.<sup>36</sup> But emancipation and wage work had wrecked such qualities, some observers claimed. “There is nothing a Southerner hates more than an airified [*sic*], impudent negro,” a writer declared in the *Charleston News*, in a piece reprinted in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* in 1901. “If anyone had left the South thirty years ago and come back now...of all the changes he would notice, none would strike him so forcibly as the complete change in the negroes.” Their purportedly soured mood and disinclination to serve evoked a malevolent threat. “They were such polite, gentle, kindly people that it was impossible to treat them otherwise than kindly,” the writer reflected, but “its opposite behavior is fast losing them the kindly feeling the white people had.”<sup>37</sup> The Vargas dolls catered to warped fantasies for workers who were silent, present, and eager to please.

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<sup>35</sup> Belle Hunt, “New Orleans, Yesterday and To-day,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* XXXI, no. 6, June 1891, 650.

<sup>36</sup> The 1900 *Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans* suggested a fictionalized confrontation between old and new generations of New Orleanians of color. Rocking her employer’s children to sleep in Jackson Square, an elderly mammy “casts contemptuous looks at the ‘colored folks’ who ‘dress so fine,’ instead of being neatly dressed like her, in bandana ‘tignon’ and Guinea-blue dress and apron.” The writer located the younger people’s new audacity in material things – their clothing and jewelry – as well as their use of Jackson Square as a promenade ground rather than a site of work. The elderly mammy functioned as a thin filter for contemporary whites’ anxieties about social and economic liberties recently claimed by New Orleanians of color. *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans: Revised and Enlarged*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1900), 92-93.

<sup>37</sup> African-American writers vehemently discredited such a saccharine bluff. “A ‘happy slave’ has never been known outside of books,” declared an editorialist for the African-American newspaper *Louisiana Weekly* in 1945. “And a contented Negro today in the South...is becoming equally scarce. The Negro will continue to migrate [out of the South]...for he knows that this civilization is built with his tears and blood and rests on his degradation.” “On the Old Plantation,” *Charleston News*, printed in *Times-Democrat*, October 10, 1901; “Negro Migrations,” *Louisiana Weekly*, August 4, 1945.

Purchasing a Vargas doll permitted white collectors and tourists to own a particular, historical iteration of the New Orleanian of color who could no longer be found in the contemporary city, or so many claimed. The dolls returned corporal shape to an acquiescent ghost.

Though of three dimensions, the Vargas dolls presented a distinctly flattened perspective on New Orleans's legendary street sellers and advanced damaging stereotypes about workers of color. The dolls' kindly smiles, relaxed poses, and simple, if absent, footwear proclaimed them to be a content and carefree lot. Sitting on plush cotton bales with an un-diminishing supply of food for sale, the dolls conveyed sensations of leisure and material plenty. Contemporary local writers reinforced such delusions. "It is a merry, care-free life," claimed Doris Kent in a 1920 *Times-Picayune* feature on the city's street vendors. "The street merchant pays no rent.... [H]e has that glorious independence that is the inevitable goal of all men." Kent depicted New Orleans's peddlers as happy to work under the open sky and, in fact, uniquely suited to their grimy labors due to their skin color. "A real chimney sweep is born, not made," Kent reasoned. "He must be of a particular shade...of that fast, gleaming black upon which soot is not to be distinguished....There never was such a thing as a 'high brown' or yellow chimney sweep." Other vendors appeared to Kent as fellow cast members in an elaborate theatrical production, in which white residents enjoyed the performances of people of color. The blackberry seller knocked on doors like the "ebony goddess of spring," wearing a headdress of "Egyptian-like folds," while the banana vendor "loll[ed] like a barbaric Senegambian chieftan against a mountain of golden fruit."<sup>38</sup> Vendors' skin color and clothing combined with the substance of

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<sup>38</sup> According to Kent, the blackberry seller announced her early-morning arrival in city neighborhoods with the "slap-slap of heelless old slippers on the banquette....The black goddess has been up betimes harvesting among the white-flowered briars 'back of town.'" Kent's description clarified that the vendor had worked through the night to pick berries off of thorny bushes, only to have to immediately walk the city streets in meager shoes to sell her harvest. Doris Kent, "Merry, Carefree Life of our Street 'Merchants,'" *Times-Picayune*, March 21, 1920, 50.

their work – whether that be chimney ash or bananas – to convince Kent that people of color were innately suited to their menial labors.<sup>39</sup>

In romanticizing the street vendor of color, the Vargas family bowed to a narrowed nostalgia that proclaimed African Americans at work to be picturesque elements of the New Orleans landscape. Nevertheless, municipal records disproved such racist stereotypes about food peddlers' experiences. Records of the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) preserved a snapshot of street vending in the early twentieth century, in the years when Francisco Vargas operated his wax studio but before his family made their first vendor doll. In the space of a little more than a decade, from 1898 to 1910, poor New Orleanians applied by the dozen to vend food on foot. The poorest asked to have their permit fees waived by the city. Investigations of whether applicants were in fact entitled to free permits generated more than one hundred reports that read like a sorrowful litany of bad luck and empty pantries, proving that street vendors of the more distant and recent pasts were deeply vulnerable in their transient labors.

As municipal records illustrated, turn-of-the-century street vending was *in between* work. Food vendors worked literally on the margins of conventional retail: on the streets and sidewalks, in between brick-and-mortar stores. Figuratively, street vending allowed workers to balance precariously in between poverty and stability. Frequently, all able-bodied members of a family worked. Investigators recorded wives, husbands, and children engaged in the same food vending business, multiple businesses operating under one roof, or residents working both day

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<sup>39</sup> Throughout the Jim Crow era, journalists and politicians repeatedly proclaimed people of color to be living a life of ease, immune to the physical strains of any labor they did accomplish. In the late 1880s, a journalist assumed New Orleans's women vendors to be "unconscious of th[e] burdens" that they carried on their heads simply because they smiled and talked as they walked. Mississippi Senator-Elect Theodore Bilbo used people of color's so-called "nomadic" nature as one excuse to disfranchise them in the 1930s. "New Orleans," *Harper's* (December 1886 to May 1887), 201; "Why Negroes Do Not Vote in Mississippi," *Milwaukee Journal*, November 28, 1934.



and night jobs.<sup>40</sup> Such was the case for Angelo Russello, who peddled sandwiches from a wheelbarrow during the day and ice cream at night and was granted a free permit in September 1898.<sup>41</sup> Food vendors labored around the clock to maintain even a paltry standard of living.

NOPD records also revealed a preponderance of women who sought to work as street vendors or proprietors of sidewalk food shacks, invariably out of desperation. In both 1899 and 1909, approximately three out of four of the poorest city residents who filed applications to vend food on foot were women. In 1909, more than half of women food vendors were widows.<sup>42</sup> Most women who worked as heads of their households turned to vending after unexpected tragedy, when illness, death, unemployment, or desertion had eliminated a male wage earner. On January 26, 1899, NOPD granted a free permit to Mrs. Paul Maggio, proprietor of “a small wood, coal, fruit & oyster shop,” whose stock totaled less than eight dollars. “Her husband is now confined in Jackson Insane Asylum and has been for the past four years,” the officer noted. “She has four

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<sup>40</sup> For example, on September 15, 1898, an officer noted that Annie Rodesto sold wood, coal, and fruit in the same small shop where her husband worked as a shoemaker. The officer valued their total stock at less than six dollars and granted them a free vending permit. In addition, NOPD noted the interesting case of Mrs. B.L. Spencer, “a colored woman who keeps a private school of about 10 pupils. She has a husband and one child. The man does no work as he is subject to hemorrhages. She wishes to sell pops and mineral water etc.” Spencer surely ran her small school for children of color and sought to use the proceeds from food vending to support the school. Report dated September 15, 1898, Folder: Sept-Dec 1898, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL; Report dated May 26, 1899, Folder: April-October, December 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>41</sup> Reports also indicated that New Orleans’s working poor were highly mobile. Repeatedly, officers attempted to investigate an applicant listed at a particular address but upon arrival found no record of him or her in the neighborhood. For example, on September 23, 1898, an officer reported, “[T]here is no stand at corner of Villere and Customhouse Sts. and no one in neighborhood know[s] anything of Lena Martin. There is a widow named Helena R. Marratta who keeps a small eating stand at corner of Marais & Customhouse Sts. and perhaps it is to her that attached communication refers. Her stock in trade does not exceed \$3.00.” Reports dated September 23, 1898, and September 3, 1898, Folder: Sept-Dec 1898, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>42</sup> In the fall of 1898 and 1899, 133 people petitioned to have their permit fee waived to work as food vendors on foot. Ninety-six of those applicants, or 72%, were women. In 1909, sixty people acquired licenses for small-scale food vending businesses. Forty-five of them, or 75%, were women. Twenty-six women were widows. Granted these applications and licenses reflected only the poorest food vendors, since there were many more vendors who could afford to pay their permit fees. But these records demonstrated that women accounted for the majority of the poorest food peddlers in the decade surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Folder: Sept-Dec 1898, Box 1, Series 1 and Series 2, NOPD, NOPL; Permits under ordinance 228 A.S., AA670 1909 Office of the Mayor, Box: “Various Series, Etc.” (hereafter cited as AA670 Mayor), New Orleans (LA) Office of the Mayor, NOPL.

small children.”<sup>43</sup> Other women vended food because their husbands had been crippled in the Spanish-American War, lost their jobs, contracted a disease of the legs, or had moved to New Iberia, Louisiana, or back to Sicily, for example, without another word to their wives.<sup>44</sup> Women peddlers always had multiple mouths to feed. Mrs. Augustine Pierre, who peddled lunches, sandwiches, and cakes from a basket on the levee in 1898, was a widow with six children. Mrs. Petra Cussimano, also a widow, fed her five children with the proceeds of her “small fruit & vegetable shop.” And Rosie Clesi, widowed in September 1897, fed her eight children selling wood, coal, and fruit.<sup>45</sup> As such records made clear, turn-of-the-century peddlers were in fact deeply, desperately impoverished and very far from carefree.

Despite the fact that more women than men worked on the lowest rung of street vending, NOPD officers always privileged male over female wage earners when deciding whether to waive the vendor’s permit fee. In this way, municipal investigators held the power to bind women food peddlers as dependents to husbands, fathers, or sons. Ownership of land or a horse-drawn cart, the presence of healthy, adult sons, and an inventory valued at more than ten dollars regularly disqualified vendors from a free permit.<sup>46</sup> In addition, investigators reliably refused to waive the fee for a woman applicant if they found evidence that her husband or father was gainfully employed. NOPD rejected one such application from Rosalie Bonona in April 1899.

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<sup>43</sup> Reports dated January 26, 1899, Folder: January 1899, Box 1, Series 2, NOPD, NOPL; March 4, 1899, Folder: March 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPL

<sup>44</sup> Assorted reports throughout 1898 and 1899, Box 1, Series 1 and Series 2, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>45</sup> Reports dated August 24, 1898, and November 12, 1898, Folder: Sept-Dec 1898, and report dated February 9, 1899, Folder: February 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>46</sup> Still, officers enjoyed a certain degree of leeway to recommend or refuse a free permit according to the circumstances they found during their investigation. When an officer visited the dry grocery of Widow J. Wehrle on February 8, 1899, even though she held more than \$100 in stock, the officer perceived that her business was slow, she owed \$16 per month in rent, and she was raising two orphan children. “All things considered,” he noted, “she is entitled to a free permit.” Report dated February 8, 1899, Folder: February 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

The officer reasoned, “[S]he is the wife of one Joseph Alfano” and “[B]y giving her a free permit to sell wood, coal, ice & fruit, it would be nothing more or less than giving it to the said Joseph Alfano, who conducts a prosperous oyster, wood, coal & ice business....[and] owns a mule & wagon.”<sup>47</sup> The presence of a wage-earning, male head of household trumped the petition of his wife or daughter, even if she had conceivably been attempting to pursue some degree of financial independence with her own labor. Street vending offered limited upward mobility for New Orleans women who lived with men.

Municipal investigators’ reports also clarified the ethnic and linguistic diversity of street sellers, who looked very different from the Vargas family’s vendor dolls. Street peddling and other menial jobs in the food industry functioned as a common first step for newcomers to the Crescent City.<sup>48</sup> Access to centralized stores of popular commodities like coal, oysters, and fruit allowed immigrants to sell as much as they could carry on their backs or push in a cart. Many if not most of turn-of-the-century vendors were Sicilian. White New Orleanians of this era commonly disdained Sicilians as unsanitary and rude, if not criminal; city newspapers recorded this proclivity.<sup>49</sup> The mismatch between the Vargas dolls, who represented only African-

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<sup>47</sup> Report dated April 13, 1899, Folder: April-October, December 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>48</sup> The handwritten memoir of Victorine Lapuyade, a French immigrant who moved to New Orleans in 1896 at the age of eighteen, provided further evidence that food-related labor was the industry of choice for newcomers. Lapuyade began work in New Orleans packing crackers in a factory where her father rolled pasta dough. In 1899, she married a man whose family gave them a milk cart, a small route of customers, and a share in the family dairy as a wedding present. But when that proved unprofitable, her husband trained to work as a butcher. Lapuyade recalled, “I started delivering for my husband and soliciting trade at the same time...we hired a boy to deliver on a bicycle and I stayed and worked in the market (which was easier than those very long walks, carrying bundles of meat, in all kinds of weather).” Growing prosperity permitted them to hire an African-American boy to deliver groceries, allowing Lapuyade to forgo the discomforts of delivering and advertising on foot. She and her husband added fruits and vegetables to their private market and slowly saved enough money to buy property and retire in 1922. MS 33, Lapuyade, Victorine Robelet, Autobiography, 1944, NOPL.

<sup>49</sup> In 1911, fruit vendor William Dermuth complained to NOPD, “[T]he Italians had the fruit wharves and the Poydras Street commission houses all monopolized and it was impossible for Americans to make a living.” Report dated February 1, 1911, Folder: February 1911, Box 2, Series 3, NOPD, NOPL.

American peddlers, and street vendors of New Orleans's more recent past confirmed the unparalleled level of nostalgia offered by representations of black laborers in particular. In narrowing the racial diversity of street vendors, the Vargas dolls favored a purportedly rosy past over the city's flawed present.

Linguistic differences between street vendors, NOPD investigators, and customers forged unequal relationships that sometimes privileged peddlers but more often rendered them vulnerable. In March 1899, an NOPD report alerted officers to the case of Francis Dalia, proprietor of a small fruit and vegetable shop at #217 Hancock Street, who had recently attempted to apply for a second free permit under the name of Francese Tali.<sup>50</sup> It seemed that Dalia had hoped to slip past investigators' notice due to their lack of familiarity with Sicilian names and failed only because he had filed both petitions from the same address. Ethnic and linguistic divides could also lead to episodes of overt tension, however, if not violence. In January 1910, police recorded an assault on a "Roumanian glazier," likely Jewish, who had been lured into a bar with a request to install two pieces of glass, only to have men inside pour glue on his beard. On the same day, police recorded an interview with Aaron Rosen, another Jewish peddler, who had been targeted by a group of boys throwing rocks. Attempting to explain the events to an NOPD officer, Rosen was "dismissed...because he c[ould]n't communicate with him in English." NOPD instructed all officers to "give proper protection to the Russian Peddlers and other Peddlers throughout the precinct." Working without a roof over their heads, though,

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<sup>50</sup> In 1899 an officer also complained about S. Gonzales, a "Cuban negro" and proprietor of a "cook shop." "Gonzalez claims he does not understand the business methods of this country," the office wrote. "He says that one half of his credit customers never pay him. This the corporal does not believe and reports that [he]...can well afford to pay a license." Report dated March 23, 1899, Folder: March 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL; report dated June 9, 1899, Folder: April-October, December 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

and stressed by hunger, illness, and the many other burdens of poverty, street vendors remained exposed to customers' abuses.<sup>51</sup>

Still, foreign-born peddlers were not unique in incurring city residents' wrath. Despite the Vargas family's romanticization of these figures, municipal records and newspaper reporting showed that New Orleans's famous peddlers provoked regular complaints from locals irritated by their cries. A "sufferer of Baronne street" wrote to the *Daily Picayune* in July 1893 to lambast "the nuisance of the itinerant peddlers of tinware, who generally ply their trade when the male portion of families are away, and make life miserable to the ordinary housekeeper by continually pulling door bells."<sup>52</sup> The sonic aspect of vendors' work, which often delighted tourists, could be suffocating to residents who listened each day.

New Orleanians griped that vendors intruded into their lives in more concrete ways as well. Less than a month after L.M. Storz won a city permit to operate a "ham and egg stand" at 840 Customhouse Street in March 1899, the city revoked it due to neighbors' allegations that the business was a "nuisance" and blocked the entrance to a grocer's store.<sup>53</sup> Similar petitions to NOPD in the same year also prompted revocations of permits for a candy stand on Barracks Street that purportedly attracted flies, as well as a lunch stand that took up four feet of space,

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<sup>51</sup> Reports dated January 26 and 27, 1910, Folder: January 1910, Box 1, Series 2, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>52</sup> As early as 1805, a letter to the editor of the *Louisiana Gazette* lamented the incessant noise produced by the levees' oyster vendors. "That [vendors] should be allowed to place themselves at our corners and serenade us from morning to night appears to me *rather a bore*....[W]e have undoubtedly a right to protect our noses from bad smells...have we not also a right to guard the more delicate fibres of the ear?" The writer suggested giving each oyster vendor a different instrument, such that the horde could create a spontaneous, citywide orchestra as they announced their wares. Letter to the editor, *Louisiana Gazette*, January 18, 1805, 3; "Vox Populi," *Daily Picayune*, July 20, 1893. See also Jessica B. Harris, "'I'm Talkin' 'Bout the Food I Sells: African American Street Vendors and the Sound of Food from Noise to Nostalgia" in *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, eds. John T. Edge, Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 333-341.

<sup>53</sup> Records dated March 28, 1899, and April 26, 1899, related to city license #2633, Folder: March 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

rather than the allowed twenty inches, on a sidewalk in front of Nesbits Saloon.<sup>54</sup> Peddlers regularly fought battles over stakes of inches and feet. With baskets, blankets, or hastily constructed sheds, vendors tried to insert themselves into the retail foodscape of the city but did not always find willing customers.<sup>55</sup>

City residents also tended to perceive many street vendors as not just obnoxious but downright deceitful. Their itinerant status seemed to imbue them with a parallel moral ambiguity, in contrast to the solid honesty that flowed from a storefront. More than a century before the Vargas dolls first evoked the wandering peddler of pralines and fruit, an 1808 reader of the *Louisiana Gazette* had condemned America's newest southwestern city as already "infested" with hawkers. They had entered the profession, he alleged, not due to poverty but sloth. Vendors were "either too proud, or too indolent, to open and attend retail shops," he accused, and he called on municipal leaders to regulate or abolish this "clandestine" class of merchants.<sup>56</sup> In every era, large-scale food merchants and importers or exporters resented peddlers for undercutting their business with cheap prices and what they perceived to be devious business methods. Attendees at a 1900 city council meeting debated allegations that an oyster

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<sup>54</sup> Record dated April 28, 1899, related to license issued to Fred Gra\_\_ to operate a candy stand at 829 Barracks Street; record dated September 2, 1899, related to permit #13725 granted to Robert Burnell for lunch stand in front of Nesbits Saloon at the corner of Tulane Ave. and Franklin St.; Folder: April-October, December, 1899, Box 1, Series 1, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>55</sup> Permits issued by the Mayor's Office in 1909 allowed for businesses whose scale could not have been humbler. For example, "Widow C. Ford" acquired a permit on August 4, 1909, "to keep a lunch stand over the gutter edge" at 1223 S. Robertson St. Two months later, Paul Mandela secured a similar permit "to keep a plank for fruit close to [the] gutter edge" at the intersection of First and Liberty streets. Permits dated August 4, 1909, and October 4, 1909, AA670 Mayor, NOPL.

<sup>56</sup> Visiting the Crescent City in 1818, Benjamin Henry Latrobe had likewise warned readers about what he perceived to be the "infidelity" of the enslaved women who paced the streets with baskets on their heads. "Their ignorance or forgetfulness of prices at which they ought to sell," as he remembered, made him suspicious that they charged him more than their local customers. Letter to the editor, *Louisiana Gazette*, November 29, 1808, 3; Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820*, ed. Samuel Wilson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 102.

vendor had hired workers to shuck “wagon loads” of oysters in a hidden room throughout the night. “In the morning hundreds of small boys were sent on the street with cans to sell the oysters, and none of them paid a cent of license,” the councilman described.<sup>57</sup> That peddlers worked throughout the city and sometimes in the middle of the night, shirking licenses, permits, and inspections, prompted critics to condemn them as slippery, lurking on the edges of the city economy.

Still, to many customers, street vendors’ mobility made them inherently elusive and a prize to catch. And yet consumers’ turn-of-the-century nostalgia for subservient vendors of color proved to be a desire for their labor and the food they produced, rather than the people themselves. This dynamic spurred a reliance on *representations* of free and enslaved people of color to sell packaged foods and tourist products, but retraction from actual social or economic engagement with contemporary black New Orleanians. In Flo Field’s 1920 history of the praline, in which she recounted her conversation with the soft-spoken candy seller “Marie,” Field clarified that even if praline vendors were becoming extinct, their pralines were not. Marie reportedly lamented, “Me an’ tha’ leetle gurl...all whas lef’. Look like ev’ying change cept plarine!” The people and streets of New Orleans had transformed, but Marie’s fragile candies remained unspoiled. Field invited the tourist reader, “Open the Courtyard door of Yesterday. It frames the old black Mammy of the South.... In her honor...will you not eat the praline? which of all things does not change.”<sup>58</sup> Field’s narrative, like many others, claimed that an entire class of people had vanished into the realm of history. Conveniently, though, entities like the St. Charles Hotel could now profit from the sale of products associated with them. Adding insult to

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<sup>57</sup> “Unsignly Signs on the Avenue, *Times-Picayune*, November 10, 1900.

<sup>58</sup> “Where and How ‘Ole Mammy’ Pralines are Made,” ca. 1920, Rare Vertical Files, NOPL.

injury, Field suggested that tourists should consume pralines in order to honor the memory of praline sellers, who had been displaced by operations like the St. Charles Hotel candy shop.

When white-owned food businesses exploited personalities like the famed “praline mammy,” they commonly diminished her image, both literally and figuratively, in their advertisements. In the 1920s, Léda Plauché wrote and illustrated a booklet to advertise her souvenir and gift shop, the Green Orchid. Plauché proclaimed that her pralines were made according to “the recipe of my old Negro mammy, Marie-Louise. For commercial purposes I abbreviated her name to Ma-Lou.” In clipping the woman’s name, Plauché converted it from a moniker that customers might have mistaken as aristocratic, French, and Creole to one that connoted a maternal, southern mammy. Furthermore, Plauché invited readers to her kitchen at 630 St. Peter St., “the only place in New Orleans where you may see mammy making pralines.” But in the next sentence, Plauché claimed that Green Orchid pralines were “made and sold only by me.”<sup>59</sup> Marie-Louise’s image and presence in the kitchen lent historical authenticity to Plauché’s candies, but the proprietor swallowed up Marie-Louise’s labor, in addition to her name, in attempting to make the woman disappear into her business.<sup>60</sup>

A 1928 advertisement for “‘Ole Mammy’ Creole Pralines” at the St. Charles Hotel Candy Department attempted a much more literal belittling of the praline maker. In declaring the photograph of the praline at the page’s center to be of “actual size,” the ad ensured that the candy

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<sup>59</sup> Léda Plauché, “Story of the Praline,” *The Green Orchid*, 630 St. Peter St., ca. 1920s, Box 2, Folder 22, Collection 21: Anthony J. Stanonis Collection (hereafter cited as Stanonis 21), Special Collections and Archives, Loyola Monroe Library, New Orleans, LA (hereafter cited as Loyola).

<sup>60</sup> Léda Plauché drew a sketch of the praline mammy on the cover of her Green Orchid advertising booklet. She was also a famous designer of many Mardi Gras krewe costumes. Similar to Francisco Vargas, Hermann B. Deutsch (see chapter 5), and others, Léda Plauché was involved in the work of image-making for New Orleans across multiple registers. Her career exhibited a heightened awareness of the importance of performance and spectacle to New Orleans’s culture and tourist appeal. NOPL maintains an archival collection of hundreds of Plauché’s designs for carnival costumes and floats; see Léda Hincks Plauché Collection, Carnival Designs, Louisiana Division, NOPL.



dwarfed the woman who had supposedly created it.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, if the praline's scale was true-to-life, then the woman visible in the top left corner was as small as a doll. The stiff elevation of her arm, as she offered a praline to an imagined customer, encouraged such an interpretation. Contrasting a photograph of the candy with a drawing of the woman also cast the former as lifelike, almost real enough to taste, and the latter as a sketch of history or fiction. Such a pull-push strategy among businesses like the Green Orchid and St. Charles Hotel drew in tourists with romantic imagery but refused the stereotyped subjects full credit or participation in the resulting commercial interaction. The small scale of the Vargas dolls took this diminishing intent to newly literal, embodied form.

White New Orleanians' hunger for pre-modern street vendors reached its most bombastic at a public celebration of the centennial of Godchaux's department store on March 1, 1940. Anniversary events in honor of this retail cornerstone, recorded in a special section of the *Times-Picayune*, evoked New Orleans's past, present, and future, sending the message that Godchaux's had flourished during every era. To begin the day's festivities, an actor retraced the footsteps of Léon Godchaux Sr., the company's founder, from where he had debarked at the foot of Canal Street in 1840 as a penniless Jewish French immigrant and "trudged up and down the river levee selling from a pack on his back." As a gesture of celebratory generosity, Godchaux's gifted a free layette to the first white boy and girl born in the city that morning. Managers also invited *calas* vendors into the store to imbue the day with a historical air. "Dispensed then, as now, by tignon-topped Negro mammies," the *Times-Picayune* reported, the fried rice cakes completed

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<sup>61</sup> Advertisement for "Ole Mammy" Creole Pralines, The St. Charles Hotel, *New Orleans: The Paris of America* (New Orleans: Alfred S. Amer & Co, Ltd., 1928), Folder 2, Box 3, Stanonis 21, Loyola.

this immersive, sensory experience of antebellum New Orleans.<sup>62</sup> Altogether, the jubilee emphasized that Godchaux had built a successful empire after beginning as a humble street peddler. Women vendors of color, in contrast, sold food in the streets in both 1840 and 1940: “then, as now.” In classifying the vendors as historical actors, the retailers in fact placed them outside of history, enduring but stagnant, while others had modernized around them.

During decades when white consumers delighted in such material, visual, and experiential representations of people of color, they became increasingly uncomfortable with the real, physical presence of African Americans in the city, however. Although New Orleans had segregated in 1896, so-called separate-but-equal spaces still allowed for a degree of proximity between the races that inflamed many whites. In February 1910, President A.D. Preston of the New Orleans Railway & Light Company had written to NOPD to complain that African-American boys who sold newspapers in streetcars during the morning commute offended riders not just because their work required them to violate segregation laws. In addition, when they passed through the crowded cars they touched passengers. “The boys, of practically man’s size,” passed up the aisles like “a bull going through a barbed wire fence,” Preston alleged.<sup>63</sup> People throughout the city also complained when houses seemed crowded with black renters or attracted any noticeable degree of foot traffic.<sup>64</sup> Frequently, NOPD reports indicated that officers called to

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<sup>62</sup> “At Godchaux’s Today,” “Calas Tout Chaud Will be Given as Store Delicacies,” “Pony Express Due to Arrive at 4 P.M. from Lakefront,” “It’s Lucky Friday for First Babies Born Here,” special section celebrating one-hundredth anniversary of Godchaux’s department store, *Times-Picayune*, March 1, 1940.

<sup>63</sup> Reports dated February 21, 1910, and February 23, 1910, Folder: February 1910 (folder 2), Box 1, Series 2, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>64</sup> In December 1910, NOPD officers investigated a complaint of “a large number of negroes who create a general disturbance,” and found a two-story home, with seven of thirty rooms rented, whose inhabitants were all employed as drivers and teamsters. In March 1911, NOPD investigated another address where a washerwoman worked out of her home. The officer noted, “Neighbors complained that ‘a lot of negroes...visi[t] her residence.’” Report dated December 30, 1910, Folder: December 1910, and Report dated March 22, 1911, Folder: March 1911, Box 2, Series 3, NOPD, NOPL.

an address found no sign of a crime. Sometimes, they made an arrest anyway. Such was the case on March 29, 1911, when NOPD arrested Walter George, a New Orleanian of color, for walking next to a refrigerated railcar whose seal was broken. The officer detained him even after noting that all the shoulders of meat transported inside remained intact.<sup>65</sup> Such complaints communicated a clear sense that whites feared people of color as a physical menace, seeing a bull in place of a boy or a crime where none existed.

White anxiety about the space occupied by New Orleanians of color mushroomed to larger scales during the New Deal. Ambitious building projects, such as French Market renovations and new public housing developments, fanned debates about the degree to which poor people of color sapped the resources of a city struggling under the Depression. Exacerbated by access to only the lowest paying jobs, black poverty had also become increasingly visible due to overcrowding in segregating neighborhoods.<sup>66</sup> “They live...in hovels that disgrace a civilized community. They are rotten with venereal disease,” raved an inflammatory editorial in Louisiana’s *Home-Town Weekly* in November 1933. Nevertheless, “There is a way to dispose of them,” the writer confided. “In *Louisiana*, are millions of unused acres....These surplus ‘town

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<sup>65</sup> Report dated March 29, 1911, Folder: March 1911, Box 2, Series 3, NOPD, NOPL.

<sup>66</sup> February 1, 1935, wage cuts by the Emergency Relief Administration (ERA) attempted to stabilize pay for unskilled workers, but instead confined people of color, especially women of color, to hourly rates even more meager than before. “Negro women workers, classed as ‘common labor,’ and washerwomen will receive the lowest rate, 12 ½ cents an hour,” down from a previous rate of 35 cents an hour, reported the *Morning Tribune*. Unskilled construction workers and watchmen continued to receive a pay rate of 35 cents an hour. Handymen, janitors, and male laundry workers received a pay cut from 35 to 28 cents per hour, and “cooks, seamstresses, women laundry workers and yardboys” had their rate cut from 35 to 20 cents an hour. ERA assistant administrator James H. Crutcher explained these reductions as a mechanism to “make the relief rolls less attractive than private employment,” but the cuts surely pushed over the edge many black New Orleanians who had been on the brink of poverty. “New ERA Rule Cuts Wages of Ten Classes,” *Morning Tribune*, January 24, 1935.

*darkies*' OUGHT to be colonized on those unused acres."<sup>67</sup> For this writer, the solution to African Americans' presence in the city was to eliminate their presence.

Journalists who wrote for African-American newspapers such as the *Louisiana Weekly* conveyed the frustration felt by readers who feared for basic rights such as housing and employment. In 1934, editorialists debated a recent suggestion by black thinkers to attempt to make the country's forty-ninth state an "all-Negro state." They dismissed the idea, though, fearing a potential backlash from other states barring entrance to people of color.<sup>68</sup> Writers instead suggested more local, economic action, such as the establishment of a black-owned garment factory to provide jobs for city residents.<sup>69</sup> Still, Louisianians of color faced a devastating scale of opposition. In 1935, *federal* policy specified people of color to be "undesirable" when grading neighborhoods eligible for Federal Housing Authority loans.<sup>70</sup> Whether in Louisiana, elsewhere in the South, or even Westchester County, New York, people of color seemed unwelcome as residents and workers, even if many whites delighted in visual, material, and edible representations of their bodies and the fruits of their labor.

The vitriol with which whites attempted to proscribe the mobility of New Orleanians of color in the first decades of the twentieth century made the fetishization of street vendors in the

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<sup>67</sup> Though seemingly melodramatic, this proposed physical expulsion mirrored an equally violent political expulsion already in force throughout the Jim Crow South for decades. In November 1934, Mississippi Senator-Elect and Ku Klux Klan member Theodore Bilbo explained candidly how his state had disfranchised voters of color. "[H]e or she must be able to read and understand the state constitution, and we purposely made the constitution so that few of the negro population could possibly understand it. The negro with us does not pretend to vote." Barred from political participation, people of color in New Orleans and elsewhere in the South suffered from greatly restricted opportunities to argue for full inclusion in municipal life. "Negroes to the Country," *The Home-Town Weekly*, November 5, 1933; "Why Negroes Do Not Vote," *Milwaukee Journal*, November 28, 1934; also see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>68</sup> "An All-Negro State," *Louisiana Weekly*, April 7, 1934.

<sup>69</sup> Associated Negro Press, "Urban League Asks Workers to Organize," *Louisiana Weekly*, April 28, 1934.

<sup>70</sup> An early report of the use of this term surfaced at the Westchester Better Homes Exposition in Westchester, New York, in May 1935. "Colored People Classed as 'Undesirables,'" *Gary American*, May 17, 1935.

form of dolls all the more obscene. But the Vargas dolls seemed to offer a unique solution to a conundrum: whites' discomfort with blacks' presence in the city coupled with a persistent nostalgia for their culinary labors. When retailers sold representations of free and enslaved street vendors, they encouraged consumers to coddle an invented historical personality and ignore the impoverished and segregated city that surrounded them. Composed of wax that looked like skin and acted like sugar, the Vargas dolls were uniquely successful in propelling a consumer of the present into a consumable past.

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### III. Sculpting Nostalgia out of Sugar, Wax, and Skin

By fusing miniaturized street vendors and their edible goods into a single souvenir, the Vargas dolls capitalized on consumers' desire to collapse people of color with the food they created. But wax was an unusual, anachronistic medium for the Vargas family's subject. Simultaneously malleable *and* fragile, like sugar, the wax dolls offered an unexpected resistance in demanding special care and attention from their handlers, which was much gentler than the treatment endured by flesh-and-blood peddlers. Such proactive qualities in the realm of things pointed to similar strategies among New Orleans's modern street vendors, who had learned to enter into the market of representations that had long sought to dominate them.

When locals and visitors wrote about food in connection to New Orleanians of color, especially women, they often anthropomorphized the food and cast the women as edible, upending distinctions between person and thing.<sup>71</sup> In 1902, writer Eleanor Franklin sauntered

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<sup>71</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins explored the cultural, historical, and theoretical implications of this trope of the "edible" black body in mid-nineteenth century American literature in "'Everything 'Cept Eat Us': The Antebellum Black Body Portrayed as Edible Body," *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 201-224. See also Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*, Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses*.

through the New Orleans French Market in search of the city's famous praline sellers. Merely seeing the women prompted a distinct physical reaction. "It is enough to make one's sweet tooth ache to see Aunt Sukey in her big white apron," Franklin described. The woman's body was a candy that stimulated hunger. Equally disorienting, in Franklin's telling, the pralines in Aunt Sukey's basket were far from inert. Rather, Franklin imagined a kitchen scene in which Aunt Sukey had battled the "bubbling, chattering syrup which seem[ed] to be trying to climb by itself over the sides of the big brass kettle." Aunt Sukey scolded the sugar for its violent boiling, "'Heah! you'se 'lasses yit....Yo' needn't be sputterin' to git outen dat kittle. I'se goin' make sugah candy outen yo.'" <sup>72</sup> Sugar's progression through distinct physical states during the making of pralines seemed to imbue the ingredient with very human qualities. Accordingly, twentieth-century praline makers in New Orleans described their candies as if they had a will or personality of their own. "The pralines speak for themselves," one shop owner explained, when asked about his marketing practices. "Pralines have to breathe," another related, when describing his company's packaging methods. <sup>73</sup> In New Orleans's longtime tourist market, people appeared edible, food appeared human, and both were available for purchase and consumption.

Dolls interjected into this continuous, confused loop between edible humans and human-like foods in the modern South. In literature and life, objectifying white gazes often cast children of color as docile dolls, as at the 1934 Texas State Fair, when attendees participated in a "negro baby doll parade." <sup>74</sup> Three-year-old Betty June Hornsby pushed a baby carriage full of dolls and

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<sup>72</sup> Eleanor Franklin, "Strolling About the Quaint Old City of New Orleans," *Leslie's Weekly*, December 11, 1902, 558.

<sup>73</sup> Jennifer Quale, "Recipe for a 'Bite of History': Sugar, Pecans, Water and Butter," *Times-Picayune*, May 2, 1976.

<sup>74</sup> Bernstein argued that nineteenth-century white children "imagined [black] dolls as slaves, and conversely, adult writers imagined slaves as dolls....Popular culture that toyed with the transmutability between black dolls and slaves lent a veneer of harmlessness, of racial innocence, that never quite suppressed the menace." Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 223.

won first prize for being judged the cutest baby doll in attendance.<sup>75</sup> This understanding of black girls or women as things to look at and play with translated to New Orleans's souvenir shops, where workers of color, sweets, and dolls appeared together as a reliable trio. Mammy dolls and pralines often sat side-by-side on shelves, reinforcing their mutual delectability.<sup>76</sup> In 1940, a *Times-Picayune* reporter described the Vieux Carré's mammy dolls as "eagerly gobbled up" by both tourists and locals.<sup>77</sup> Her verb choice was apt. Representations of mammy dolls also frequently formed the packaging of pralines, in which the flattened women embraced the candies and protected them in transit.<sup>78</sup> A 1947 pamphlet for Aunt Sally's Original Creole Pralines illustrated such a marketing device. The company shipped its candies in tidy cubes that resembled cotton bales, held fast by the form of a smiling mammy. This patented design cohered ever more completely the woman and the sweet.

Yet no product succeeded better at erasing the dividing lines between food, plaything, and human than the Vargas family's work. Their dolls were malleable – physically, theoretically,

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<sup>75</sup> Significantly, the judges for Texas's 1934 "negro baby doll parade" were an artist, an employee of the city parks department, and chief of the welfare division. Such a combination tagged the children as aesthetic subjects and objects associated with leisure or recreation, yet simultaneously imperiled victims potentially in need of rescue. "Negroes Flock to State Fair for Glad Day," *Dallas Texas News*, October 16, 1934.

<sup>76</sup> In the 1940s, French Quarter shop Flo Salter Dolls offered tourists a veritable menu of white and black dolls, which taught consumers very specific associations between skin color and profession. White dolls included "Ballet Dancer," "French Maid," and "Girl Graduate." Black dolls included "Glorified Cotton Picker," "Mammy," "Mulatto Maid," "Petunia Picaninny" [*sic*], and "Zulu Ubangi." Similarly, Louise Cook's Pralines charged extra to pack their candies in a package resembling a cotton bale. Most expensive was the "cottonbale [*sic*] of 12 small pralines with mammy doll package wrapped in cellophane." Price list for Flo Salter Dolls, ca. 1940s, Folder 34, Box 2, and pamphlet for Louise Cook's Pralines, ca. 1940s, Folder 38, Box 2, Stanonis 21, Loyola.

<sup>77</sup> Associations between pralines and dolls as paired souvenirs were long lasting. In a 1951 *Dallas Morning News* article that announced New Orleans as the honeymoon destination of choice for local newlyweds, reporter Jean Simmons detailed the itineraries of several couples. Miss Alice Marie Harris and her new husband dined at the Roosevelt Hotel and "came home with Negro mammy dolls and pralines from the French Quarter." Want-Ad Reporter, "Up and Down the Street" column, *Times-Picayune*, December 7, 1940; Jean Simmons, "Dallas Couples Heed Call of New Orleans," *Dallas Morning News*, January 28, 1951, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Food producers used the mammy figure to advertise all manner of edible goods, most recognizably Aunt Jemima pancake mix and syrup. A 1906 advertisement in *The State*, published in Columbia, South Carolina, advised locals, "Prepare your roof for winter's rains and storms. Black Mammy Roof Paint stops leaks." This product maintained the stereotype of mammy as protector and bulwark. Advertisement, *The State*, October 9, 1906.

and commercially – because they were made of wax, which stretched them between poles of skin and sugar. Because wax looked like human flesh the dolls seemed real: believable as true-to-life historical personas. Likewise, the similarities between wax and sugar encouraged further associations between the dolls, pralines, and the city’s praline sellers. Ultimately, the miniatures’ material properties enabled them to stand in for the people and products of the city to a degree far more tangible than any cloth mammy doll ever could. The Vargas dolls thus appealed to buyers as the perfect consumable object, thoroughly human and thoroughly food.

Wax engaged with modern viewers differently than other media, such as marble or paint. For thousands of years, Mediterranean and European artists and scientists had used wax to evoke highly lifelike figures of religious devotion or scientific study in churches, studios, and medical schools. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Italians, and the French had created wax paintings, busts, effigies, and figurines to commemorate the dead, curse the living, and model larger sculptures to be carved out of less forgiving substances. Artists and embalmers used wax to bind, protect, and preserve objects as diverse as mosaics, fabrics, and corpses. Wax’s nearly limitless adaptability prompted its use in a wide variety of settings, across centuries and continents.<sup>79</sup>

Thinkers have long emphasized wax’s uniquely “uncanny” resemblance to human skin.<sup>80</sup> In many modern observers’ descriptions, a wax object, especially in human form, evoked a

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<sup>79</sup> Roberta Panzanelli, ed. *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2008); and Thelma R. Newman, *Wax as Art Form* (South Brunswick, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1966).

<sup>80</sup> In 1906, psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch described the encounter with a wax form as the definitive uncanny experience. “Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become an original cause of the uncanny feeling, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate....The unpleasant impression is well known...in many people when they visit collections of wax figures, panopticons and panoramas.” Jentsch acknowledged that the wax form needed to be life-sized to prompt this sensation; miniaturized scale destroyed an object’s uncanny nature. More famously, in 1919, Sigmund Freud rejected Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny – specifically his reliance on “intellectual uncertainty” – in favor of the uneasy sensation associated with mysterious episodes of doubling, repetition, and the return of repressed thoughts. As I will discuss, Bill Brown described nineteenth- and twentieth-century black collectibles’ slippage between



moment of indecision that alternately intrigued and repulsed the observer as he sought to distinguish whether the object was alive. Recounting his time in New Orleans from 1818 to 1820, the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe described this uncanny moment of uncertainty. “The nearer a figure in waxwork resembles a living individual, the more we are embarrassed by its presence while we are deceived to believe it alive, & the more shocked when we discover that it is really dead.” From the architect’s point of view, a marble sculpture or a poem never attempted to be more than a representation, so the viewer or listener remained free to appreciate the artistry involved in its making. “The statue gives you nothing but the form,” Latrobe explained. In contrast, “The Waxwork pretends to give you the life, & the employment of life with the form, & you find nothing but death in the Masque of life.”<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, the intense verisimilitude of wax prompted sensations of distraction, disappointment, and anger in Latrobe.

For others, though, wax’s lifelike properties produced an eerie thrill, which helped push wax from religious and academic settings into cheaper realms of the wax museum, carnival, and toy store. In March 1911, a New Orleans police officer visited Kelly’s Wonderland on Canal Street, a “so called museum of anatomy,” as the policeman described it. Proprietor A.J. Kelly invited curious passersby to surrender fifteen cents and in return allowed them “to view a few, roughly made, wax specimens of anatomy intended to demonstrate diseases of the male and female sexual organs.” But, the officer dutifully recorded, “There is only one large wax figure and it is that of a woman and intended to demonstrate the Caesarian operation.” Disgusted but

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history and the present and animation and stillness as a modern, American example of the uncanny. I suggest that the Vargas dolls represented an even more perfect example of the American uncanny due to the combination of their material qualities and nostalgic purposes, as wax things enmeshed in New Orleans’s tourist market. Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” (1906) in *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1996): 11, 12; Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, by Freud, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 121-163; Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 175-207.

<sup>81</sup> Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*, 112.

mostly confused, the officer seemed not entirely sure what to make of Kelly's bizarre business, decreeing it "very poorly supplied...to be styled a museum of anatomy." Kelly straddled the line between museum and peep show, banking on customers' desire to pay for a provocative view.<sup>82</sup> In 1910, perhaps with just this form of establishment in mind, German art historian Julius von Schlosser had declared, "Wax's proletarianization is complete."<sup>83</sup> As a medium, wax had transitioned from high to low art. But with their vendor dolls, the Vargas family depicted members of the proletariat in a persistently artisan form. The Vargas dolls stood as an artistic anachronism and cultural incongruity, hovering in between fine art and kitsch.

Wax's unique ability to slip between realms of life and representation of life suited it to New Orleans's tourism industry, which strung an elastic line between history and the present and fantasy and reality. In 1891 a writer described, "The past clings to the present in New Orleans; nay, bridging it locks hands with the future until everything is pregnant with triple significance."<sup>84</sup> The modern city's tourist appeal rested on an understanding of history as a two-way street, which permitted visitors to travel back in time or believe that remnants of the past had leaked into the present. Tourists could dine in a secluded Vieux Carré courtyard, enjoying a sense of temporal and spatial dislocation from the modern city that surrounded them, or purchase pralines at a French Market shop, believing them to be made from an unchanging plantation recipe. In medium as well as message, then, the Vargas dolls fit seamlessly within New

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<sup>82</sup> Report dated March 9, 1911, Box 2, Series 3, Folder: March 1911, NOPD, NOPL. On modern and postmodern uses of wax, especially the rise of wax museums, wax figures in literature, and the late-twentieth century return of wax to the realm of fine art, see Michelle E. Bloom, *Waxworks: A Cultural Obsession* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Pamela Pilbeam, *Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003).

<sup>83</sup> Julius von Schlosser, "History of Portraiture in Wax," trans. James Michael Loughridge, in *Ephemeral Bodies*, ed. Panzanelli, 287.

<sup>84</sup> Hunt, "New Orleans," *Frank Leslie's*, 654.

Orleans's cultural and consumer environment. With one foot in older traditions of devotional sculpture and the other in the souvenir shop, crafted in a medium that wavered between life and death, the Vargas dolls were in-between objects representing in-between people.

Wax's verisimilitude also lent the Vargas dolls an aura of truth – a sense that they depicted historical people as they were – as well as a sensation that the dolls might be partly alive themselves.<sup>85</sup> When Francisco Vargas created the gigantic King Cotton for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Mississippi Commissioner R.H. Henry had written to the artist to complain about the king's throne. "Thrones are usually wider than chairs," Henry pointed out, "and I would be glad if you would broaden this out and allow the king plenty of space to move around in. In the picture he looks cramped, packed down and ill at ease, generally."<sup>86</sup> Henry understood that Vargas had fashioned the king out of wax, but he responded to the artist's model as if the king were actually alive and required room to stretch and change position on his throne.

Decades later, New Orleanians reacted in a similar way to the Vargas family's diminutive vendor dolls, believing them to be distinctly lifelike in their fine detail. "These figures are copied from real life and are the most realistic," declared a 1940s promotional statement on Vargas family letterhead that described the dolls. "Everything but the strange cries and calls made by these negroes has been reproduced and preserved in wax."<sup>87</sup> A 1966 magazine article further supported this notion. "Each figure is made with minute attention to some detail of daily

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<sup>85</sup> "The skin looks like human skin," marveled a reporter, upon viewing figurines of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Francis Xavier that had been created by Francisco Vargas. Though sculpted seventy-five years earlier, they remained "startlingly lifelike." Gormin, "Wonders," *Times-Picayune*, December 22, 1946.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from R.H. Henry to Francisco Vargas, March 22, 1904, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>87</sup> Statement about Vargas family history and work on letterhead titled, "Vargas Wax Figures, New Orleans, LA / 'Genuine Vargas' / Made for 75 Years by the Same Family," Xerox from original possession of August Alfaro, ca. 1940s, Vargas, HNOC. Portions of this statement were drawn from the following newspaper article: Frances Bryson, "Fourth Generation of New Orleans Family Carries on Historic Artistry in Wax," *The New Orleans Item-Tribune*, February 16, 1941, 2.

life...Mrs. Rosado must have known these people well to have depicted them with such loving care.”<sup>88</sup> Lucy Rosado missed by several generations the street vendors whom she evoked. But because she and her family worked in wax, observers responded as if they were true fragments of history, snagged and preserved like specimens in amber.<sup>89</sup> Wax’s resemblance to human skin delighted many but also carried a great danger. Believing the wax dolls to replicate life conveyed the parallel notion that the dolls’ depictions of street vendors – as symbols of ease, subservience, and plenty – were historically accurate too.

Just as wax allowed the Vargas dolls to slide between realms of history and the present, material similarities between wax and sugar allowed the dolls to embody an even more perfect union between New Orleans’s food and its makers. Sugar work and wax sculpture led the praline maker and wax artist through strikingly similar steps in their kitchen or studio. To make pralines, the candy maker heated sugar beyond the boiling point, often in large copper kettles. As the sugar caramelized, it darkened and became pliable. Adding cream, butter, vanilla, and pecans caused the molten sweet to bubble and spit, rising up the sides of the kettle. After the mixture reached a precise temperature, the cook needed to work quickly, spooning the pralines into pools on wax paper or marble before the sugar cooled. Making pralines was hot, heavy, and dangerous work; candy makers risked scars from spatters of superheated sugar.

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<sup>88</sup> August Alfaro confirmed that the Vargas family did not begin to make dolls of African-American washerwomen, in particular, until after 1940. HNOC interview with Alfaro, May 17, 1984; Fragment, *Dixie*, ca. 1966, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>89</sup> Even an HNOC curator who maintained the museum’s collection of Vargas dolls casually characterized the dolls as more human than object. In April 1976, Mrs. Mary Prah of Annapolis, Maryland, wrote to HNOC to inquire about a “wax figurine of a black woman cotton picker” that she owned. Curatorial assistant John A. Mahe II confirmed that Prah’s doll was Vargas-made. Furthermore, he responded, “Should you make your way to New Orleans, please add our collection to your itinerary so that you can visit the ‘cousins’ of your ‘Cotton Picker.’” Reinforcing associations between sugar and wax, another HNOC curator noted that one Vargas doll in the museum’s collection had developed a white substance on its dark surface that reminded her of the bloom on chocolate. Letter from Mrs. Mary Prah, 260 Defense Highway, Annapolis, MD, to John A. Mahe II, HNOC curatorial assistant, April 18, 1976, and Mahe’s response to Prah, April 24, 1976, Vargas, HNOC; author’s conversation with HNOC curator, February 12, 2014.

To fashion their dolls, the Vargas family completed comparable steps in their waxwork. They began with “pure beeswax,” August Alfaro described, which had been filtered of dead bees to achieve a pure “white to...light amber” color. Heated in a pot, the wax liquefied, requiring careful attention. “Anything higher [than 120 degrees] will change...the wax to a much darker color. Of course when making Negro characters this is no problem,” Alfaro acknowledged. As his comment revealed, the vendor dolls’ skin, praised as unbelievably lifelike, gained its shade by imprecisely burning color into white wax. The Vargases then poured the wax into molds or built human shapes over skeletons made of wire or broken umbrella staves. To add details of gesture and posture, they used tools that belonged to artists, dentists, and even entomologists: pliers, hammers, drills, a magnifying lamp, and sharpened steel blades.<sup>90</sup> Such equipment reflected work that was simultaneously creative and anatomical, delicate and violent. The figurines were colorful specimens to cull out of a blank, organic medium. More significant than similarities in processes of heating and shaping sugar and wax, though, were similarities in result.

Although New Orleans pralines and the wax dolls that represented them both began in a molten, malleable state, they cooled into finished forms that were so fragile they required special handling to avoid breakage. Praline makers slid the sugared candies into individual wax paper sleeves or even separate boxes and then stacked them vertically to prevent shattering. The cost and time involved in generating such elaborate packaging seemed unprofitable when considering the thousands of pralines produced every day by the city’s commercial kitchens.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>90</sup> August A. Alfaro, “Making Vargas Wax Figures,” no date, Vargas, HNOC.

<sup>91</sup> In 1976, the four cooks, two wrappers, and six packers at Evan’s Creole Candy Company produced and packaged 32,000 pralines in a “normal production day.” The same year, Leah Johnson, proprietor of Cook’s Creole Candies, told a reporter, “We spend a lot of money to keep our praline in one piece....We put corrugated paper between each one, no matter what anyone tells you, pralines have to stand up or they break.” Quale, “Recipe,” *Times-Picayune*, May 2, 1976.

consumer demand for New Orleans's signature sweet helped increase the number of large-scale praline producers as the twentieth century matured. The sugar-like properties of wax likewise made the Vargas dolls extremely fragile. Composed of a medium that threatened to melt if exposed to extreme temperatures, the figurines also guarded delicate wares – tiny, pointed carrots, slender sugarcane stalks and fishing poles – that would chip or snap with any rough handling. “We pack them carefully and ship only by express,” August Alfaro pledged to *Coronet* magazine in 1939.<sup>92</sup> Whether mailed in cubes that looked like cotton bales or layers of sheltering padding, New Orleans's candies and Vargas dolls had to be outfitted carefully for travel.

In more abstract ways as well, the fragility of the Vargas family's wax dolls dictated a certain level of care and attention among their buyers that made the dolls into fundamentally resistant things. During the closing credits of Spike Lee's 2000 film *Bamboozled*, an array of black collectible objects – dolls, toys, aluminum banks – sprang into action without human help, pivoting and clanging and dancing. Theorist Bill Brown explained, “I want to understand this revenge of the black collectible come-to-life as the recollection of the ontological scandal perpetrated by slavery, as the reanimation of the reified black body...the reenactment of the breakdown of the person/thing binary.”<sup>93</sup> Just as the system of slavery had negated the boundary between person and thing, Brown posited, so did the persistent legacy of slavery in American cultural and political realms continue to blur the division between history and the present. These things moved in order to act out the fact that the past had never passed and real people's stories lay within these abhorrent objects. But disciplinary or methodological hang-ups precluded the discovery of these histories, Brown lamented. Scholars have been squeamish to jab at the rotten core of a shiny apple. “[O]ur reluctance to think seriously about things may result from a

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<sup>92</sup> “August Alfaro: Who Goes the Bee One Better by Selling His Workings in Wax,” *Coronet*, 1939, Vargas, HNOG.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, “Reification, Reanimation,” *Critical Inquiry*, 197.

repressed apprehension...that within things we will discover the human,” Brown wrote, “precisely because our history is one in which humans were reduced to things.”<sup>94</sup>

In contrast to the crazed animation of Brown’s collectibles, the stillness and fragility of the Vargas dolls nevertheless enacted a similar confrontation with viewers. The wax figurines calmed the peripatetic nature of street vendors’ work, making permanent what had been a transient, liminal occupation. When customers purchased a Vargas doll, they brought it home and placed it on a shelf or table, perhaps in a dining room or living room, as did Barbara Lewis in her Dallas home. Sitting or standing on their wooden pedestal, forever shaded from the sun, these proletarian figures had succeeded in penetrating consumers’ homes to an extent that true vendors of pralines, coffee, and cakes had never been permitted to do. As NOPD records made clear, peddlers’ poverty had forced them to remain perpetually on the move and on the margins, dismissed by many as subservient and obnoxious, if not duplicitous. They carried their heavy wares for miles in the hot Louisiana sun. But the material vulnerability of these figurines negotiated a new kind of treatment, if only for objects that stood in the place of real men and women. The fact that the dolls were made of wax ensured that they would be handled gently, honored as works of art, and preserved from extreme conditions.

Still, of what use could this foray inside consumers’ homes be if buyers derived pleasure from simply gazing at the Vargas dolls, enjoying vague associations with New Orleans and its food? The dolls resisted further by confronting viewers with an unending moment of withheld satisfaction. Like all souvenirs, the Vargas dolls never stopped reminding their owners of things

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 207.

and people and places that were out of reach and could not be enjoyed.<sup>95</sup> They negotiated their way past the doorstep only to stand impassive, refusing to render the praline or cup of coffee for which customers hungered. In these ways, they dictated a relationship that continually swung between invitation and evasion. The hyperreality of the dolls' waxen features drew consumers toward them for a careful look, proffering a sense of bodily, historical reality, but their miniature scale then denied it.<sup>96</sup> Benjamin Latrobe had suggested that the more true-to-life a wax object seemed, the more devastating the moment when the viewer realized it to be fake. The Vargas dolls ultimately served as permanent markers of absence and distance. Any pleasure they seemed to render was empty. Though remarkably realistic, the tiny pralines they carried in their baskets would taste only of burned wax on the tongue.

Such resistant modes of action and inaction could not rescue the Vargas dolls, however, from their participation in larger, longer traditions of consumer objects that exploited racist stereotypes of workers of color. The Vargas family did not fashion their vendor dolls out of wax in order to correct the harsh treatment endured by New Orleans's street sellers. Interviews with the family clarified that they created the dolls because they judged them to be the most profitable form of souvenir that would appeal to the largest number of buyers.<sup>97</sup> Using the same molds for decades, the Vargas family made identical representations of food vendors of color in order to meet consumers' unchanging, nostalgic desires.

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<sup>95</sup> Regarding souvenirs of travel, Dean MacCannell wrote, "Everywhere in the minutiae of our material culture, we encounter reminders of the availability of authentic experiences at other times and in other places." MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 148.

<sup>96</sup> Stewart argued that both the miniature and the gigantic attract but ultimately repel viewers. "The miniature allows us only visual access to surface and texture; it does not allow movement through space. Inversely, the gigantic envelops us, but is inaccessible to lived experience. Both modes of exaggeration tend toward abstraction." Stewart, *On Longing*, 102.

<sup>97</sup> HNOC interview with Alfaro, May 17, 1984, Vargas, HNOC.



Nevertheless, resistance from the Vargas dolls stood as an allegory to the ways that flesh-and-blood New Orleans peddlers learned to resist the customers whose sales they desperately needed. By the early decades of the twentieth century, African-American women food workers, especially praline vendors, sought to capitalize on the multiplying representations of their profession that filled New Orleans's tourist shops and souvenir stands. During the same years that the Vargas family made their dolls, women of color purposefully dressed the part of the stereotypical praline mammy. They skillfully reinvented a role that had long been performative in its enactment in city streets and public squares. In 1913, a *Times-Picayune* reporter acknowledged that a second generation of praline sellers had replaced the first and now charged for more than their candies. "The original of these imitations is dead, but all of them seem to have some of the same characteristics. They have a particular aversion for photographers who fail to touch their palms with silver."<sup>98</sup> Conscious that they, in addition to their pralines, constituted figures of historical interest and sensory desire, the women demanded compensation for their image, which would disappear onto the film inside the journalist's or tourist's camera.

One particular street seller of the early 1900s used both her consumers' hunger for her sweets and her own mobility as tools to her advantage. From her typical vending spot on the campus of Newcomb College, the women's school associated with Tulane University, Azelie sold pralines to the women students who "begged in vain for years to be allowed to snap her picture," a *Times-Picayune* reporter described. Their incessant requests irritated her, such that "she would retire...and leave the college craving for sweets for a week until she considered it punished sufficiently." In the writer's telling, Azelie was mistress of her own fate and refused to sell to college students and local residents just as readily as she exploited those unfamiliar with

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<sup>98</sup> "Odd Ones: A Round-Up of the Queer Characters with Whom Orleanians are More or Less Familiar," *Times-Picayune*, January 12, 1913.

the Crescent City. “On her return [to campus] she would tell loudly of her conquests of Northern tourists,” the reporter recorded. “‘Look lak some Yankee in dat house,’ [Azellie] would remark, and straightaway ring a doorbell....[S]he would look on with masked pleasure as the strangers exclaimed over her basket.” Customers’ eager desire for her sweets confirmed to Azellie her expertise. Demand exceeded supply and, distinct from many other commercial and social equations in segregated New Orleans, this time the balance of power tilted in her favor.

During the same era that a group of white housewives sought to eject men and women of color from the French Market, decrying their presence as unsanitary, a local resident offered Azellie five dollars per day to make pralines in her kitchen. “[The woman] had a horror of unhygienic surroundings, and wished to send off pralines for Christmas gifts if she could be sure they were sanitary,” the reporter explained. Azellie rebelled, but not against insults to her standards of sanitation. “‘She try to steal my secret—,’” the writer recorded her as declaring, and thereafter refused to sell ever again to the woman.<sup>99</sup> Not unlike the waxen representations of food vendors created by the Vargas family, Azellie withheld her candies from customers as an expression of autonomy, if not retribution. She protected her recipe with the same ferocity that she guarded against theft of her photograph. After generations of white appropriation of the labor of people of color in Louisiana kitchens – in plantations, French Quarter restaurants, and cookbooks – recipes, even unwritten, continued to require vigilant defense.

Azellie and others who vended throughout the city during the 1910s through 1930s expanded their entrepreneurship far beyond the original sweet. They continued to sell the praline – the historical taste at the center of decades of romanticization and nostalgia – but likewise declared ownership of all representations of themselves, whether in cloth, sugar, or film. In 1936,

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<sup>99</sup> Granted this profile came solely from the pen of a white observer, but the writer depicted Azellie as a savvy businesswoman, fully cognizant of the allure of her wares. Kent, “Merry, Carefree Life,” *Times-Picayune*, March 21, 1920.

the *Times-Picayune* printed a special feature in its Sunday magazine that celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of *New Orleans Characters*, a book published in 1876 by Léon J. Frémaux. Frémaux had sketched the city's most recognizable peddlers and other personalities of the streets and levees. Sixty years later, the *Times-Picayune* sent its reporters out into the city to determine what had changed and who, if anyone, remained the same. Staff artist McGowan Miller sketched chimney sweeps, ice cream peddlers, and even a tamale seller. Additionally, he noted "the fat, black mammy who sells pralines and fat, black mammy dolls with brass earrings." By selling dolls of themselves, vendors had advanced even beyond the inclination to charge for a photograph.<sup>100</sup> "The show goes on," reporter Meigs O. Frost declared. "Those 60 years haven't been able to take away the picturesqueness of New Orleans streets. They've merely changed the cast of characters."<sup>101</sup> If the Crescent City had become a tourist-friendly stage, New Orleans praline sellers now claimed a credited role there. And if the market sought to make these women into things, the women declared that they would profit too.

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### **Conclusion: Picturing Doll Baby**

Even as women street sellers demanded increased recognition and compensation for their longtime work, New Orleans's tourism industry remained inequitable. Well into the mid- and even late-twentieth century, locals and tourists exhibited a persistent hunger for food made by New Orleanians of color. Many women who had sold pralines in the streets went to work for

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<sup>100</sup> Women of color in New Orleans claimed the image and identity of a doll in another, even more public, format. In Mardi Gras parades, krewes of women known as the "Baby Dolls" paraded in ornate and often sexualized baby doll costumes. With early twentieth-century origins in Storyville, New Orleans's red light district, the women masked in a mode intended to be both alluring and assertive. Kim Vaz-Deville, *The "Baby Dolls": Breaking the Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

<sup>101</sup> Meigs O. Frost, no title, *The Times-Picayune New Orleans States Sunday Magazine*, 1936.

popular tourist and candy shops, or their daughters did.<sup>102</sup> Both Edna Mae Francis and her mother made pralines at Aunt Sally's Praline Shop in the French Market. A May 1976 photograph showed Edna Mae at work, standing in the small room where she had made the candies for twenty years. Even if Francis worked for wages in a desegregated New Orleans, her daily labors were hot, heavy, and tedious, similar to the work of many praline makers before her.<sup>103</sup> Francis's work was also highly performative. She made pralines in full view of tourists outside, separated from them by a pane of glass.

In fact, Francis worked in the light of thousands of gazes, no less than five of which can be identified in this photograph. First: the gaze of her supervisor. The *Times-Picayune* caption read, "[M]anager Walter J. MacDonald [*sic*] watches over employees Marie Jackson and Edna Mae Francis."<sup>104</sup> McDonald made no pralines. No article of clothing was more impractical close to a vat of boiling sugar than a silk tie. He ducked into this photograph likely at the journalist's request and "watche[d] over" Francis's work with a gaze of cultural and economic appropriation. Second, Francis poured pralines under the gaze of the mammy figures that adorned the shop's cotton bale packaging, visible on the counter next to her. They stood for the insatiable appetite of the market, whose design had not changed in decades. These empty boxes represented consumers near and far waiting for their pralines, confident that they would be guarded from

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<sup>102</sup> For an overview of praline sellers in New Orleans from the eighteenth century to the present, see Chanda M. Nunez, "'Just Like Ole' Mammy Used to Make': The History of the New Orleans Praline Woman," in *Working in the Big Easy: The History and Politics of Labor in New Orleans*, eds. Thomas J. Adams and Steve Striffler (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014), 163-189; and Nunez, "'Just Like Ole' Mammy Used to Make: Reinterpreting New Orleans African-American Praline Vendors as Entrepreneurs" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2011).

<sup>103</sup> "Francis did not like candy making," Nunez learned in an interview with Aunt Sally's management in January 2011. "[S]he worked hard to make sure that she would not remain in the kitchen. Francis earned a position in management, pushing back against the 'mammy' myth." Francis worked for Aunt Sally's from the late 1940s until she died in 2002. Nunez, "'Just Like Ole' Mammy," in *Working in the Big Easy*, 184.

<sup>104</sup> Quale, "Recipe," *Times-Picayune*, May 2, 1976.

shattering by a protective mammy.<sup>105</sup> Third, Francis worked under the gaze of the tourist who stood at the window, looking in. Hailing from the North, Midwest, South, or from abroad, she watched Francis ladle the pralines onto the waxed paper and understood that this product was authentic because a woman of color made it, as a woman of color had made it before her. Fourth, Francis worked under the gaze of the photographer who captured this image and allowed the scene to be viewed by untold numbers of readers. Fifth, and finally, Francis worked under the gaze of her mother. Her framed photograph on the wall memorialized the more than thirty years that she had stood in the very same space as her daughter, sweating in the humid heat, stirring vats of sugar, spooning thousands of candies. Her mother had taught her how to make pralines, Francis told the reporter. Her continued presence added a flavor of historical authenticity. The photograph recorded in non-textual form the verbal transmission of expertise, from mother to daughter.

Watching the black body at work made viewers understand that the black body was a working body. Such had been the attempt of the Vargas dolls. Their small size and waxen skin made the dolls intellectually light and credibly authentic. They froze vendors in poses of servitude. Placing Francis behind glass, employing her to make pralines day after day, Aunt Sally's continued the same effort. "Will you not eat the praline?" Flo Field had written in 1920, "which of all things does not change." More than fifty years later, Aunt Sally's still packaged the Crescent City's eternal sweet in cotton bales embraced by mammy dolls. Like many other New Orleans food producers, Aunt Sally's continued to traffic in nostalgic tastes and the people who

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<sup>105</sup> In a 2010 interview with Mary McDonald, granddaughter of Pierre and Diane Bagur, the founders of Aunt Sally's Creole Pralines in the 1930s, Nunez recorded McDonald as claiming that by the mid-twentieth century the family had become embarrassed by the mammy imagery on their praline packaging. McDonald alleged that a manager "who was not a family member" had ordered the boxes in the 1960s while he was in the process of being fired. For financial reasons, McDonald claimed, the company had to use up the supply of boxes that he had ordered. If this story is accurate, it is unclear why Aunt Sally's still packed its candies in boxes decorated with mammy representations a decade later, in the mid 1970s, when the *Times-Picayune* photographer visited the store. Nunez, "'Just Like Ole' Mammy,'" in *Working in the Big Easy*, 182-183.

created them. As the *Times-Picayune* reporter clarified, Edna Mae Francis's mother's name was Iola Thomas. But among customers she was "better known as 'Doll Baby.'"<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Quale, "Recipe," *Times-Picayune*, May 2, 1976.

## Chapter Five: Contextualizing Creole Cuisine: Reading Race and Ethnicity in Culinary Texts

In the midst of the Depression, as one arm of the New Deal was busy renovating New Orleans's famed French Market, another was busy writing. Funded by a Public Works Administration loan, the renewed French Market opened its doors in 1938. The same year, the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration published the *New Orleans City Guide*. Authored by local writers, the book served as a federally sponsored travel advertisement to Americans short on cash, with New Orleans cuisine front and center. "To the tourist the city is first of all a place in which to eat, drink, and be merry," the writers began.<sup>1</sup> Tantalizing with descriptions of gumbo, bouillabaisse, and absinthe drips, the authors promised to teach the reader where to eat, drink, dance, worship, and sleep in the Crescent City.

Both implicitly and explicitly, the *Guide*'s pages mapped a thoroughly segregated city in which local customs of race, public space, and food needed to be explained. Chapters on restaurants, jazz clubs, churches, and public beaches carefully distinguished between facilities that welcomed whites and those reserved for people of color. The book's hotel listings revealed starkly not just the extent to which black and white visitors were segregated, but the magnitude with which the city welcomed white tourists and deterred black travelers. Eleven hotels offered a total of 3,518 rooms to white visitors. Two hotels offered *twenty-six* rooms to African-American tourists, with the Young Women's Christian Association also able to house thirty-six "transients."<sup>2</sup> The scholarly white tourist could plan to visit any of twenty-four public and private libraries and archives throughout the city. In contrast, the *Guide* invited the African-American reader to three libraries, including the New Orleans Public Library, which offered "books on

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the City of New Orleans, *New Orleans City Guide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), xx.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

Negro history written by nationally famous Negro writers.”<sup>3</sup> With such a qualification, the author seemed to assume that only works directly addressing African-American subjects and written by African-American writers would be of interest. Restaurants for black tourists also showed a similar degree of spatial detachment. Clustered on South Rampart Street, on the edge of the French Quarter, they included none of the famed white tablecloth institutions that had drawn tourists to New Orleans since antebellum days. Such spatial and cultural segregation would have been legible to locals but unclear, at least initially, to outsiders. The glossary at the *Guide*’s conclusion read like a strange litany of foods, people, and places, with definitions provided for “Congo....Courtbouillon....Crayfish bisque....Creole....Free-Mulatto....[and] Griffe.”<sup>4</sup> Color and cuisine in the Crescent City had a lexicon all their own and the *New Orleans City Guide* promised to serve as the necessary textual key.

Another text published the following year told a very different story about the relationship between food, race, and the written word in New Orleans. *Lena Richard’s Cook Book*, the first cookbook produced by a New Orleanian of color – and a woman of color, no less – likewise promised to educate its readers about New Orleans’s history and food. “This book is an attempt to put the basic facts concerning the art of cooking into a form that may be easily understood by the youngest housewife as well as the most experienced chef,” Richard wrote in the preface. As the teacher of public cooking classes in New Orleans, Richard was experienced in translating her work into layman’s terms. She claimed many of the book’s dishes as her own creations, naming them “Lena’s Lamb Chops” and “Lena’s Baked Custard.” But she also tapped into a lengthy heritage of recipes “used for generations in the South, the home of famous Creole

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 120-122.

<sup>4</sup> The *Guide* defined “Congo” to mean “a very black Negro”; “Creole” as “a white descendant of the French and Spanish settlers”; “Free-Mulatto” as “a person of color who was never a slave,” and “Griffe” to mean “a person having three-fourths Negro blood.” Ibid., 408.



cooks.”<sup>5</sup> Her sources were modern and historical. And her advice was both practical and sophisticated, as she offered tips on using leftovers as well as creating an elegant aspic. Richard’s 1939 cookbook elevated her from a popular caterer among local high society to a national star, with cooking stints in New York and Virginia and her own restaurants and television program in New Orleans. It also garnered her a contract with Houghton Mifflin, the same publisher of the *New Orleans City Guide*, which reissued her cookbook for a national readership in 1940. Richard’s career was an unequivocal literary, artistic, and professional success. But she would receive greater respect outside of New Orleans than within it.

The *New Orleans City Guide* and *Lena Richard’s Cook Book* were two texts that anchored one end of a period of significant social, political, and cultural change in New Orleans, when representations of culinary expertise and race intersected on the printed page as never before. From the Depression to the *Brown v. Board* ruling in 1954, which outlawed so-called “separate but equal” spaces, the New Orleans economy came to rely increasingly on tourism. At the same time, technological and social changes made New Orleans look more and more like other southern and American cities. Chain supermarkets, slum clearance, and suburbs reshaped or obliterated Crescent City neighborhoods. In the midst of such transformations, tourism promoters and restaurant owners evangelized New Orleans’s Creole cuisine as the city’s most valuable cultural draw. An easily recognizable set of dishes – Oysters Rockefeller, pompano *en papillote*, café brûlot – cohered into a singular brand that propelled the gospel of Creole cuisine *out* of New Orleans and pulled tourists *in*.

This mid-century, tourist-focused promotion of Creole cuisine possessed a distinctive racial perspective. Menus, cookbooks, and recipes that referenced a romanticized colonial and antebellum history depicted New Orleans food as the cultural bequest of white French chefs.

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<sup>5</sup> Lena Richard, *Lena Richard’s Cook Book* (New Orleans: 1939), Preface.

Implicitly and explicitly, the texts spelled out whites' attempts to claim authority over Creole cuisine and ethnicity and deny the creativity and professionalism of African Americans in the kitchen. Food seemed to offer tangible proof to New Orleans whites that they still belonged to an exceptional cultural legacy, exclusive of people of color, during an era when the privileges associated with whiteness were eroding. Private recipes, published cookbooks, and menus showed how the practice of being Creole and making and eating Creole food mattered just as much in home kitchens as it did in French Quarter restaurants. Together, mid-century culinary texts became a crucially important vehicle in prolonging the myth of a whitened Creole past.

Ultimately, however, whites' ardent defense of Creole cuisine betrayed a fundamental anxiety as to whether they produced or merely consumed their city's famous culture. White New Orleanians cloaked their insecurity in claims that *text* was the ideal medium for preserving and conveying Creole culinary traditions, while denying the literacy of African Americans in the kitchen. At the same time, white culinary professionals also emphasized the spectacular, theatrical qualities of Creole fine dining as a mechanism to assert their own secret knowledge and insist that tourists travel to New Orleans to experience authentic cuisine. In stubbornly ignoring African Americans' contributions to Creole food, whites sought to refuse blacks a stake in the city's future, just as they had tried to subjugate them in narratives of the city's past. Nevertheless, African-American cooks and chefs, like Lena Richard, expressed security in the knowledge that people of color had been the very first Creoles and had produced the cuisine continuously since the city's founding.

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## I. Traveling by Menu and Market: Evangelizing and Defending Creole Cuisine

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, New Orleans cuisine became more visible to a national audience and more important to the local economy than ever before. Louisiana food producers, writers, and even housewives championed the singularity of New Orleans's cuisine and defended it from perceived slights. But greater media attention to Creole food led to confusion among the national public about the racial meaning of "Creole." Menus' and guidebooks' attempts to defend "Creole" as a marker of whiteness revealed how the city's postwar reliance on tourism coincided – uncomfortably – with transformations to the city's political and culinary landscapes.

During the Depression, cultural and technological innovations transported New Orleans flavors throughout the country, generating enthusiasm for quintessential dishes like gumbo far from their source. A June 1, 1936, advertisement in the *New York Times* proclaimed a seemingly impossible meal: "New Orleans Creole Gumbo without traveling 1,345 miles!...Also genuine Sarazac [*sic*] cocktail and New Orleans gin fizz." Diners typically consumed such pleasures on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, and yet now they needed to go no farther than Sazarac [*sic*] Restaurant at 112 Greenwich Street in New York City. Such an advertisement testified not just to the skills of the "gifted Creole cooks" in the kitchen but also to the presence of diners in search of New Orleans fare.<sup>6</sup> "Menu-card traveling toward Southern cookery is easily done in New York," another 1936 *Times* article declared. "Batter cakes and molasses pie have devotees who have never been south of the Mason-Dixon line except via menu card." Novel culinary experiences were cheaper than a vacation during these Depression days and the need for savvy chefs seemed to exceed supply. "Tuskegee Institute in Alabama is training African-American men in Southern cooking," the author explained, "to answer post-Prohibition demand for fine dining with a regional flair." Northern diners relied on educated chefs of color to create dishes

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<sup>6</sup> Classified advertisement for Sazarac [*sic*] Restaurant, *New York Times*, June 1, 1936, 3.

that evoked a geographic escape without the cost of a train ticket. For authentic southern cooking in Manhattan, the writer specified, “Negro cooks are the rule.”<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to advances in canning and refrigeration, in certain cases, New Orleans food actually could make the trip from the Mississippi delta up north and the technological feat of its transportation also helped excite consumers about Creole cuisine. Listings in the *New York Times* in 1938, 1940, and 1941 announced that shoppers could now buy canned New Orleans gumbo, straight from Louisiana and cleverly packaged in boxes that resembled cotton bales or tied together with a bandana. One such advertisement featured an illustration of a smiling figure leaping out of a can labeled “Creole,” like a jack-in-the-box on a spring.<sup>8</sup> This rendering referred to an already well-known stereotype, of the cheerful “mammy” whose face sold pancake mix, coffee, and oranges in the decades following the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> Here, she did not just sell gumbo; she replaced the soup in the can, suggesting that *she* was the authentic essence of New Orleans cooking, mobile and ready for purchase.

Perishable delights of the Crescent City also journeyed north, shuttled on airplanes carrying fruits and fish. “Once we journeyed far to enjoy...pompano – remembered as incomparably delicious at Havana or New Orleans,” recalled *Times* journalist Catherine Mackenzie in 1938. “But that was before Miami was seven hours distant by plane.” Speedy airplanes and efficient refrigeration allowed New York City’s markets to tap a worldwide larder, such that Russian caviar and French wines now seemed commonplace. “The cosmopolitan

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<sup>7</sup> “To the Rescue of Savory Southern Cooking,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1936, SM 14.

<sup>8</sup> Gene Slate, “Adventures in Food in the Creole Country,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1938, 142; Kiley Taylor, “Victuals and Vitamins,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1940, 114; Jane Holt, “News of Food,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1941, 11.

<sup>9</sup> See Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2008); and Maurice M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

variety of [the New Yorker's] menu...is already an old story," Mackenzie reflected.<sup>10</sup> Whether traveling by menu or market, the 1930s restaurant diner or home cook with an appetite for New Orleans cuisine did not need to venture very far at all.

Louisiana-based Godchaux Sugars recognized the profitable potential in making food an edible ambassador of New Orleans and identified grocers and housewives as the critical pair to help them do so. In a marketing booklet produced for "the grocers of America" around 1940, Godchaux led grocery store owners through a fictional conversation that could only logically end in an agreement to sell Godchaux sugar (*fig. 5.1*). "What city is best known for good food?" demanded the booklet's narrator, depicted as a French chef. "Right! It's New Orleans!...But most folks in your town can't come to New Orleans. So let's bring famous New Orleans dishes to them!" As the booklet illustrated, Godchaux sugar, refined in Louisiana from Louisiana cane, would combine nearly effortlessly with pecans to make the city's trademark sweet, the praline. "Eighty-thousand women have written in for Godchaux's cook book," the narrator claimed. "More proof women want the Creole specialties you can give them." Along with recipe cards for "Creole Pecan Pralines" and "Pain Perdu Creole," Godchaux mapped out a counter display of sugar, pecans, and cinnamon that would place all required ingredients within easy reach of the shopping housewife (*fig. 5.2*).<sup>11</sup> Such a diagram functioned as a script for action, delineating the re-creation of a specific New Orleans dish, similar to the way that recipes and menus dictated movements of production and consumption in a home kitchen or restaurant dining room. Authentic New Orleans foods could be enjoyed anywhere, these sources claimed, whether the housewife wanted to boil sugar for pralines or reheat canned gumbo in a pot.

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Mackenzie, "Fresh Food by Plane Delights the Gourmet," *New York Times*, February 13, 1938, 136.

<sup>11</sup> "Godchaux Sugar Presents a New 'Sell-Idea' for the Grocers of America," Godchaux Sugars, ca. 1940, Vertical Files: Godchaux Sugar, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

What city is best known for good food

**?**

Right! It's New Orleans!  
(The Crescent City---Home of Godchaux Sugars)



500,000 PEOPLE COME TO NEW ORLEANS EVERY YEAR TO SEE AND **TO EAT!**




Visitors enjoying Creole Dishes in a New Orleans Restaurant

**BUT**



Most folks in your town can't come to New Orleans

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**SO**



Let's bring famous New Orleans dishes to them!

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO MAKE CREOLE DISHES

IT'S SO EASY! I'LL BUY THE INGREDIENTS RIGHT HERE

GIVE ME GODCHAUX EXTRA FINE AND GODCHAUX BROWN!

**IT CAN HAPPEN HERE!**

Figure 5.1. Courting grocers with this marketing booklet, Louisiana-based Godchaux Sugars promised to serve as an ambassador of Creole cuisine to American housewives. "Godchaux Sugar Presents a New 'Sell-Idea' for the Grocers of America," ca. 1940, Vertical Files: Godchaux Sugar, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

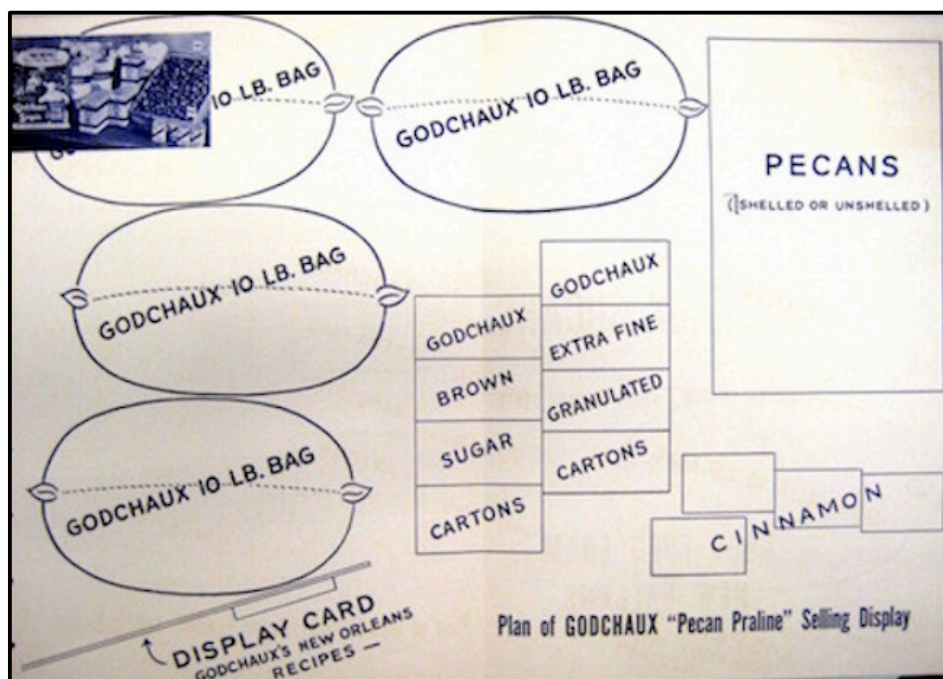


Figure 5.2. Godchaux Sugars mapped out a grocery counter display of Louisiana’s most famous ingredients – sugar and pecans – to allow the housewife a virtually effortless assembly of pralines. The company targeted grocers and housewives as the key pair to help spread Creole flavors throughout the country. “Godchaux Sugar Presents a New ‘Sell-Idea’ for the Grocers of America,” ca. 1940, Vertical Files: Godchaux Sugar, NOPL.

Women food writers possessed a special authority in efforts to evangelize Creole cuisine and promote products like Godchaux sugar because their words reached the many thousands of female consumers who shopped and cooked for their families each day.<sup>12</sup> “The best native dishes are those Creole specialties cooked up in New Orleans,” the *Times-Picayune* reported proudly in March 1950. Such a declaration came not from a renowned chef, but Clementine Paddleford, editor of *This Week* magazine. During a recent trip to the Crescent City Paddleford had dined at the Corinne Dunbar restaurant with five other women food editors, who represented syndicated presses and major newspapers from multiple cities. “The editors ‘yummied’ out loud...as they

<sup>12</sup> Kimberly Wilnot Voss characterized American newspapers’ women’s pages as deeply embedded in local communities and therefore more accurately reflective of regional eating habits than most cookbooks. Most newspapers abolished women’s pages by the 1970s, largely due to the calls of feminists like Gloria Steinem, who protested the pages’ culinary and housekeeping advice as “‘ghettos’ for women.” Voss, *The Food Section: Newspaper Women and the Culinary Community* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 4.

dipped into a lake crab bouillon,” the journalist recounted with excitement.<sup>13</sup> Upon returning home, the women translated their delight into articles and recipes in newspapers around the country. New Orleans boosters anticipated that their words would then convert to dollars and cents from diners inspired to purchase Creole ingredients or book a vacation to the Crescent City.

The ripple effect that pushed content throughout women’s pages could be noted in an April 28, 1950, *Dallas Morning News* article titled, “Creole Cookery Deserves Wider Use Throughout U.S.” Less than one month later, *The Oregonian* followed with a piece titled, “Creole Cookery is Tasty.” The articles shared similar writing, as both honored Louisiana cuisine’s “delicate touch of the French, the spiciness of the Spanish, the ingenuity of the Negro and the earthiness of the American Indian.” The close paraphrasing present in the *Oregonian*’s article suggested that Nancy Morris, the food editor, likely drew from other syndicated women’s pages for inspiration.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Paddleford’s single meal in March 1950 at the Corinne Dunbar restaurant, with six diners present, may have resulted in literally thousands of women consumers reading the praises of Creole cooking.

While the rising visibility and mobility of Creole cooking intrigued eaters throughout the country, the cuisine’s increasingly easy availability served as a double-edged sword to restaurant owners in the Crescent City. The danger in the new nearness of New Orleans food had become apparent as early as 1940, in a description of the “Gay New Orleans” village at the World’s Fair in New York City. “Probably closer to the New Orleans of your imagination than the real city is Gay New Orleans at the Fair,” *Times* journalist Kiley Taylor reported. “Pleasant it is to sit...before the pillared Southern mansion which is the New Orleans restaurant and be served

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<sup>13</sup> “Creole Specialties Best Native Dish, Says Expert,” *Times-Picayune*, March 2, 1950, 16.

<sup>14</sup> “Creole Cookery Deserves Wider Use Throughout U.S.,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 28, 1950; Nancy Morris, “Creole Cookery is Tasty,” *The Oregonian*, May 19, 1950.



such authentic Creole dishes as gumbo.” Such a description called to mind enthusiastic reviews of the three-dimensional stereograph, popular a half-century earlier, which could facilitate a seemingly realistic trip to the Colosseum from the comfort of the viewer’s parlor. This simulated, polished New Orleans at the Fair was likely better than the authentic thing, Taylor suggested, in that it met the visitor’s imagined expectations.<sup>15</sup> A mere subway trip could reward the New Yorker with decadent sensory pleasures: “The shrimps, large ones, are folded into a smooth sauce in which are combined onion, paprika, olive oil, vinegar, celery, pepper and mustard.”<sup>16</sup> Diners measured their pleasure against an idealized standard, Taylor’s article conveyed, and the Fair’s offerings mapped perfectly onto their fantasies.<sup>17</sup> Tuskegee-trained chefs, Godchaux sugar at the supermarket, and pillared mansions in Queens made it less and less necessary for American diners to travel to New Orleans to sample its famed cuisine. From the perspective of

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<sup>15</sup> Umberto Eco chronicled his 1975 “journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.” He discovered a visit to New Orleans to be the optimum setting in which to gauge the disappointment involved in encountering reality after enjoying a fabricated fake. He explained, “When, in the space of twenty-four hours, you go (as I did deliberately) from the fake New Orleans of Disneyland to the real one, and from the wild river of Adventureland to a trip on the Mississippi, where the captain of the paddle-wheel steamer says it is possible to see alligators on the banks of the river, and then you don’t see any, you risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don’t have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can.” Mid-century New Orleans food producers, restaurant entrepreneurs, and writers were masters at fabricating an edited, enchanting culinary history that delighted tourists. Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 8, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Kiley Taylor, “Victuals and Vitamins,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1940, 98.

<sup>17</sup> On consumers’ persistent desires to experience a romanticized, imagined Old South in a variety of media, see Martyn Bone, Brian Ward, and William A. Link, eds., *Creating and Consuming the American South* (University Press of Florida, 2015); Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Rebecca Cawood McIntyre, *Souvenirs of the Old South: Northern Tourism and Southern Mythology* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Culture Through a Transatlantic Lens* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

New Orleans entrepreneurs, however, booked hotel rooms were specifically becoming more and more necessary, as the economy pivoted from World War II manufacturing to tourism.<sup>18</sup>

Within that economic context, postwar New Orleans newspapers began to exhibit a more chauvinistic defense of the city's food, as a singular cultural feature that must not be insulted or tainted. New Orleans journalists widely snubbed food writer and critic Duncan Hines when he rejected the city's well-loved "Creole coffee" during a 1954 visit. "Hines likes almost any kind of food. Almost," an *Item* reporter related, with a manipulative set-up. "I don't like any kind of varmint, like rattlesnakes, possums, or snails," Hines reportedly detailed. "And he doesn't like the pride of New Orleans – chicory coffee," the journalist divulged. Hines's visit, and his disastrous breakfast order of one sweet roll and "pure coffee," as opposed to the city's chicory blend, made news in multiple publications.<sup>19</sup> New Orleans writers lambasted Hines's rejection of this Creole culinary trademark with as much enthusiasm as they had promoted Paddleford's love of New Orleans cooking. The New Orleans press kept a tight watch on visiting culinary experts, expecting nothing but praise.

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<sup>18</sup> The conclusion of World War II also spurred a major migration of African-American New Orleanians westward, toward California, eager to leave the Jim Crow South behind. See Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 49. On the substantial community of black New Orleanians that developed in Los Angeles, see Lynell George, "Who's Your People?" *LA Weekly*, November 13-19, 1992, 18-22, 24-28. For a study of earlier migrations of Louisianians of color out of the state, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1976). On the importance of tourism to the twentieth-century New Orleans economy, see Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Mark J. Souther, *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); and Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Second only to gumbo, twentieth-century New Orleans culinary texts and travel guides lauded "Creole coffee" as the city's next favorite gastronomic delight. In his 1945 dining guide, local radio personality Scoop Kennedy wrote, "To drink Northern coffee in New Orleans is like bringing a bathtub to the beach. Perhaps the only out-and-out dogmatic statement in this book is this: a barrel of Northern coffee is equal to but not quite as good as one cup of French drip with chicory." Mary Crossley, "Gourmet's Order: Sweet Roll, Coffee," *New Orleans Item*, February 1, 1954; Scoop Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Bantam House, 1945), 75.

Prominent figures like the head of the National Restaurant Association (NRA) encouraged such offensive and defensive press coverage of the New Orleans culinary scene as a savvy means to protect the city's singular brand. During a visit to New Orleans, NRA President Andrew J. Crotty, Jr., professed that the city's savvy culinary marketing was making it the envy of restaurants and hotels in other regions. "New Orleans has done such a 'beautiful job in popularizing its Creole cuisine,'" the *Times-Picayune* reported him saying, "that other sections are trying to achieve the same national and international fame for their dishes." Hailing from Boston, Crotty planned to copy New Orleans's food-related advertisement methods to excite faraway eaters about Beantown's clam chowder and lobsters. "'What we're after with our 'Yankee cooking' ... is the same thing you're after with Creole cooking, and that is – tourists.'"<sup>20</sup> Crotty's comment revealed the constructed and profitable nature of calling New Orleans cooking a cuisine – with the distinguished adjective "Creole" to describe it – and proclaiming its delights to the masses.

For many white New Orleanians, however, professing an affinity for Creole food and declaring that it must be consumed in New Orleans was not just a public exercise for newspaper reporters or the chief of the National Restaurant Association. Perceived slights or threats to Creole food, being New Orleans's cultural cornerstone, by association called into question basic conceptions of regional and even racial identity, when the definition of the latter was rapidly changing. A set of private letters and recipes provided a revealing window onto the degree to which the notion of "Creole" cuisine mattered in the private kitchens of white New Orleanians.

On August 13, 1951, Hermann B. Deutsch, a daily columnist for the *New Orleans Item*, one of the city's most prominent newspapers, alleged that an act of cultural – and culinary – blasphemy had occurred. Addressing his column to Campbell Soup Company, he wrote, "Where

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<sup>20</sup> "Emphasis on Creole Cuisine is Example to Other Cities," *Times-Picayune*, March 20, 1950.

in hell do you get ‘Creole gumbo SOUP?’....When you call your chicken-with-vegetable soup a Creole gumbo, you’re as wrong as a heart in the hole with four spades showing.”<sup>21</sup> Two days earlier, Campbell’s had run a full-page ad in the *Saturday Evening Post* for its new canned product. Under illustrations of a steamboat paddling the Mississippi by moonlight and a bowl of gumbo studded with okra, the ad’s text proclaimed, “One taste...and you’ll know why the Creole recipes of Old New Orleans are so famous.”<sup>22</sup> Such a claim made Deutsch fume. What irritated him most, however, was the image at the bottom of the page. “That picture of a Negro mammy,” he wrote:

She’s seated on the hearth of such a fireplace as never was in New Orleans...while beside her is a basket containing, as nearly as I can make out...two bunches of radishes...and a leaf of...tobacco. If that’s what she’s about to make a ‘gumbo soup’ out of, I’ll take a New England boiled dinner, which is the ultimate low of edibilia.<sup>23</sup>

Deutsch took offense at the new soup’s mysterious ingredients and the imagery and text that the company used to advertise the product to a national audience. Such transgressions were not just false, he claimed; they were downright “impious.” Deutsch predicted that New Orleanians stood ready to enlighten Campbell Soup Company as to the makings of an authentic Creole gumbo, and he promised a prize of \$5.55 to the authors of the two best gumbo recipes he received. Deutsch’s readers responded. Some letters came typewritten on personal or business letterhead, others in neat cursive on lined notepaper, and still others arrived scrawled in messy script, stained with splatters of grease.<sup>24</sup> As the writers described how they made gumbo in their own

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<sup>21</sup> Hermann B. Deutsch, “Gumbo SOUP!” *New Orleans Item*, August 13, 1951.

<sup>22</sup> “A Tradition in Old New Orleans,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, August 11, 1951.

<sup>23</sup> Deutsch, “Gumbo,” *Item*, August 13, 1951.

<sup>24</sup> Deutsch kept about twenty submissions of readers’ gumbo recipes in his files. It is possible that he received more than those twenty and decided not to save them. In 1950 and 1955, Deutsch sponsored similar recipe contests for crawfish bisque, potlikker, and gumbo z’herbes, which resulted in several dozen additional letters and recipes. These submissions demonstrated a similar degree of social and geographic variety among letter-writers, as well as parallel

kitchens, they declared that they shared Deutsch's annoyance with what they considered to be a gross misrepresentation of a treasured regional dish.

To Deutsch's readers, it was far from insignificant that Campbell's had chosen to can gumbo, as opposed to, perhaps, turtle soup. A stew containing chicken, sausage, crabs, shrimp, and/or oysters, thickened with okra or filé, a powder made from dried sassafras root, and served with rice, gumbo had long stood as the hallmark of the city's cuisine. In his 1885 *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans*, William H. Coleman proclaimed gumbo to be "the great dish of New Orleans....There is no dish which at the same time so tickles the palate, satisfies the appetite...and costs so little as a Creole gombo."<sup>25</sup> The *Picayune's Creole Cook Book*, first published by the *Picayune* newspaper in 1900 and considered by many to be the encyclopedia of Creole cuisine, characterized gumbo as both timeless and original. "Indeed, the word 'evolution' fails to apply when speaking of Gumbo," the author declared, "for it is an original conception, a something sui generis in cooking, peculiar to this ancient Creole city alone."<sup>26</sup>

Gumbo persisted as important to New Orleans cooks and eaters through the decades because its ingredients uniquely embodied the city's history and population. Combining flour and fat to make a roux was a French technique. Okra was an ingredient of African origin. Choctaw Indians were renowned for selling sassafras in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans marketplace. Accordingly, scholarly and popular writers in New Orleans

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emotional attachment to these "Creole" dishes. See Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, and Box 6, Folder 6: Recipes, bisque, Hermann Bacher Deutsch papers, 1827-1970, Manuscripts Collection 130 (hereafter cited as HBD), Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC).

<sup>25</sup> William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map. Illustrated with many original engravings; and containing exhaustive accounts of the traditions, historical legends, and remarkable localities of the Creole city* (New York: William H. Coleman, 1885), 91.

<sup>26</sup> *The Original Picayune Creole Cook Book*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Orleans: Times-Picayune Publishing Company, 1945), 26.

repeatedly reached for “gumbo” as a local metaphor to characterize Louisiana society as similar to, yet still slightly distinctive from, the famous American “melting pot.” Creole gumbo represented the city’s people and their history both literally and figuratively.<sup>27</sup>

Accordingly, *Item* readers rebelled at Campbell’s attempt to can a gumbo and call it “Creole.” Mrs. Jeanne R. Franklin wrote to Deutsch, “I, too, have often fumed over Campbell’s misuse of that sacred word Gumbo – and labeling it Creole, yet!....This dish is the one reason I’ll never move North.” She added, “P.S. In case you’re sending a petition to Campbell’s – please add my name – Those Yankees shouldn’t be allowed to get away with this fraud.”<sup>28</sup> In another letter, Ida Honold, a public grade school teacher, concurred. “It is about time for someone to call the hand of those people who foist so-called Southern dishes upon the unsuspecting public who disgustingly cry out: ‘Is this the famous GUMBO of the South!!!’ No, no, it is not even a kissing cousin of our delicious Creole Okra Gumbo,” she declared. “More power to you...for rising on your hind legs and challenging the Campbells of New Joisey.”<sup>29</sup>

In these two letters, the writers seemed certain that there existed such a thing as a Creole gumbo and equally certain that Campbell’s had gotten it wrong. But their letters, and those that accompanied them, emphasized the degree to which there existed neither a common understanding of what “Creole” meant, even in New Orleans, nor a standard recipe for Creole

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<sup>27</sup> In 1916, Louisiana Creole writer Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson wrote, “The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition [of Creole], and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique.” Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana: Part I,” *Journal of Negro History* (October 1916): 367. Also see Rien T. Fertel, “‘Everybody Seemed Willing to Help’: *The Picayune Creole Cook Book* as Battleground, 1900-2008,” in *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, eds. John T. Edge, Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Jeanne A. Franklin to Deutsch, no date, Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, HBD, LaRC.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Ida Honold to Deutsch, August 29, 1951, Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, HBD, LaRC.

gumbo. Whereas Franklin and Honold clearly equated “Creole” with “Southern,” some writers identified themselves as both Creole and Cajun in the same letter, or as Creole and French.<sup>30</sup>

Recipes called for an enormous range of ingredients, from duck, prairie hen, turkey necks, and veal stew meat, to canned okra and tomatoes. Even the fat used to start the roux differed: ham scraps, lard, bacon, Crisco, oleo, and Snowdrift, a vegetable shortening derived from cottonseed oil, all seemed to work. Of special note, the catsup called for by Mrs. E.A. Bourgeois of Baton Rouge would have seemed a crime to many other gumbo cooks.<sup>31</sup>

If anything, the only unequivocal lesson conveyed by the letters was that a marked variety of people cared enough to write to Deutsch about Campbell’s great cultural sin. Their numbers crossed social and educational classes and stretched over a wide geographic spread.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For example, during his spring 1950 recipe contest for crawfish bisque, Deutsch received an anonymous letter dated March 1, 1950, from “A Creole who loves her crayfish.” The letter concluded with the comment, “This ‘Cajun’ loves her crawfish but is very seldom able to obtain any.” Calling the crustacean a crayfish, versus a crawfish, also often denoted geographic and cultural distinctions. March 1, 1950, Box 6, Folder 6: Recipes, bisque, HBC, LaRC.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to adding catsup to her gumbo, Bourgeois clarified that she in fact loved the taste of Campbell’s Gumbo Soup, such that she added it to many of her stews. Bourgeois also told Deutsch that never began her gumbo with a roux, finding it unhealthful. She explained, “I’m not a user of rouxs for its [*sic*] indigestible and many folks ru the times it’s used.” Letter from Mrs. E.A. Bourgeois to Hermann B. Deutsch, August 16, 1951, Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, HBD, LaRC.

<sup>32</sup> I judged differences in social and educational classes among letter writers by a variety of factors. The 1940 federal census provided information on the educational background of readers who submitted gumbo recipes, plus information on where they lived and whether or not they owned or rented their houses. Cross-checking these listings with city directories of the late 1940s and early 1950s noted readers’ occupations and those of their spouses. Frequent misspellings in letters suggested a shorter educational background than those with no errors. Following are examples of three writers who hailed from very different circumstances within the city. The 1949 New Orleans City Directory listed the profession of Mrs. Jeanne R. Franklin’s husband, Warren, as an employee of International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and noted that the couple lived Uptown, on Magazine Street. Mrs. George T. Guedry, who wrote to Deutsch with a gumbo recipe on August 24, 1951, lived at 2831 North Tonti Street, in the Ninth Ward, immediately adjacent to the city’s downriver artery of railroad tracks. The 1940 federal census listed her as having completed one year of high school. Her husband worked as a pressman at Wholesale Bed Company. Louise Guyol, a noted journalist and novelist who published several novels in the 1920s and worked as an editor for *Atlantic Monthly*, among other publications, wrote to Deutsch with a recipe for gumbo z’herbes on June 10, 1955. Typewritten on her own letterhead, the letter arrived with a return address of a massive mansion, likely a widows’ home, on Prytania Street, one of the city’s most sumptuous avenues in the Garden District. Guyol noted that the best gumbo z’herbes she ever made was not in New Orleans but in Newport, Rhode Island, “where I would gather the allotted 7...green things from the garden of Julia Ward Howe’s daughter.” These letters hailed from the kitchens of middle-, lower-, and upper-class white New Orleanians, respectively, who all nevertheless cared equally strongly about their Creole recipes to write to Deutsch. U.S. Census Bureau, 1940 United States Federal Census; New

Letters came to Deutsch from all over New Orleans – from the Paul Morphy Chess Club, on tony St. Charles Avenue, to the newly suburbanizing sector of Mid-City, to more humble addresses in the French Quarter and Irish Channel. They arrived from far outside of New Orleans, too – from Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, and towns on the Mississippi Gulf Coast – showing not just the geographic reach of people who made Creole gumbo, well into Cajun country, but also the degree to which the readership of the *New Orleans Item* stretched. While some recipes landed on Deutsch’s desk rife with misspellings, with several writers rendering the French “roux,” as r-u-e, others were carefully precise, as in the case of Blanche Copping, who scolded Deutsch, “By the way, you omitted the accent...in filé.”<sup>33</sup> Notably, the one arena in which the letters appeared homogeneous was race. Among the names that could be cross-referenced in the 1940 federal census and 1951 city directories, everyone who submitted a Creole gumbo recipe was white. Such a detail was far from insignificant.

In the mid-twentieth century, the relationship between race and political and cultural privilege in New Orleans wavered in a state of greater flux than in any era since the postbellum period. From the seventeenth century onward, Louisianians had evolved a notoriously complex vocabulary to distinguish between enslaved people, manumitted or free men and women of color, colonized indigenous people, colonizers born in Louisiana, the Caribbean, Europe, or elsewhere in America, and the offspring of their various combinations. Prior to the Civil War,

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Orleans, Louisiana, *City Directory*, 1949; Letter from Franklin to Deutsch, no date; Letter from Mrs. George T. Guedry to Deutsch, August 24, 1951; Letter from Louise H. Guyol to Deutsch, June 10, 1955, Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, HBC, LaRC.

<sup>33</sup> Blanche Copping won Deutsch’s contest for filé gumbo. New Orleans resident Mrs. [Lucille] Roberts won the contest for okra gumbo. In delivering Roberts’s recipe, Deutsch described her as a “Creole-for-generations-back housewife,” who was “great-granddaughter of a New Orleans judge, whose father migrated to the Louisiana colony from France.” Deutsch honored a very narrow mid-century definition of “Creole” by bestowing his prize upon a contestant with verifiable ties to the state’s French colonial history. Letter from Mrs. J.C. Copping to Hermann B. Deutsch, August 20, 1951, Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, HBD, LaRC; Deutsch, “Gumbo Winners,” *New Orleans Item*, September 10, 1951.



Louisiana society divided along three primary channels: whites, free people of color, and slaves.<sup>34</sup> But on July 13, 1873, the francophone newspaper *Le Carillon* instructed its readers, “The time has come...one must be either WHITE or BLACK, that each person must decide for himself. There are two races here: one superior, the other inferior....Their separation is *absolutely* necessary.”<sup>35</sup> Such an imperative conveyed the novelty and highly constructed nature of only two identifiers – white or black – descending on a society that had long relied on far more nuanced language.

As postbellum whites devised an elaborate system of Jim Crow segregation, guidebooks authors, journalists, and local historians invented the notion that “Creole” signified “purely white,” though the term had originally served as a marker of nativity and language but specifically *not* skin color.<sup>36</sup> In his 1893 *New Orleans Guide*, historian James S. Zacharie declared, “Strangers often make a great error in supposing that the Creole population is a mixed race of whites and blacks.”<sup>37</sup> When Zacharie and others denied that people of color were creole,

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth R. Aslakson, *Making Race in the Courtroom: The Legal Construction of Three Races in Early New Orleans* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> As cited in Virginia R. Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 291.

<sup>36</sup> On the changing definitions of “Creole” throughout Louisiana history, see Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: A Primer on Francophone Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Sybil Kein, ed., *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); and Domínguez, *White by Definition*.

<sup>37</sup> Scholars note that, paradoxically, at the same time that white New Orleanians began to insist on a completely white definition of “Creole,” they also increasingly refused to identify themselves as Creole, fearing any hint of so-called tainted blood. Thus, they simultaneously defended and marooned the word, leaving it to be rediscovered by the twentieth-century tourism industry as a romantic and historical adjective. Such a perspective was not the case for New Orleanians of color, many of whom continued to identify proudly as Creole to denote their deep-rooted lineage in the city. In 1886, New Orleans native George Washington Cable wrote, “The term [Creole] was adopted by – not conceded to – the natives of mixed blood, and is still so used among themselves....There seems to be no more serviceable definition of the Creoles of Louisiana than this: that they are the French-speaking, native portion of the

they tried to sever them from New Orleans's native culture: its history, music, language, and cuisine.<sup>38</sup> That cultural violence belonged to a larger project to deny people of color the social and political benefits associated with whiteness, a task undertaken in many American places.<sup>39</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, white New Orleanians renewed the fantasy that "Creole" meant "white" because it allowed them to imagine that they retained exclusive authority in the profitable realm of "Creole" culture and cuisine, even if the social and political benefits associated with whiteness were eroding. New Orleans newspapers reported warily on national-scale integration efforts led by the Young Women's Christian Association, corporations like General Motors and Lockheed Aircraft, President Truman, and the armed forces. Three years before the *Brown v. Board* ruling, local African-American parents and A.P. Tureaud, a prominent attorney of color fought to integrate city public schools. In the face of protests by the Orleans parish school board that integration would constitute a "departure from tradition and custom" that would cause "chaos and confusion," Tureaud promised to file suit against the state board of education on the grounds that school segregation violated the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>40</sup>

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ruling class." Other late nineteenth-century writers who weighed in on Creole's racial meaning included local historian Charles Gayarré and traveling journalist and writer Lafcadio Hearn. James S. Zacharie, *New Orleans Guide, with Descriptions of the Routes to New Orleans, Sights of the City Arranged Alphabetically, and Other Information Useful to Travelers; also, Outlines of the History of Louisiana* (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1893), 176; Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 163-166; and Cable, *The Creoles of Louisiana* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), 41-42.

<sup>38</sup> In nineteenth-century New Orleans – as well as the twentieth century, I suggest – the simple word "Creole" became a powerful tool wielded for purposes of inclusion or exclusion. Shirley Elizabeth Thompson argued, "The term *Creole* displayed an impressive elasticity, taking on a variety of forms to fit a range of individual and communal needs." Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> See Angela Jill Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2015); and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> "YWCA for Inclusion in Association Life," *Times-Picayune*, March 6, 1946, 7; "Advisory Group for Integration," *Ibid*, December 3, 1950, 28; "Negro Job Plan Given Approval," *Ibid*, November 17, 1951, 16; "New Plea to End Segregation Set," *Ibid*, November 28, 1951, 38; "HST Again Urges Action on Rights," *Ibid*, June 14, 1952, 1; "U.S. Segregation in Service Falls," *Ibid*, October 19, 1952, 18.

From the perspective of whites, threats to segregation in places of work, defense, education, and even recreation accelerated in the years following World War II. Spaces associated with food production and consumption, which had become uniquely valuable in modern New Orleans, were surely next.

At the same time, bewilderment about the meaning of “Creole” in relation to food expanded to a national scale, such that New Orleanians who declared themselves to be experts on the state’s cuisine and racial culture found themselves defending both at once. Mobile and novel products like Godchaux sugar and Campbell’s gumbo had accomplished their objective of persuading Americans to be intrigued by mid-century New Orleans’s Creole culture. But outsiders repeatedly expressed confusion about what “Creole” meant.<sup>41</sup> In April 1951, just a few months before Campbell’s advertised its new Creole gumbo, a reader wrote to a Cleveland, Ohio, newspaper to ask, “Will you please explain what a Louisiana creole is?” The columnist responded, “Sometimes the term is applied to persons of mixed Negro and creole blood...and sometimes to any American Negro....In many regions the term indicates a certain excellence of origin and culture.”<sup>42</sup> Definitions of “Creole” as a person of blended ethnic heritage, both white and of color, appeared in syndicated question-and-answer columns of New Jersey and Oregon

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<sup>41</sup> This confusion was nothing new. In the January 1902 edition of *North & South* magazine, printed for railroad travelers, the writer smirked at New Orleans entrepreneurs’ strategy of pronouncing “Creole” foods to be of better quality. He wrote, “Creole names attached to dishes are supposed to be a guarantee of their quality and one is amused to note the different uses to which the word has been put. In the French market one sees...Creole chickens, though it would be a little difficult to have the exact meaning of this explained. Possibly the chickens on this side of Canal street aspire to French or Spanish ancestry and are more aristocratic than the ordinary Louisiana born hen.” “Hotel et Restaurant de Louisiane,” *North & South*, (New Orleans: January 1902), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Flora MacFarland, “Question Box,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 7, 1951, 10.

newspapers, spreading in the same way that adulatory coverage of New Orleans food jumped from one women's page to the next.<sup>43</sup>

Such catholic explanations of the meaning of "Creole" drove certain white New Orleanians into a frenzy. In *New Orleans from A to Z*, a 1951 illustrated guidebook to the city, Ray Thompson insisted, in all capitalized letters, "A Creole is ALL WHITE...The capitalized noun, referring to a person...definitely and without exception refers to the descendants of those noble blooded...Spanish and French colonists."<sup>44</sup> In this frantically defensive definition, "Creole" conveyed a strain of refinement and sophistication that was historical, aristocratic, and European. The term signified purity, quality, and authenticity, he claimed. In short, it was a brand. Campbell's foray into gumbo represented a novel and seemingly dangerous affront because, from the perspective of some New Orleanians, it democratized the Crescent City brand and lessened the privilege of those who fancied themselves at the pinnacle of an exceptional cultural and historical hierarchy. Now, a northern company, a national company, claimed to serve an authentic taste of New Orleans and advertised it with imagery that had been white New Orleanians' stock-in-trade for decades.

In the same era, an explicitly legal – rather than cultural – challenge to whites' claims to the word "Creole" caused additional consternation in New Orleans. In March 1953, a Mobile, Alabama, court ruled that seven-year-old Michael Chestang, Jr., could not attend a white school. Although his mother "was of proven Caucasian descent," the *New Orleans Item* reported, his father possessed "a trace of Negro blood" and the family identified as Creole. Although the boy

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<sup>43</sup> A "Questions and Answers" column in *The Oregonian* declared, "Anything native, and therefore superior, may be called [creole]." "Questions and Answers...by Haskins," *The Oregonian*, June 25, 1952, 19. The same definition, within the same set of questions and answers, appeared in the *Trenton Evening Times*, July 2, 1952.

<sup>44</sup> Ray M. Thompson, *New Orleans, from A to Z: Questions You'll Ask About This City of Charm and its Famous French Quarter...Alphabetically Answered* (New Orleans: The House of the Artists, 1951), 25.

worshipped at white churches, played with white friends, and had been attending a white school, his family's identification as Creole – and their community's understanding that being Creole implied having an ancestor of color – barred Chestang from being considered white. “Much of the trial...centered on that word,” the *Item* explained. “Despite different meanings given the word in other localities...Trial witnesses testified that in Mobile [the word Creole] is applied to a mixed race in which Negro blood is present.”<sup>45</sup>

The court's decision – which paradoxically upheld school segregation by confirming an integrated understanding of the term “Creole” – distressed three New Orleans “writer-historians,” one of whose expertise extended to Creole cuisine. Stanley Arthur, the author of several travel guides and histories of the French Quarter, as well as a 1937 cookbook, *Famous New Orleans Drinks and How to Mix 'Em*, called the ruling “a big mistake.... It's going to make a lot more people believe that ‘Creole’ has something to do with mulatto.” Creole tomatoes and Creole corn were the same as “‘Creole’ Negroes,” Arthur explained. They were products that had originated in Louisiana and were enrolled in the service of, or consumed by, the European Creole “aristocracy.”<sup>46</sup> Arthur's consultation in the matter, and his explanation of his reasoning in culinary terms, demonstrated the ease with which a New Orleans cultural figure could rationalize people of color as consumable objects. From the perspective of white New Orleanians who ascribed to such a restrictive definition of “Creole,” the average American, whether a tourist or a supermarket shopper, had much to learn about New Orleans Creoles and their food.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “High Court Defines an Ala. Creole,” *New Orleans Item*, March 27, 1953.

<sup>46</sup> “Ruling Called Error of Fact,” *New Orleans Item*, March 27, 1953.

<sup>47</sup> In contrast, University of New Orleans history professor Joseph G. Tregle Jr., insisted constantly, for more than thirty years, that “Creole” had nothing to do with race. In 1952, Tregle wrote, “There are few things clung to so tenaciously or taught so vehemently in New Orleans as the doctrine of the Creole....It is abundantly clear that in the 1820s and 1830s ‘Creole’ was generally used in Louisiana to designate any person native to the state, be he white, black, or colored.” Tregle's words failed to penetrate the majority of culinary texts and travel guides that reached

Champions of Creole cuisine and Creole whiteness often found the opportunity to present their opinions to visitors in touristic, food-centric settings. The pleasurable nature of objects and texts like menus and travel guides masked the violent prejudices contained within. A 1953 menu from French Quarter restaurant La Louisiane, which claimed to be “the oldest world famous Créole-French restaurant,” functioned as both an ambassador of Creole food *and* notions of Creole whiteness (*fig. 5.3*). Alongside Crescent City delicacies like Oysters Rockefeller, Gumbo Créole Louisiane, and Café Brûlot, the menu advertised no less than six different items that could be purchased “for home use.” After enjoying a meal in the restaurant, the diner could buy Remoulade, Creole, Mariniere, Marchand de Vin, and Poivre Rouge sauces, as well as Crayfish Bisque Louisiane, in fifteen-ounce tins or jars to bring back to his or her own kitchen. La Louisiane’s creations offered themselves as souvenirs that would spread the chef’s expertise and continue the restaurant experience far beyond the bounds of the Quarter. In addition, the menu itself was a mobile object. Half of the menu’s back cover allowed space for a recipient’s name and address, the return address of La Louisiane, and the message, “This menu is sent to you by: \_\_\_\_\_ who enjoyed eating at La Louisiane.”<sup>48</sup> Folded into quarters and dropped in a mailbox, the menu functioned as a movable advertisement for the restaurant and the city in which it operated.

Finally, and importantly, it arrived pretending to bear a history lesson as well. The “Story of Old La Louisiane,” also on the menu’s back cover, explained, “Just as the Creole himself is

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both New Orleans residents and tourists. Even as late as 1981, Tregle wrote to the editor of a New Orleans newspaper to insist that “Creole” did not mean “white.” As cited in Jeanne Weill, “When is a Creole Not a Tomato?” *New Orleans Magazine*, March 1984, 57-58; Joseph G. Tregle Jr., professor emeritus of history, University of New Orleans, “‘Creole’ in context,” letter to the editor, no source, September 13, 1981, Vertical files: Creole, NOPL.

<sup>48</sup> Menu from La Louisiane, 1953, Menu Collection and Restaurant Memorabilia (hereafter cited as Menus), Louisiana Division (hereafter cited as LA Div), NOPL.

the blend of French and Spanish racial stock...so Créole-French cooking is the subtle blending of the best culinary arts of Europe and Latin America.”<sup>49</sup> Restaurants like La Louisiane conveyed an image of Creole cuisine as a sophisticated, nuanced harmony of European parentage. No hint of Louisiana’s long history of racial conflict or oppression tainted such menus, nor did they acknowledge the role of New Orleanians of color in inventing or preparing the proffered dishes. The excited tourist with a full belly could adhere a stamp to this menu and help sell an imagined history of New Orleans, garnished with Strawberry Brûlot and Trout Amandine, to her friend or family member.

The vacation scrapbook of Mr. and Mrs. John and Helen Abbot, of Andover, Massachusetts, offered an additional example of the sheer banality with which pleasurable,

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<sup>49</sup> Menus are both intriguing and frustrating primary sources for the historian. As Andrew Haley argued, restaurateurs relied on diners to order the dishes that appeared on menus. Unpopular dishes had no place on menus because they earned no profit. Therefore, the historian can interpret menus as texts that could be edited frequently and quickly by restaurant owners and chefs, to mirror diners’ preferences. Cookbooks, in contrast, were often filled with recipes that no cook ever prepared, including perhaps even the contributor. Lynne Ireland warned the critical reader to consider whether cookbooks declared, “‘Here is what we eat’ or ‘Here is what we would have you believe that we eat.’” Ireland – and many others scholars of English, Women’s Studies, and American Studies – argued that cookbooks, especially community cookbooks, are best read not as accurate reflections of historical eating habits, but for subtler clues to the social ideals of a group, the gendered and racialized nature of labor, and the practice of ethnic and regional identities.

While potentially useful, menus can aggravate the historian seeking a precise date of origin. Dates (to the day) often appeared on mid- to late-nineteenth-century hotel menus, as well as the menus from steamships and cruise lines through the early twentieth century. But twentieth-century restaurant menus frequently require a more creative approach. I estimate that the menu from *La Louisiane* can be dated to 1953, or circa 1953, by a seemingly novel dessert featured at the head of the menu: the “La Louisiane Purchase Parfait,” described as “a colorfully delectable dessert and after dinner cordial combined in regal splendor to commemorate the sesquicentennial celebration” of the Louisiana Purchase, which occurred in 1803. Menus can be dated to Prohibition years if they lack alcohol. Others can be dated to World War I, World War II, and the immediate postwar years with mentions of specific food conservation programs or Office of Price Administration price ceilings. I suggest that the historian-oenophile could date fine dining menus to a “no earlier than” year by the restaurant’s wine list, if it can be assumed that a restaurant would not serve a specific vintage of a red Bordeaux, for example, before a particular date. Likewise, it could be possible to date a restaurant menu to before or after the 1960s by its telephone number, when telephone numbers that combined numbers and digits converted to digits-only formats. Menu from “La Louisiane,” New Orleans, LA, 1953, Menu, LA Div, NOPL. On menus, public consumption, and social class in turn-of-the-century New York City, see Andrew Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). On the strengths and pitfalls of cookbooks as historical sources, see Lynne Ireland, as cited in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed. Anne L. Bower (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 10; Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster, eds., *The Recipe Reader: Narratives – Contexts – Traditions* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003); and Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2003).

consumptive experiences shrouded prejudiced messages about Creole culture and whiteness. In January 1953, the couple fled a New England snowstorm for a two-week trip to Coconut Grove, Florida, and New Orleans. In a typed summary of their vacation, John or Helen recounted several sunny days in Florida, including a side trip to Miami “where there were miles of hotels all filled with Jews,” and a turbulent flight to New Orleans on January 20, 1953. For the next three days,



Figure 5.3. This mailable menu from French Quarter restaurant La Louisiane broadcast the flavors of Creole cuisine as well as invented notions of Creole whiteness. Menu from La Louisiane, 1953, Menu Collection and Restaurant Memorabilia (hereafter cited as Menus), Louisiana Division (hereafter cited as LA Div), NOPL.



they dined at La Louisiane and Antoine's and drank Sazerac cocktails at the Absinthe House and Ramos Gin Fizzes at the Roosevelt Bar. After sampling the French Quarter's nightclubs, the writer decreed, "Once is enough, got tired of G-strings."<sup>50</sup> On their scrapbook's black paper pages, they glued a map of the French Quarter, a menu from Antoine's, postcards of the French Market and banana conveyors on the levee, and a cocktail napkin from the Roosevelt Bar. In addition, on the scrapbook's first page they pasted a small booklet titled, "Condensed History of New Orleans for the Tourist," produced by Gray Line Motor Tours, Inc.

Like many other souvenir booklets and travel guides, this slim volume sought to clarify a very specific definition of "Creole" for these visiting Bostonians. "Because of the fact that there are 'Creole negroes,' that is, colored people...whose ancestors as slaves belonged to the Creoles, some uninformed persons have inferred that the term designates Louisianians having a 'touch of the tar brush.' This is entirely incorrect....There never was a nobler or more pure-blooded race than the Creoles."<sup>51</sup> In the book's telling, which was strikingly similar to Stanley Arthur's *Item* interview the same year, people of color could only be mistakenly labeled "Creole" by association with whites, and by their former status as slaves. A 1959 New Orleans vacation scrapbook belonging to a different couple contained a comparable travel guide, pocket-sized and convenient for touring, that expressed the exact same message.<sup>52</sup> Tourists' exposure to the

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<sup>50</sup> "Trip to Coconut Grove, Florida and New Orleans, LA, Jan. 10 to Jan. 25, J.R. Abbot and H.M. Abbot," Box 23, Folder 2, Scrapbook of Trip to Florida and New Orleans, Collection 65, Anthony Stanonis Travel Scrapbook and Diary Collection (hereafter cited as Stanonis 65), Special Collections & Archives, J. Edgar & Louise S. Monroe Library, Loyola University, New Orleans, LA (hereafter cited as Loyola); U.S. Census Bureau, 1940 United States Federal Census.

<sup>51</sup> Gray Line Motor Tours, Inc., "Condensed History of New Orleans for the Tourist," 13, Stanonis 65, Loyola.

<sup>52</sup> A scrapbook that commemorated a couple's 1959 trip to New Orleans featured a similar souvenir booklet, issued by Gluck's Restaurant. The author wrote, "The term 'Creole' is much misunderstood outside of Louisiana, where it is often misinterpreted as meaning persons of mixed blood....The 'Creoles' of Louisiana are the descendants of the best families of France and Spain....'Creole' down here means 'the best!'" "A Condensed History of Old New Orleans," issued by Greater Gluck's, Jos. Fein Jr., President, 10, Box 23, Folder 1: 1959 Vacation / Scrapbook of trip to New Orleans and elsewhere, including postcards, menus, maps, etc., Stanonis 65, Loyola.

consumable pleasures of New Orleans was brief. Menus and travel guides functioned as educational texts, teaching outsiders how to understand the foods – and people – they encountered. Exclusionary lessons about cultural belonging and racial identity lurked among pleasing, seemingly inconsequential objects like postcards and cocktail napkins.

Ambassadorial approaches to the diners and tourists of America, as well as defenses of New Orleans's homegrown Creole identity, unfurled against a backdrop of social transformations even beyond hints of coming integration. New Orleans's food culture was changing, too, during the very years that restaurant owners needed tourists to travel to the city and sample its historic cuisine. Until the early twentieth century, New Orleans had remained unique from other cities for its network of corner stores and public food markets. But the 1919 arrival of Tennessee grocery store Piggly Wiggly and 1946 opening of Schwegmann's, the city's first supermarket, changed that system. "The atomic age is...the quick freeze age," a *Times-Picayune* columnist wrote wistfully in October 1947. "An entire meal may be delivered to your door, frozen, cooked, ready to warm up and serve."<sup>53</sup> To the regret of some and delight of others, the same technological advances that had brought canned gumbo and Russian caviar to New Yorkers in the 1930s threatened to make New Orleans markets similarly efficient and cosmopolitan. A 1953 journalist marveled that the housewife could "visit her super market and buy ready mix cake, complete-in-one package meals and avacodos [*sic*]...or she can shop at the stalls of the French Market."<sup>54</sup> In mid-century New Orleans, old and new co-existed in systems

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<sup>53</sup> "Fresh Food...and Old Bottles," *Times-Picayune New Orleans States Magazine*, October 12, 1947, 147.

<sup>54</sup> "Thanks to Plentiful Food, City Has Educated Palate," *Times-Picayune New Orleans States*, January 25, 1953, 12. For studies of such changes on a national scale, see Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking Press, 2004).

of food production and consumption, even if restaurant menus and cookbooks tended to emphasize the historic.

A March 1953 special section of the *New Orleans Item*, “Tips on Homemaking,” encapsulated this moment of transition from a regional to national economy and food system. The section’s articles and advertisements placed New Orleans squarely within the largest social and cultural trends occurring across the country. Articles pointed to a city whose population was growing and suburbanizing in ways very similar to postwar New Jersey or Illinois. “The New Orleans home is growing larger,” one article pointed out, with a typical new construction featuring three bedrooms instead of two. “Many people might not realize it but the World War II veterans are having larger families than their parents,” one home builder disclosed.<sup>55</sup> America’s now well-known entrance into its baby boom years can be traced in advertisements for bigger houses with new gadgets to fill them.<sup>56</sup> Middle-class white *and* black families were moving out of central New Orleans to developing neighborhoods in Mid-City and Lakefront and the city’s eastern fringes, respectively.<sup>57</sup>

Accordingly, stores touted specifically suburban, rather than urban, accoutrements, such as lawn mowers and aluminum awnings. Advertisements for laundry machines, in particular, such as the “New De Luxe Norge Triple-Action Washer,” which claimed to launder “9 lbs. of clothes in only 7 minutes,” spoke not only to booming families’ spending money but to the bulk of soiled diapers that they needed to wash.<sup>58</sup> A nearly full-page ad for Pap’s Food Store outlined

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<sup>55</sup> “Homes Growing in Size in N.O.,” *New Orleans Item*, March 3, 1953, 18.

<sup>56</sup> On the social and political implications of postwar consumer spending, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Such migrations reached their apex in the 1960s, with court-ordered public school integration. Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 182-183.

<sup>58</sup> Advertisement for Rosenberg’s Furniture Store, *New Orleans Item*, March 3, 1953, 11.

changes in the city's food culture, too. Brands like Godchaux's sugar, French Market coffee, Borden's Creole Cream Cheese, Snowdrift shortening, and Purnell's Pride frozen chicken all came from regional sources. But national products such as Dulany frozen vegetables, Duncan Hines's cake mixes – “a new adventure in good eating” – and Jewel Salad Oil could make cooking in New Orleans like cooking anywhere else.<sup>59</sup> New Orleans was changing in myriad small and large ways that were rendering it less and less singular.

During these decades when New Orleans grew to be increasingly like other American cities, as white New Orleanians pondered a future in which white and black would have no legal distinction, they were nevertheless intent on claiming a continuing cultural exceptionalism that divided along racial lines. Creole cuisine seemed to offer tangible proof to white New Orleanians that they still belonged to a special heritage of culinary knowledge and skill. New laws could allow people of color into public schools, but restaurateurs, historians, and writers would continue to maintain that white Creole New Orleanians had invented and maintained the city's famous cuisine. New Jersey-made gumbo in a can would not suffice. They insisted that tourists come to New Orleans to experience authenticity.

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## **II. Literacy and Spectacle: The Creole Chef as Scholar and Performer**

From the 1930s through 1950s, white New Orleanians who claimed ownership of “Creole” culture emphasized two primary themes in order to assert the authority of white chefs and entice travelers to the Crescent City. First, they prized text as the ideal medium – and literacy as a necessary skill – to preserve, convey, and re-create Creole food and culture. Second, restaurant owners and writers insisted on the spectacular, transporting nature of Creole cuisine as a means to lure tourists to the city. Both of these efforts were fundamentally exclusionary, in that

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<sup>59</sup> Advertisement for Pap's Food Store, *New Orleans Item*, March 3, 1953, 6.

they enabled whites to attempt to deny the influence of African Americans in the kitchen and reserve the most theatrical, impressive qualities of Creole cuisine for white, male chefs.

Promoting literacy and spectacle in relation to Creole food ultimately cloaked white insecurity in the kitchen, however, which had always been the domain of Creoles of color.

When *New Orleans Item* readers attacked Campbell Soup Company in August 1951, their letters communicated a fear of the democratization of Creole culture. But there existed a second chapter to the story in which *Item* readers claimed expertise of authentic Creole gumbo. As previously noted, every reader who submitted a recipe to columnist Hermann B. Deutsch was white. This, however, did not mean that the cooks behind the recipes were white. While the numbers were surely far higher, at least two letters offered clear evidence that African-American women were the true authors and preparers of the recipes that the white letter-writers had submitted under their own names. One particular letter offered an especially clear window onto the distinctly unequal relationship between whites and blacks in the kitchen. On August 23, 1951, Lottie Keife Swift, of Pass Christian, Mississippi, explained to Deutsch, “This recipe is not written professionally as Azalea makes it from an old recipe given her by her mother.... Everyone who eats it (especially Yankees) always ask for a second helping.”<sup>60</sup>

Swift’s casual characterization of Azalea’s gumbo recipe as “unprofessional” revealed a persistent trope in the way that whites had learned to claim authority over Creole cuisine.

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<sup>60</sup> Swift did characterize Azalea as Creole, but indicated a sense of possession of both her and her recipe, writing, “I have a Creole cook.” In this way, Swift’s letter conformed to conventions in which people of color could be classified as Creole, but only in the service of whites. Letter from Lottie Keife Swift to Deutsch, August 23, 1951. Mrs. Richard H. Smith, writing from the U.S. Marine Hospital in New Orleans on August 14, 1951, also entered the recipe of her employee. She wrote, “I am entering the gumbo recipe of my cook, Mary Washington....I watched her make it and tried to get it down as she went along....If this is not the prize winning recipe it is because I have not written it down correctly.” Smith’s letter pointed to the opportunity for inaccuracy and error that existed in the space between Washington’s cooking and Smith’s attempts to translate and transcribe her actions into words. Box 6, Folder 5: Recipes, gumbo, HBD, LaRC. On the work of women domestic employees after the Civil War and dynamics between white employers and black cooks, see Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Journalists and cookbook authors had long portrayed African Americans' culinary skills as magic, resourceful, and intuitive. Swift reported that Azalea's gumbo bewitched everyone, "especially Yankees," into a second helping. Furthermore, Swift classified Azalea's recipe as unprofessional *because* it had been transmitted orally, from one African-American woman to another. This was despite the fact that Azalea was literally a professional, employed by Swift to cook. In Swift's telling, literacy equaled authority. Whites repeatedly used this problematic maxim as a means to exclude African Americans.<sup>61</sup> In this case, Swift excluded Azalea from a cultural pantheon of professional Creole chefs. But this was of course an era in which an emphasis on literacy could have much more overt political consequences, too. Until 1965, whites insisted specifically on literacy to exclude black Louisianians from the polls.

White writers had long depicted people of color in the kitchen as illiterate, with the resulting effect of characterizing their knowledge as both ephemeral and non-academic. An 1898 poem titled "Beaten Biscuit" by Howard Weeden that was reprinted in an Indianola, Mississippi, community cookbook, demonstrated such a perspective:

Of course I'll gladly give de rule  
I meks beat-biscuit by,  
Dough I ain't sure dat you will mek  
Dat bread de same as I...

Well, 'bout de 'grediances required,  
I needn't mention dem,  
Of course you knows of flour an' things,  
How much to put, an' when;

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<sup>61</sup> White denigration of black culture and intelligence on the basis of illiteracy – and blacks' use of literary forms to resist such discrimination – began in the earliest days of the African slave trade. Henry Louis Gates Jr., explained, "The Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write." Gates dated the first anthology of African-American literature to 1845, when *Les Cenelles, Choix de poésies indigènes* was published in New Orleans. Collections of prose and poetry eventually grew to include vernacular forms as well, such as folk tales, sermons, and spirituals. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), xxxviii.

But soon as you is got dat dough  
Mixed up all smooove an' neat,  
Den's when your genius gwine to show,  
To get them biscuit beat!<sup>62</sup>

Typical of plantation tradition writing that depicted white and black subjects in romanticized, antebellum interactions, Weeden's narrator spoke in heavily mediated speech. A baker of color, surely a woman, she directly addressed the reader, seeming to respond to a request for her recipe for beaten biscuits. She agreed to "gladly give de rule," but then omitted what the reader would have considered to be the recipe. "'Bout de 'grediances required, / I needn't mention dem, / Of course you know of flour an' things,'" she acknowledged. The narrator seemed to prattle, skipping from her agreement to share the recipe to a description of mixing and beating the biscuit dough. The poem's humor lay in the fact that, although the narrator assumed the reader to understand the "rule," the reader knew nothing about flour or other required "'grediances," and concluded the poem as clueless as he or she had been when starting it. As dismissive as Weeden's poems were of her subjects, this biscuit baker finished the poem having retained a greater degree of culinary knowledge than the reader.

Portraying African Americans' culinary knowledge as ephemeral – because it was illiterate – underlay the construction of the *Picayune's Creole Cook Book*, New Orleans's seminal culinary text.<sup>63</sup> Producers of the book's first edition in 1900 recognized the skill of African-American female kitchen workers, but, as with Weeden's biscuit baker, declared their

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<sup>62</sup> Maria Howard Weeden went by the first name of Howard. Weeden, *Shadows on the Wall* (New York: M. Stolz and Co., 1898), cited in *Bayou Cuisine: Its Tradition and Transition*, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church (Indianola, MS: 1970), 222. Doris Witt read this poem as a "'primal scene' of recipe exchange," in that the conversation was "pre-textual...[and] precapitalist...No rules are communicated." See Witt, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 55.

<sup>63</sup> On variations between the separate editions of the *Picayune's Creole Cook Book*, see Fertel, "'Everybody Seemed Willing to Help'" in *The Larder*, 10-31.

knowledge to be oral, not textual. The cookbook authors accordingly sought to “gather [New Orleans recipes] from the lips of the old Creole negro cooks...ere they, too, pass away.”<sup>64</sup> When the authors recorded the book’s recipes, however, they made the formulas public and repeatable. This conversion allowed whites to separate blacks from the culinary fruits of their labor and appropriate such knowledge as their own.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, in the *Picayune* cookbook’s sixth edition, published in 1922, the authors revised “Creole negro cooks” in the introduction to read “Creole cooks,” eliminating any possibility that African Americans could be credited with originating New Orleans cuisine.<sup>66</sup> Issued in fifteen editions over the course of the twentieth century, this cookbook enjoyed massive popularity among readers in New Orleans and far away. To thousands of consumers, the book’s authors presented a literal and figurative distance between African Americans and the descriptor “Creole,” if the usage connoted originality or invention. The *Picayune* cookbooks taught that African Americans could cook Creole food. Creoles could cook Creole food. But African Americans could not *be* Creole.

Two cookbooks written by New Orleanian Natalie V. Scott in 1929 and 1931 likewise elaborated on black illiteracy in relation to Creole cuisine. Scott’s 1929 cookbook, *Mirations and Miracles of Mandy*, began with an introduction that referred in tone and language to Weeden’s 1898 poem. ““My madam say she writin’ mah cookin’ down. Lawdy, put me front’ a cookin’

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<sup>64</sup> Introduction, *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1900).

<sup>65</sup> When Mrs. L.E. Bentley won a *Times-Picayune* recipe contest for her “Creole Kidney Hash” in October 1931, she found no shame or complication in acknowledging its source. “When a girl I was a guest in a New Orleans home and the nicest food I ever ate was prepared by ‘Aunt Lizzie,’ a dear fat old negro woman....One of her chef d’oeuvres was Creole Kidney Hash and this is how she told me she made it.” The article’s headline read: “Prize-winning recipe: Creole Kidney Hash, Mrs. L.E. Bentley.” Aunt Lizzie existed as a shadow cook – a detail that gave the recipe context – while the prize and attribution for the dish went to Bentley. “Creole Cookery Extolled as Dishes Are Described,” *Times-Picayune*, October 3, 1931, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Culinary historian Susan Tucker reported this subtle change in her bibliography of New Orleans cookbooks. Tucker et al., eds., *New Orleans Culinary History Group*, “New Orleans Cookbook Bibliography,” accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.tulane.edu/~wclib/New%20Orleans%20Cookbook%20Bibliography%202011.pdf>.



stove, an' I don't needs no prescription,' says Mandy." Mandy worked according to the unwritten knowledge in her head and protested the need for a written "prescription." Or so the book claimed. Mandy was an invention, Scott clarified: a fantastical amalgamation of all the black women who cooked for Scott and her circle of friends. "Mandy, of course, is a composite," Scott divulged. "My own Mandy's name is Pearl....There are the Mandys of all my friends – Mammy Lou, and Phrosine, and Tante Celeste, Venida, Felicie, Mande, Titine, Elvy, Mona, Relie."<sup>67</sup> Scott's phrasing declared a sense of ownership that she and her friends shared of the cooks in their kitchens. The cover of Scott's cookbook showed a kaleidoscopic array of these "Mandys," all the same woman, with identical red *tignons* and starched white collars, their smiles tilted at slightly different angles. Scott acknowledged these cooks as individuals by naming them, and yet she openly blended them all into one "Mandy" for the purposes of this text. They became a single sequence of interchangeable, undistinguishable, cooking women, who reluctantly described their recipes for Scott's eager pen.<sup>68</sup>

Scott's cookbook functioned as a complete catalogue of the stereotypes that white New Orleanians created to disparage cooks of color. According to Scott, Mandy created "miracles" in the kitchen, due not to her exhaustive training or hard work, but her "sixth culinary sense." Such accidental wonders made Scott ponder whether Mandy was related to the "witch doctors of North Africa [who] have a mastery of mental telepathy."<sup>69</sup> In Scott's 1931 cookbook, *200 Years*

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<sup>67</sup> Natalie V. Scott, *Mirations and Miracles of Mandy* (New Orleans: R.H. True, 1929), Introduction.

<sup>68</sup> Scott repeatedly distanced her own voice, as the narrator, from that of the imagined Mandy. At times, the two even differed in their recommendations of a recipe. For example, describing the recipe for "Crab Gumbo à l'Anglais," Scott wrote, "This is a gumbo which Mandy scorns for its simplicity....But – out of her earshot – it can be recommended." In such an instance, Scott doubled her authority over Mandy in presenting the recipe's written formula for the reader and also insisting on its worth, despite Mandy's disapproval. Consistent with Scott's emphasis on Mandy's illiteracy, Scott recommended the gumbo when Mandy was "out of earshot," as Mandy communicated orally, rather than textually. *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction.

of *New Orleans Cooking*, Mandy reappeared. There, Scott avowed Mandy's illiteracy in unambiguous terms, declaring, "The A.B.C.'s of vegetable cookery are well-known to Mandy, though she is often innocent of the alphabetic ones."<sup>70</sup> Scott's cookbooks represented particularly egregious example of the ways in which whites had learned to constrict the authority and deride the intelligence of African Americans in the kitchen. But the hurtful tropes that appeared in Scott's recipes were hardly rare, nor were they destined for a small and local readership.<sup>71</sup> Of the seven New Orleans cookbooks that the 1938 Federal Writer's Project *New Orleans City Guide* recommended to its national readers, two were these cookbooks by Scott.<sup>72</sup>

The equation of literacy with authoritative knowledge of Creole cuisine functioned just as effectively in New Orleans's fine dining restaurants as it did in cookbooks and recipes. Nowhere was this better exemplified than at Antoine's. More than any other establishment, Antoine's restaurant demonstrated a sharp awareness of the profitable importance of amassing a written history of itself and displaying it to customers. Antoine's cultivated a fascination for its own past in a way that emphasized the expertise of its white, French owners. Founded in 1840 by French immigrant Antoine Alciatore, Antoine's claimed to be America's oldest restaurant operated continuously by the same family. Composed of a warren of private and public dining rooms that

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<sup>70</sup> Natalie V. Scott, *200 Years of New Orleans Cooking* (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1931), 122.

<sup>71</sup> Harsh portrayals of African Americans as illiterate could be found in early-twentieth-century travel texts, too. In historian Grace King's introduction to a 1928 city guide, *A Tour of the Vieux Carré*, she announced that texts had become the new voice of authority in matters of New Orleans history and culture. "It is not so long ago...that New Orleans had no other guide book than the traditions narrated by Grandparents and 'black Mammies,'" she began. "But, *tout cela a changé!* the printed letter now represents...the old black 'Mammies' and 'Daddies' and we read what once we listened to; more accurate...but less charming." The conversion from oral tradition to textual history, as described by King, infantilized men and women of color as quaint yet unreliable pieces of local scenery. King, introduction to *A Tour of the Vieux Carré*, by G. William Nott (New Orleans: Tropical Printing Company, 1928), 3.

<sup>72</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *New Orleans City Guide*, 165.

occupied an entire French Quarter block, its kitchens could feed more than 700 diners at once.<sup>73</sup> Proprietors emphasized the business's long history by filling the restaurant's dining rooms with thousands and thousands of *things*: shelves of cookbooks, menus, obscure kitchen gadgets, paintings, and wine glasses sipped by politicians, actresses, and sports stars. In his 1945 restaurant guide, *Dining in New Orleans*, local writer and radio personality Scoop Kennedy described Antoine's as "both restaurant...and exposition, with its hundreds of autographed photographs, its priceless collection of cups."<sup>74</sup> Eating at Antoine's felt like dining in a museum whose collection continued to grow.

Antoine's commemorated its diners' experience of and contribution to its long history with a particular textual object. Dispensing a small card to each customer who ordered the restaurant's trademark creation, Oysters Rockefeller, the restaurant entered the diner into its historical roll of eaters (*fig. 5.4*).<sup>75</sup> Meals are by definition fleeting experiences. Menus dictate an array of possibilities, rather than a record of what a diner ate. This card, though, historicized the ephemeral nature of the meal, translating it into textual form as a written record of a past occasion. At its center, the card displayed an image of proprietor Roy Alciatore tasting the restaurant's one-millionth plate of broiled oysters. The photograph preserved Alciatore in a

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<sup>73</sup> Paul Freedman called Antoine's a "resolutely French" restaurant in a Creole city. Nevertheless, New Orleanian diners frequently characterized Antoine's cooking as "Creole," blurring lines that some culinary professionals sought to keep clear. Freedman, *Ten Restaurants That Changed America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation of W.W. Norton, 2016), no page.

<sup>74</sup> Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Antoine's copied this practice from the Tour d'Argent restaurant in Paris, which gave similar, numbered cards to customers who ordered its famous *Canard à la presse*. A chef assembled this dish in front of diners by compressing the duck carcass in a silver press to extract its blood, which he then used to prepare a sauce. Antoine's adoption of the Tour d'Argent's custom functioned as a textual link to French culinary tradition. Frances Parkinson Keyes featured this dish in her 1948 novel *Dinner at Antoine's*, to be discussed below.

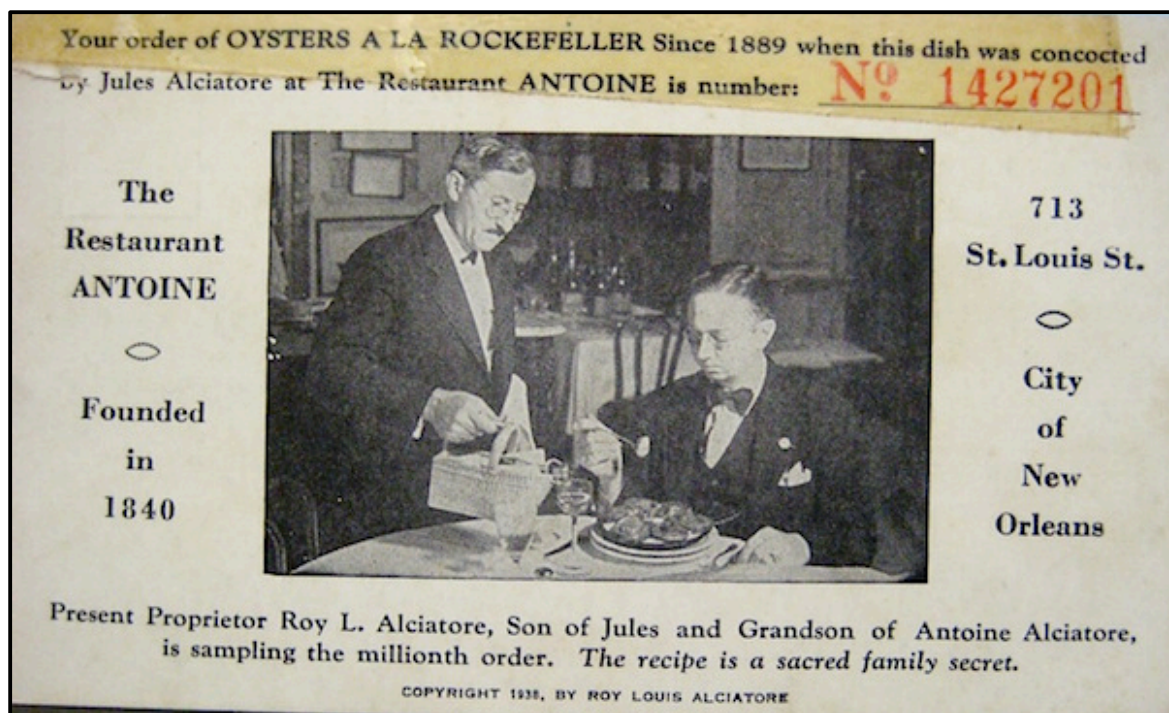


Figure 5.4: French Quarter restaurant Antoine’s issued one of these cards to each diner who ordered Oysters Rockefeller. In doing so, it used a textual object to convert a fleeting moment of consumption into a historical event. Oysters Rockefeller card, no. 1427201, Antoine’s Restaurant, ca. 1938, Folder: Restaurants; New Orleans Print File, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as LaRC).

moment of appraisal, lifting the fork as he smelled its anise-scented butter, felt the tablecloth’s grain under the fingertips of his left hand, and heard the wine fall into his glass. The diner who ordered this 1,427,201<sup>st</sup> order of the dish echoed these actions, the card suggested. Such sensory impressions could be preserved and repeated. Four borders of text surrounded Alciatore’s photograph, grounding this transitory act in multiple forms of historical authenticity. The text pinpointed the restaurant’s physical location within New Orleans and anchored the institution’s founding in a distinct date. Alciatore belonged to a direct lineage of experts, the card declared – he was “Son of Jules and Grandson of Antoine” – that permitted him to know the “sacred family secret” of the recipe.<sup>76</sup> And at the top of the card, mirroring the Alciatores’ genealogy, was the current diner, personified by the number stamped in red. The number imparted chronology. He

<sup>76</sup> Oysters Rockefeller card, no. 1427201, Antoine’s Restaurant, ca. 1938, Folder: Restaurants; New Orleans Print File, LaRC.

ate and drank in relation to the ones who ate and drank before and after him. History embraced the diner who came to Antoine's and the proprietors who guarded its success. This card served as textual proof.

Materials produced to celebrate Antoine's centennial in 1940 likewise demonstrated the specifically literary nature of Antoine's fame. "As a poet blends words to produce a sonnet; [Roy Alciatore] blends ingredients to produce a sauce," writer Meigs O. Frost proclaimed.<sup>77</sup> Frost praised Alciatore in the terms of a scholar, not a chef, and compared him to an architect and a physician in another fawning article.<sup>78</sup> An illustration of writer Irvin S. Cobb emphasized this theme, showing Cobb in need of a rhyming dictionary to accurately pen his "Ode to Creole Cooking" after enjoying a meal at Antoine's. Alciatore was like a poet, these writers decided, whose food in turn inspired authors to write. Antoine's recorded such praise from Frost, Cobb, and many others in its 1940 booklet, *Centennial Souvenir du Restaurant Antoine*, which recounted the restaurant's history and offered a catalogue of the many illustrious diners who had passed through its doors. Names and quotes and dates filled the booklet's pages, concretizing the restaurant's past in a historical text. A photograph of Alciatore taken around 1940 provided a final confirmation of this perspective, as it posed him not in the kitchen but in his office, surrounded by culinary books, looking far more like an academic than a restaurateur. Truly expert New Orleans cooking required literacy far beyond Mandy's "A.B.C.s of vegetable cookery," such sources tried to attest.

Fine dining restaurants and their eminently literate proprietors also forced a particular sense of illiteracy among their diners, in an extra bid to assert the owners' authority. Antoine's insisted on printing its menu entirely in French, which resulted in trouble for one diner in 1943,

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<sup>77</sup> Roy L. Alciatore, *Centennial Souvenir du Restaurant Antoine* (New Orleans: Antoine's, 1940), 19.

<sup>78</sup> Meigs O. Frost, "Gourmets' Shrine," *Times-Picayune*, April 4, 1940.

who heavily marked up his menu as if it were a Latin text to decode (fig. 5.5). Perhaps with the help of a tablemate or waiter, the diner annotated the page with a blue pen, suggesting English descriptions of French dishes. In some cases, his clumsy translations – as of “Mushrooms Fresh Under Cover” for *Champignons Frais Sous Cloche* – likely stopped short of clarifying the

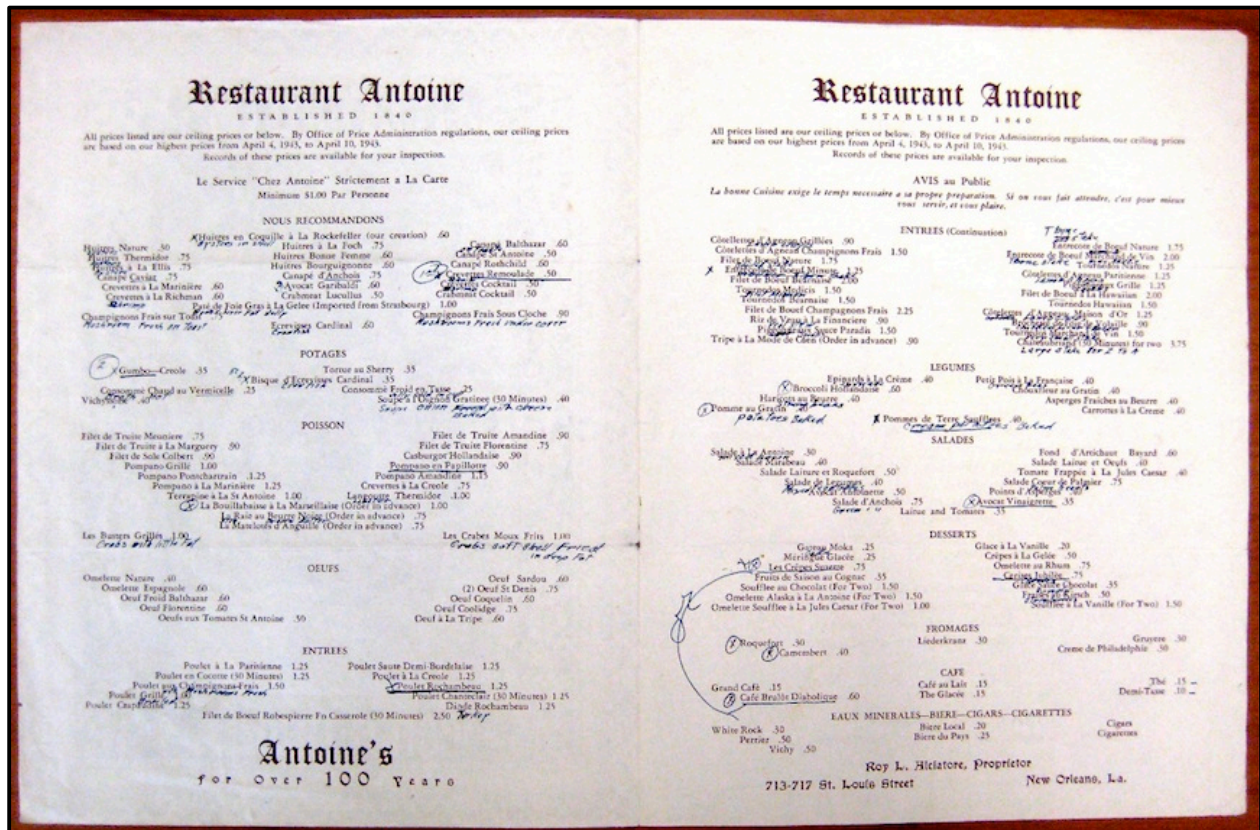


Figure 5.5: A 1943 Antoine’s menu demonstrated the diner’s attempts to translate descriptions of dishes, listed only in French. New Orleans fine dining restaurants forced a sense of illiteracy among its diners, to enhance the proprietors’ exclusive expertise. Menu from Antoine’s, 1943, Menus, LA Div, NOPL.

restaurant’s mystery. A menu from Arnaud’s restaurant, a neighbor and competitor of Antoine’s in the French Quarter, featured a similar pride in its inscrutability. “Some of the names in this menu will probably puzzle you,” the restaurant management wrote in a note to guests. “They are the names of dishes belonging to what we call ‘La Cuisine Classique,’ as expounded by great chefs.... We cannot simplify, alter or change them. The waiters will gladly tell you what they

constitute.”<sup>79</sup> Fine New Orleans cuisine, developed by famed French, Italian, and New Orleanian chefs, as the menu claimed, could only be described, ordered, and served in a particular vocabulary. If the diner could not understand it, the restaurant staff offered to interpret.<sup>80</sup> Together, such elaborate emphasis on the kitchen and restaurant as a literate and literary space cast Weeden’s biscuit cook, Azalea, and Mandy as the unlettered antitheses of the scholarly owner and waiters at Antoine’s or Arnaud’s.

Importantly, cookbooks by the *Picayune*, Scott, and similar sources circulated among New Orleanians and tourists who also honored restaurants like Antoine’s and Arnaud’s, such that polar stereotypes of the illiterate black female cook and scholarly white male chef amplified each other. Poems, newspapers, cookbooks, and menus created a textual system in which whites acknowledged women of color in the kitchen to possess culinary knowledge, but only as the conveyors or *doers* of culinary traditions, rather than their expert inventors or historians.

Restaurateurs, writers, and cookbook authors in mid-century New Orleans relied on a second mechanism in their bid to champion Creole food and attract tourists to a rapidly modernizing Crescent City. They declared Creole cuisine to be a uniquely theatrical event, capable of transporting diners to another era and place, but only in the physical setting of New Orleans. Eating Creole food, especially in a secluded French Quarter courtyard, promised to blur the boundaries between present and past and reality and fantasy. In such settings, New Orleans’s persistent racial and sensory exoticism manifested itself in culinary form. Texts that touted

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<sup>79</sup> Arnaud’s menu, ca. 1950s, Louisiana Menu and Restaurant Collection, LaRC, Tulane.

<sup>80</sup> Another French Quarter restaurant, La Louisiane, showed a bit more flexibility in printing a “Dictionary of Delectable Dishes” for its diners, to help them distinguish between *Dinde Rochambeau* and *Poulet Louisiane*. La Louisiane, “A Dictionary of Delectable Dishes,” ca. 1930s, Menu Collection and Restaurant Memorabilia, Louisiana Division, NOPL.

Creole meals in these terms sought to rebuke claims that Campbell Soup or Godchaux Sugars could let an Indiana housewife re-create New Orleans in her home kitchen.

Scoop Kennedy's 1945 *Dining in New Orleans*, which claimed to be the first guide to the city's restaurants, offered ample contributions to the mythology of Creole cuisine as uniquely transportive. In his review of Courtyard Kitchen, situated close to Bourbon Street, Kennedy wrote, "One moment you are bounding about on one of America's most famous cock-a-hoop streets; the next you are in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century...being served an ambrosial meal by charming Negro girls." The restaurant's allure lay in the food as well as the people, plants, and objects that rendered the entire experience picturesque. "Everything here belongs to another world...the azaleas, the camellias, the banana trees...the flagstones as freshly scrubbed as the waitresses and the kitchen," he marveled.<sup>81</sup> Servers, patio stones, and kitchen walls all impressed Kennedy as aesthetic objects, contributing in equal measure to his feeling of temporal detachment.<sup>82</sup> In this review, as in several others, much of Kennedy's sense of dislocation stemmed from the experience of being served by waiters and waitresses of color. At Marigold restaurant, Kennedy noted, "Negro girls serve the very excellent food. They are taught to serve with the best manners." And at Patio Royal, "The waiters are unobtrusive, efficient Pullman-like colored folks."<sup>83</sup> New Orleans restaurants eagerly played into fantasies of a romanticized,

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<sup>81</sup> Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 51.

<sup>82</sup> Patricia Yaeger argued that the genteel material objects – carpets, dolls, statues – of plantation homes that appeared in the photographs illustrating a particular southern cookbook served to neuter or obscure the deeply violent, human histories of "southern labor" inherent in southern food. Yaeger described this phenomenon as the "redolent, redounding pleasures [that] appeal to the senses and move us back into a dreamy acceptance of a terrifying social habitus." Yaeger's analysis mapped perfectly onto Kennedy's description of his experiences in French Quarter restaurants like Courtyard Kitchen and Patio Royal. Yet whereas the black body remained absent from Lee Bailey's cookbook, omitted from all photographs, forcing Yaeger to plead for readers to remember its role, it was central to Kennedy's enjoyment of New Orleans restaurants. Offensively, women and men of color were forced to play a part in creating the same sense of pleasant amnesia generated by Bailey's cookbook. Yaeger, "Edible Labor," *Southern Quarterly* 30 (winter/spring 1991-1992): 152.

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 79, 86.



antebellum Old South, cultivated by both locals and tourists.<sup>84</sup> In this saccharine re-write of Louisiana history, the servers smiled benevolently, much like the Mandys on the cover of Scott's cookbook. Restaurants like Courtyard Kitchen and Marigold staged what they claimed to be a corrected version of the antebellum South, whose food could be enjoyed without any hint of racial conflict or tension. Such a farce was especially insulting considering that New Orleans restaurants and other public spaces remained firmly segregated. White diners could seek the service of "charming Negro girls," but diners of color were unwelcome.

In theatrical spaces like the patio of Courtyard Kitchen, some of the city's most renowned dishes proved to be explicitly theatrical, too, doubling the sensory appeal of a tourist's visit to the Crescent City. Café brûlot – hot black coffee mixed with orange peel, spices, and flamed with brandy – appeared on the menu of nearly every fine dining restaurant in the city, promising a spectacular climax to every meal. New York food writer Clementine Paddleford recounted the tableside preparation of this concoction at Antoine's in language that emphasized its performative nature. "Watch...Roy make magic with flame," she commanded:

At this point the lights were dimmed that the eyes might feast. The brandy was ignited. Slowly it was poured into the bowl in a flaming cascade. Slowly the ladle was lifted, again the burning essence, blue and orange, spilled to the bowl....Nothing in the room was visible save the illuminated faces of the party at our table. Everywhere the sweet odor of spice....The brûlot ladle dipped, lifted, dipped as the flames died, the air was saturated with exotic odors.<sup>85</sup>

As in a theater, Alciatore lowered the dining room lights so as to attract everyone's attention to his actions. Although there was no question that Alciatore facilitated this performance, expertly creating the beverage for his customers, Paddleford's account uncoupled the coffee and brandy

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<sup>84</sup> On the performative nature of tourist attractions that rely on a "front" and "back" of house, see Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>85</sup> Clementine Paddleford, ed., *Recipes from Antoine's Kitchen: The Secret Riches of the Famous Century-Old Restaurant in the French Quarter of New Orleans*, A *This Week* Magazine Service Booklet (United Newspapers Magazine Corporation, 1948), 14-15.

from his hand, giving the liquid a life of its own. The ladle lifted, the burning essence spilled, and the flames died. An illustration in Kennedy's dining guide showed such a scene at Arnaud's in all its drama. Mysterious clouds and rays of light burst from the waiter's hands. Presumably he stood in front of an urn of café brûlot, but here he seemed more magician than server. The diners' luminous faces, trained on his hands, showed the same hypnotized attraction recounted by Paddleford. This rendering, as well as Paddleford's description, made New Orleans's café brûlot far more titillating than the typical after-dinner coffee. Crescent City restaurants insisted that dining be a ritual, and such theatrics helped entice potential customers.

Whereas some Creole food experiences allowed the diner to blur history with the present and theater with reality, still others allowed for a confusion between fact and fiction, in a very literary sense. When author Frances Parkinson Keyes published her best-selling novel *Dinner at Antoine's* in 1948, New Orleanians reveled in the prominent role she accorded to the city's oldest restaurant. The mystery opened with a dinner at Antoine's, described course by course, as a prelude to the suspicious death of a young socialite in her bed. Yet *Item* book reviewer James Wobbe clarified, "What impressed me most was not the novel, as a novel....Her characters are as real as Joe Blow who runs the barroom down the street from you." In fact, some of the novel's characters delighted readers because they *were* real. "Mrs. Keyes has taken a number of local celebrities and given them a fictional status. Among these: Roy Alciatore, proprietor of Antoine's," Wobbe noted. "These stalk through her pages wearing their own names."<sup>86</sup> Reading *Dinner at Antoine's* thus became an exercise in attempting to sift the true-to-life from the invented. If Alciatore were real, could that also be said of Orson Foxworth, the cosmopolitan fruit magnate? Or Tossie Pride, the simpering, deferential mammy of nearly unintelligible

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<sup>86</sup> James A. Wobbe, "'Dinner at Antoine's' one of Keyes' Best," *New Orleans Item*, November 18, 1948.

speech, falsely accused of the murder and forgotten in her jail cell? By mixing fictional characters with recognizable New Orleanians, Keyes raised the possibility that all the novel's characters could be true.

In the case of both people and food, fact echoed fiction, which echoed fact, as Antoine Alciatore welcomed 300 New Orleans elites on November 18, 1948, to dine on *Aspic de crevettes*, *Canard Mallard*, and *Café Brûlot Diabolique*. In celebration of the book's success, Antoine's served the same meal that Keyes's characters had eaten in her novel.<sup>87</sup> The diners' reenactment of a fictional meal, which had been inspired by Antoine's true menu, resulted in a repast in which the line between reality and invention did not seem to matter.<sup>88</sup> In fact, participants embraced it. As with Kennedy's experience at Patio Royal, or Paddleford's descent into a burning café brûlot, much of the pleasure of eating in New Orleans relied on a transitory sense of abandonment. The food itself, the space in which it was served, and the texts that described and enhanced it all facilitated this transporting quality.

When the Women's Republican Club of Louisiana published a community cookbook, *New Orleans Carnival Cookbook*, in 1951, they wrote for the modern New Orleans housewife. She shopped at the supermarket and crafted graceful kitchen shortcuts with a can opener. But, the authors, hesitated, "New Orleans still has a social season," which demanded festive dinners when silver had to be polished and place cards set. Shortcuts would not do, yet "Most of us are

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<sup>87</sup> "Dinner at Antoine's," *New Orleans Item*, November 19, 1948.

<sup>88</sup> In the introduction to her novel, Keyes thanked Hermann B. Deutsch of the *New Orleans Item* for his work as editorial adviser. "If I had my way," she wrote, "I should refer to him as a collaborator." Deutsch also served as one of only four people, the other three being academics at Tulane and Loyola, to read the entire manuscript of the Federal Writers' Project's 1938 *New Orleans City Guide*, while also writing a daily column for the *Item*. Thus, Deutsch balanced between concurrent projects of fact and fiction, as did Stanley Arthur. As previously noted, Arthur wrote romanticized local histories, travel guides, and a cookbook, before being consulted for his opinion about the legal meaning of "Creole." This chapter suggests the cultural and social damage that could result when notions of a fictionalized Creole past crossed over into realms of journalism and history. Keyes, *Dinner at Antoine's* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc, 1948), viii; Federal Writers' Project, *New Orleans City Guide*, Preface.

our own chief-cooks and bottle-washers,” the writers acknowledged. How could the reader host an elaborate meal if she were the only one in the kitchen? The writers suggested a brief flight of fantasy. “Now we are going to forget all that for one happy page and talk about a dinner party menu with hostess at table and cook in the kitchen.”<sup>89</sup> The sentence was flippant, but it conveyed a specific message. For “one happy page,” the writers invited the reader to imagine an alternate, and better, scenario, in which someone else cooked and served while she dined. This little cookbook contained all of the themes that helped readers in mid-century America become intrigued by Creole cooking. Asserting their expertise over their city’s cuisine, the authors touted New Orleans as the place where “past and present blend[ed] in Epicurean perfection.” They shared their recipes, but ultimately hoped that the volume would spur something more. “Perhaps you may be inspired to come, see, and dine,” they hinted.<sup>90</sup> Texts like this left little room for the voices of African-American cooks, much less respectful acknowledgement of their professional expertise. Nevertheless, their authority marked every Creole meal. A deeper look into mid-century kitchens and texts reveals their presence.

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### **III. Black Creole Chefs and Cooks: Authors, Experts, and Activists**

The 1938 *New Orleans City Guide* suggested one cognitive map of the city to its readers, in which whites sent blacks to swim on separate beaches and dine in restaurants far from the likes of Antoine’s. But *Lena Richard’s Cook Book*, published in 1939, announced an altogether different perspective on New Orleans, in which an African-American woman sounded as the sole voice of artistic, professional authority. Richard became a multimedia kitchen star, but many

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<sup>89</sup> Women’s Republican Club of Louisiana, *New Orleans Carnival Cookbook* (New Orleans: Women’s Republican Club Publications, 1951), 101.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, Foreword.

more New Orleans chefs and cooks of color worked without recognition, underpaid and unsung. Nevertheless, many demonstrated complete security in the knowledge that black New Orleanians made the city's Creole cuisine possible. They showed great pride and creativity in their cooking as they resisted a social and legal system that barred them from eating the food they had cooked in their own restaurants' dining rooms. Both implicitly and explicitly, Creole chefs and cooks of color made the midcentury New Orleans kitchen a political space.

Caterer, cookbook author, teacher, restaurateur, and television personality Lena Richard used white-dominated tools of literacy and spectacle in order to achieve national fame for her food. Born in New Roads, Louisiana, in 1892, Richard's family moved to New Orleans when she was young.<sup>91</sup> She learned to cook alongside her mother, who worked in the kitchen of Alice Vairin. Recognizing Lena Richard as a "child prodigy of the kitchen," as Clementine Paddleford reported, Vairin allowed Richard one day a week to read cookbooks and later sent Richard to Boston to attend the Fannie Farmer Cooking School. There, Richard found *not* helpful culinary advice, but a more important form of affirmation. "I found out in a hurry they can't teach me much more than I know," Richard told Paddleford. "I cooked a couple of my dishes like Creole gumbo...and they go crazy, almost, trying to copy down what I say. I think maybe I'm pretty good, so some day I'd write down myself." In Boston, rather than New Orleans, Richard received encouragement and confidence that she could translate her skills to the printed page and author her own book. After returning south, she did so. When Richard decided to "travel with my

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<sup>91</sup> In spite of her national fame during the 1940s, Richard remains almost completely unstudied. Her legacy has thus far been most fully explored in two public history exhibits. See Karen Trahan Leathem, "Two Women and Their Cookbooks: Lena Richard and Mary Land," exhibition guide, edited by Susan Tucker, Newcomb Archives, Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Newcomb College (hereafter cited as Newcomb), Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, November 2-December 21, 2001, accessed December 5, 2014, <http://www.slideshare.net/cookingwithdenay/lena-richard>. Ashley Rose Young chronicled her experiences cooking from Richard's *New Orleans Cook Book* on a blog; accessed December 5, 2014, <http://lenarichard.blogspot.com/>. Also see Toni Tipton-Martin, *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

book” to the World’s Fair in New York City in 1939, she brought the three tools of her trade: her cookbook, a suitcase of Louisiana ingredients, and specialized kitchen tools for making her most famous dishes. “I’m here and ready for showing my work,” Richard declared to Paddleford. Richard showed that New Orleans food could travel – most authentically with a fully provisioned, confident chef.<sup>92</sup>

Among her many recipes, Richard’s most renowned dishes relied on a similar ploy of spectacular surprise that New Orleans restaurant entrepreneurs used so skillfully. To create her “Scale Fish,” Richard lined a metal mold with sliced olives and pimentos, filled the mold with flaked fish set with gelatin, and unmolded the creation so it appeared to be a whole fish on a plate. “Long ago Lena lost count of the number of fashionable New Orleans wedding parties at which scaled fish...lord[ed] it over the bride’s festive cake,” Paddleford described. Richard’s cooking was both theatrical and delicious and her public cooking classes drew crowds. Paddleford located the source of Richard’s poise in her cookbook: “the pride of her life...that slim blue volume.” Honoring her literary and culinary accomplishments, Paddleford called Richard “one of New Orleans’ ace kitchen performers” and complimented the text as “a professional job.”<sup>93</sup> Richard’s success, and Paddleford’s coverage of her, resulted in a career cooking in New York and Virginia, several of her own restaurants in New Orleans, a line of frozen foods, and a cooking show in the early days of New Orleans television.<sup>94</sup> Richard’s career was exemplary, and thus the disbelief and discourtesy that she received from some white New

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<sup>92</sup> Clementine Paddleford, “Cook from New Orleans Shows Northerners ‘Tricks of the Trade,’” *New York Herald Tribune*, July 8, 1939, 7.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Leathem, “Two Women and Their Cookbooks,” Newcomb.

Orleanians served only to emphasize their own insecurity at the prospect of a black, female ambassador of the city's cuisine.

To the consternation of the New Orleans press, Richard avowed the unequivocal authority of New Orleanians of color in the realm of Creole cooking. In 1938, a *Times-Picayune* journalist attended one of Richard's public cooking classes and reported incredulously, "That a negro woman should undertake to teach white folks about Creole cooking seems eminently sensible to Lena." Richard responded, "'That's what we been doing every [*sic*] since slavery time....That's what we're good at.'" The daughter of a professional cook, raised to be a professional cook herself, the prospect of a woman of color as a culinary expert was thoroughly apt to Richard. But such an equation confounded the reporter, who sought to rationalize a distinction between Richard's race and the Creole dishes she had perfected. "All Lena's cooking is Creole, though some of her recipes are her own invention," the journalist wrote. Richard, and many of her fans outside of New Orleans, found no tension in the notion that her cooking was original *and* Creole *and* she was a woman of color. "A lot of 'quality' white women have wandered into the past into the kitchen of Lena M. Richard," the journalist persisted, wanting to assure readers that they would not suffer any loss in pride or social status if they, too, happened to "wander" into one of Richard's public courses.<sup>95</sup> Whereas Paddleford delighted in Richard's teaching, this *Times-Picayune* reporter seemed wary and perplexed.

Newspapers in and out of New Orleans enthusiastically promoted Richard's classes. However, the language in which they did so showed the danger in sharing her knowledge in both classroom and textual settings. When the *Pittsburgh Courier* printed a photograph of Richard teaching in New Orleans in May 1938, the caption described the event as being "crowded with

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<sup>95</sup> "Cook Who is Known for 'Dream Melon' to Teach Creole Cuisine," *Times-Picayune*, May 15, 1938, 7.

representatives of the white haute monde who wished to learn her culinary secrets.”<sup>96</sup> And when the *Times-Picayune* book reviewer noted that Houghton-Mifflin had re-issued Richard’s cookbook, he detailed, “In offering [her recipes] she bares all of her secrets of measuring, mixing and timing.”<sup>97</sup> Despite assertions by mid-century whites that literacy equaled authority, the illiterate and unwritten nature of black women’s culinary skills involved an undeniable power all its own.<sup>98</sup> Similar to when recipes invented by “Mandy” or Azalea appeared in print, when Richard published her cookbook she relinquished a certain degree of control over her hard-earned knowledge.<sup>99</sup>

Such a fact could be read in a plaintive request received by *Item* columnist Hermann Deutsch in 1951. Eugénie Lavedan Maylié, proprietor of a famous New Orleans restaurant, Maylié’s Table d’Hote, wrote, “I’m wondering if you would know how and where one can get

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<sup>96</sup> “Orleans Cateress Attracts Haute Monde,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1938, 5.

<sup>97</sup> “Notes on Books and Authors,” *Times-Picayune*, September 1, 1940, 19.

<sup>98</sup> For many reasons, a parallel tradition of black-authored cookbooks did not exist throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries in New Orleans. African Americans did most of the cooking in public and private kitchens and did not need to rely on written recipes. In addition, they were often denied the time, funding, or support required to publish cookbooks, nor could they expect an audience willing to believe that they wrote with a voice of literate, professional authority. Just as an ardent defense of authentic Creole food – and of the notion of a white Creole identity – implied doubt and insecurity among mid-century white New Orleanians, so too did the very proliferation of Creole recipes and cookbooks communicate an actual lack of knowledge among whites in the kitchen. Arjun Appadurai argued, “Authenticity is typically not the concern of the native participants in a culinary tradition...The concern with authenticity indicates some sort of doubt...It is the problem of the outsider.” Black-authored cookbooks increased following the era of Black Power, especially as soul food became popular. An early example appeared in 1958, when the National Council of Negro Women published *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*, as a literary and culinary compilation that celebrated the foods, events, and personalities important to African-American history. Authors alternated recipes with history lessons, suggesting dishes appropriate for National Emancipation Proclamation Day and detailing the founding of groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League. On the rampant theft of black recipes and the imbalance between black- and white-authored cookbooks, see Tipton-Martin, *The Jemima Code*; Neuhaus, *Manly Meals*, 313-314; and Doris Witt, *Black Hunger*, 217-228. Appadurai, “On Culinary Authenticity,” *Letters, Anthropology Today* 2, no. 4 (August 1986): 25; Sue Bailey Thurman, ed., *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro* (Washington, DC: The Corporate Press, 1958).

<sup>99</sup> A “praline woman” in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1937 already understood this dynamic. When a *New York Times* journalist pressed her for her recipe, she coyly responded, “Ah nevah tells mah recipe to nobody.” Disclosing the formula would have damaged if not extinguished her business. Eva Beard, “Gulf Coast Has Flavor: In Food on its Shores, Tourist Find Tang of the Sea,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1937, 198.



some good homemade mayhaw and wild crabapple jelly in this vicinity,” she asked. “Since the death of our old Creole cook, (Thérèse Coquillion of Mandeville) we have not been able to get any of these delicious sweets.” Coquillion had been the daughter of a slave, Maylié explained, and a longtime cook in the restaurant kitchen.<sup>100</sup> Although several of Coquillion’s recipes appeared in the restaurant’s 1941 cookbook – which did acknowledge Coquillion’s contributions by name and also called her Creole, unlike most culinary texts – some of Coquillion’s recipes never made it to paper and died with her.<sup>101</sup> Lena Richard was a professional and an expert, and the media’s promotion of her cooking classes and cookbook betrayed a certain eagerness to pilfer her knowledge. Publishing the recipe for Scale Fish let it exist on tables other than ones where Richard crafted it for her own credit and pay.

Despite their enthusiasm to consume Richard’s recipes, as well as her food, white New Orleanians constricted Richard’s professional success at the height of her career and diluted her legacy after her unexpected death in the fall of 1950. Though Richard’s cookbook featured recipes for extravagant and complex dishes – layered timbales, flaky *vol-au-vent*, and oysters Rockefeller – the New Orleans public lavished their greatest praise on Richard’s Watermelon Ice Cream. This fruit, long associated with African Americans in racist postcards, stories, and poems, emerged as Richard’s most prominent legacy in New Orleanians’ collective memory. Poet Howard Weeden had rhymed about watermelon in addition to beaten biscuits in 1898, in a poem titled “Easy Living.” She wrote:

Dar’s two times in de year dat Gord  
Made for de nigger sho’,  
Two times when he’s so rich he don’t

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Eugénie Lavedan Maylié to Deutsch, August 15, 1951, Box 6, Folder 5, Recipes, gumbo, HBD, LaRC.

<sup>101</sup> Eugénie Lavedan Maylié, *Maylié’s Table d’Hote Recipes: And the History and Some Facts Concerning “La Maison Maylié et Esparbé”* (New Orleans: Maylié’s, 1941).

Ask Gord for nothin' mo':

Blackberry time is one; for den  
He neither hoes nor sows;  
De nigger knows his daily bread  
Right on de bushes grows.

De other's Watermilion time;  
An' den – Lord bless your soul!  
Bof bread an' water grows for him –  
In one big cool green bowl!<sup>102</sup>

The poem portrayed the African-American speaker as lazy and stupid, delighted to stumble across his food without needing to work for it. The blackberry “right on de bushes grows,” ready to be plucked, but watermelons offered an even greater prize: bread and water together, “in one big cool green bowl!” Lena Richard’s watermelon enchanted New Orleanians because it proved doubly pleasing, as a slice of the colorful fruit, presented by a familiar source, but proving in fact to be an elaborate surprise of red and green sherbet and raisin seeds. Like her Scale Fish, Richard’s Watermelon Ice Cream was a deceptively complicated dish that engaged its eaters by appearing effortlessly natural and lifelike. Components that seemed inedible – a fish tail, its sharp scales, the watermelon’s tough rind – slipped softly and sweetly down eaters’ throats. Richard cooked like a magician, making difficult tricks look easy. Accordingly, descriptions of Richard’s invention of Watermelon Ice Cream cast her professional skill as secondary to the well-worn trope of the black cook’s innate intuition and “sixth culinary sense.” Richard called the confection her “dream melon.” A *Times-Picayune* journalist explained, “It’s a ‘dream melon’

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<sup>102</sup> Weeden, “Easy Living,” *Shadows on the Wall*. Such stereotypes remained very much alive and well in twenty-first-century America, when an award-winning writer of color suffered as the subject of a very public wisecrack. Jacqueline Woodson, “The Pain of the Watermelon Joke,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2014.

in more than one sense, because Lena conceived the idea in her sleep.”<sup>103</sup> The dish arrived to Richard readymade, the reporter proclaimed, with her eyes closed.

The day after Richard died of a heart attack at her home on November 27, 1950, the *Times-Picayune* printed a brief notice that read, “Lena M. Richard, 51, Negro, caterer and author of ‘New Orleans Cook Book,’ died....”<sup>104</sup> In this short obituary, Richard was a Negro first, followed by a comma, then a caterer, and only lastly, an author. She was neither a Negro author, nor just an author. The notice’s syntax betrayed the writer’s perspective. In contrast, the *Cleveland Call and Post*, an African-American newspaper in Ohio, notified its readers of Richard’s death with the announcement, “New Orleans, Louisiana’s fabulous Lena Richard was buried last Friday morning. A television star and cateress, she recently published a book on Creole cuisine.”<sup>105</sup> The *Chicago Defender*, also an African-American publication, likewise honored the multi-faceted talent of this chef who lived very far from Chicago. “Mrs. Lena Richard, television personality, caterer and author,” was also the proprietor of her own restaurant, Lena’s Gumbo House, and a televised chef, the obituary specified.<sup>106</sup> Richard had attracted devoted attention far beyond New Orleans and such obituaries that elaborated her accomplishments, rather than her race, showed the respect she had won.

Yet the most damaging insult to Richard’s legacy came not in New Orleans newspapers, but on television. One and a half years after Richard’s death, the *Times-Picayune* reported on a daily cooking program on WDSU that had become a “local favorite.” “With affable Amanda Lee as culinary artist, ‘New Orleans Cookbook’ features the secrets of fine creole cooking,” the

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<sup>103</sup> “Cook Who is Known,” *Times-Picayune*, May 15, 1938.

<sup>104</sup> “‘Cook Book’ Author, Restaurateur Dies,” *Times-Picayune*, November 28, 1950, 3.

<sup>105</sup> “Around the Country” *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 9, 1950, 6D.

<sup>106</sup> “Lena Richard, Restaurateur, Author, Dies,” *Chicago Defender*, December 9, 1950, 20.

writer announced. The televised cook, “Mandy,” wore a red and white checked *tignon* and dress. “Since the beginning of the program, there have been two Amanda Lees,” the writer described. “The first was the late Lena Richard, one of the South’s leading Negro cooks....The current ‘Mandy’ dressed the part of the old-time Southern cook.” Such changes offered what the journalist claimed to be a “fresh new touch” to what had been a groundbreaking educational program, in a new medium, led by a highly skilled professional. WDSU broadcast the show’s second iteration while continuing to use the title of Richard’s cookbook and maintaining Richard’s daughter, Marie, as program assistant. But the producers had substituted another woman to play Richard’s role and suggested that she was essentially interchangeable with Richard.<sup>107</sup> Even more astonishing, WDSU named this new, “affable” cook “Mandy,” which would likely have struck many New Orleanians as familiar, from the kaleidoscopic, composite, illiterate “Mandy” of Natalie V. Scott’s cookbooks.

With this second Amanda Lee, WDSU published a cookbook, *Mandy Lee’s Recipes for Good New Orleans Dishes*. The cover featured a photograph of Lee in Southern garb, serving herself from a large plate of fried chicken. As a gimmick, the cookbook offered to double as a human adviser in the kitchen, in that its base folded into a triangle. “This book stands on its own feet!” the back cover announced. “Fold the cover over...and the book will stay upright on your work surface for easy reference.” The bottom of each page featured Mandy’s face, alongside a snippet of advice that began, “Mandy Lee says....” Such was New Orleans’s commemoration of the fabulous Lena Richard’s career: memories of Watermelon Ice Cream, a TV show that featured a cooking stereotype, and a cookbook that stood like a woman on a counter, offering

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<sup>107</sup> “Cooking Show is Local Favorite,” *Times-Picayune*, June 8, 1952, 18.

inane advice. “Always refrigerate shellfish,” Mandy Lee advised, under a recipe for “Old Plantation Okra Gumbo.”<sup>108</sup>

Lena Richard was exceptional not only for the geographic breadth traveled by her cookbook and fame, but the extensive media attention that her cooking attracted. The large majority of African-American cooks and chefs in mid-century New Orleans worked far from newspaper reporters and television cameras. Yet they took deep, professional pride in their work, despite the insults of segregation and low pay. The words of these culinary professionals, who worked in New Orleans kitchens of the 1930s through 1970s, are only available thanks to a 1978 book, *Creole Feast: 15 Master Chefs of New Orleans Reveal Their Secrets*. The co-authors – Nathaniel Burton, a New Orleans chef, and Rudy Lombard, a New Orleans oral historian and civil rights worker, both African-American – set out to correct the deep imbalance in the culinary historical record that had privileged the voices of whites and silenced those of blacks.<sup>109</sup> “It is difficult to arrive at a universally satisfying definition of Creole cuisine,” they began in their introduction. “The one feature, however, that all previous definitions have in common is a curious effort to ascribe a secondary, lowly or nonexistent role to the Black hand in the pot, in spite of the fact that everything that is unique about New Orleans culture...can be traced to that city’s Black presence.” Their writing had an urgent purpose, in an era of ethnic revival when Italians built a monument to their history in downtown New Orleans and young New Orleanians

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<sup>108</sup> WDSU-TV Channel 6 New Orleans, *Mandy Lee’s Recipes for Good New Orleans Dishes*, ca. 1950s.

<sup>109</sup> In a 2012 interview, Lombard recalled standing outside Uptown restaurant Pascal’s Manale in the 1940s as a child, knowing he was not allowed inside because of his skin color. In his 1945 *Dining in New Orleans*, Scoop Kennedy noted, rather dismissively, that the chef at Pascale’s Manale was a black man. He wrote, “The actual chef is Tom Wright, whose ancestors probably hailed from the Congo. Tom, with Manale’s for over 30 years, is a character of supreme divination.” Lombard’s experience on the outside looking in helped spur him to lead sit-ins in New Orleans in the 1960s and co-author *Creole Feast* in the 1970s. Sara Wood, “Remembering Rudy Lombard,” Southern Foodways Alliance blog, December 15, 2014, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.southernfoodways.org/rudy-lombard-1939-2014/>; Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 76.

of color preferred to call themselves Black than Creole.<sup>110</sup> “The single, lasting characteristic of Creole cuisine is the Black element,” they insisted. Their book allowed culinary professionals of color to finally speak for themselves.<sup>111</sup>

Many African-American chefs and cooks verified the authors’ claims that people of color had been the very first Creoles – and Creole cooks – and had produced the cuisine continuously since the city’s founding. Their words and stories deserve enumeration after such a lengthy absence from the city’s recorded history. “They say [Creole cuisine] is a mixture of Spanish and French, but the only people who seem to know all about it are neither Spanish nor French, they’re Blacks,” said Sherman Crayton. “They got it from their grandparents.”<sup>112</sup> Crayton began cooking at Arnaud’s restaurant in 1936 – through the era when Arnaud’s menu insisted that its “Cuisine Classique” remained an inviolable heritage of white French men – and worked his way up to head chef at Vieux Carré Restaurant in the 1970s. Co-author Nathaniel Burton, born in 1914 as one of nine children from a McComb, Mississippi, family, rebuked stereotypes of the illiterate, accidental black cook by memorizing the culinary tomes of legendary French chef Auguste Escoffier and then becoming executive chef at Broussard’s restaurant in the French Quarter.<sup>113</sup> Charles Kirkland contributed in a more humble, though no less important, position. When Scoop Kennedy dined at Garden District favorite Commander’s Palace, he marveled at the

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<sup>110</sup> Virginia R. Domínguez found that in 1970s New Orleans, middle-aged or elderly people of color proudly identified as Creole, while the younger generation rejected the term. Following movements for Civil Rights and Black Power the younger generation expressed greater affinity for an ideology of black solidarity. Domínguez found that young New Orleanians of color were ashamed to call themselves Creole because the term identified a past in which their ancestors had been the mistresses of white men, or the offspring of such relationships. Many light-skinned people of color maintained Afro hairstyles in order to prove that they were black. Such dynamics will be explored more fully in the sixth chapter, in conjunction with the white ethnic revival and the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans. See Domínguez, *White by Definition*, 161-181.

<sup>111</sup> Nathaniel Burton and Rudy Lombard, *Creole Feast: 15 Master Chefs of New Orleans Reveal Their Secrets* (New York: Random House, 1978), xv.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

food's remarkable continuity, which seemed to persist unmarred by frequent changes in management. "All through the years, whether the operator be Italian or Irish, the food always has been of the highest quality," he remarked.<sup>114</sup> Kennedy was remiss in searching for continuity in the front of the house, however. Charles Kirkland began work in the kitchen at Commander's Palace in 1942 and continued there for twenty-seven years. "An undisputed specialist in salads and dressings of all kinds," as Burton and Lombard called him, Kirkland made 900 salads every weekend night and up to 1,000 salads during the busiest shifts.<sup>115</sup> Continuity came from the back of the house.

Food produced by chefs of color behind closed doors made Corinne Dunbar restaurant famous, too. In a mansion on St. Charles Avenue, where Clementine Paddleford enjoyed a luxurious lunch in the spring of 1950, Corinne Dunbar restaurant ran for generations on a kitchen staffed exclusively by African-American women who cooked from their heads, not books. Leona Victor and Clara Mathus stood first at the Dunbar stove, *Creole Feast* noted, while Rosa Barganier, head chef in the 1970s, came later. She recalled learning how to master cooking processes for delicate fowl like duck, dove, and squab. "They almost mastered *me*," she remembered.<sup>116</sup> In his 1945 guide, Kennedy touted Corinne Dunbar restaurant as the second most important eating institution in New Orleans, alongside Antoine's. The restaurant pleased him so much because "Everything is arranged to convey the impression that you are dining in the home of an aristocrat of the old south," he described. To dine there was to enter a gourmet, fantasy world, such that after the meal the proprietor had to "ushe[r] you into the street beyond –

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<sup>114</sup> Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 46.

<sup>115</sup> Burton and Lombard, *Creole Feast*, 61.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

into a world of reality.”<sup>117</sup> While Kennedy’s impression was correct, in that women of color also dominated antebellum kitchens, his memories of Corinne Dunbar restaurant leaned heavily on the gracious hosts and tangible trappings of their elaborate mansion, rather than the chefs who had crafted his meal.

As Burton and Lombard’s book made clear, men and women chefs and cooks of color circulated among the mid-century city’s finest restaurants, teaching each other and producing masterful seafood, salads, and pastries, whose fame drew tourists to eat. Their labor generated huge profits for restaurants – Arnaud’s earned over one million dollars in 1944, Kennedy divulged, with eighty-two staff members serving 1,500 customers per day – and yet this money rarely trickled down to the people who actually cooked the Creole city’s Creole food.<sup>118</sup> Before leaving for Commander’s Palace in 1942, Charles Kirkland had worked at the French Quarter restaurant Court of the Two Sisters during the late 1930s and early 1940s. There, he cooked seventeen hours a day, for thirty-eight cents an hour.<sup>119</sup> Kennedy’s dining guide listed the price of a “miscellaneous whiskey” in 1945 at Court of the Two Sisters as forty-seven cents.<sup>120</sup> Thus, Kirkland’s hourly wage totaled less than the price of a shot of mediocre whiskey. In these ways, Burton and Lombard’s transcribed interviews and recipes can be read alongside mid-century culinary texts, like Kennedy’s guide, as a corrective key. Their important book fleshed out the incomplete narratives offered by white writers and revealed the names and voices of those who actually cooked, the wages they earned, and the attitude they held toward their cuisine.

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<sup>117</sup> Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 22, 55.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>119</sup> Burton and Lombard, *Creole Feast*, 61.

<sup>120</sup> Kennedy, *Dining in New Orleans*, 48.



Beyond pride in their Creole cooking, certain mid-century kitchen professionals of color exhibited a distinct attitude of resistance when they refused to compromise their culinary standards, despite the constraining dictates of recipes. A self-taught baker who entered the Pontchartrain Hotel pastry kitchen in 1949, Annie Laura Squalls continually revised recipes in her head, to the frustration of managers who valued consistency and demanded that she cook the same formula, day in and day out. “But I still had ideas about the food I was assigned to cook,” she explained. Squalls had so many ideas, in fact, that she continually added and subtracted ingredients to and from her cakes, pies, sweet rolls, and pastries, while swearing that she had made no changes. Squalls even went so far as to steal ingredients from the restaurant’s pantry in order to improve her dishes. She admitted to Burton and Lombard:

When I started doing apple pies at the Pontchartrain Hotel I sneaked a little vanilla and lemon juice into them while the head baker was away. It wasn’t in the recipe they gave me, and I promised not to do it again, but when I had to do the orange cake, I sneaked grated orange rind into the icing....The same thing happened with the mile-high ice cream pie....I didn’t like the way it looked....There was too much white....I tried to stay in good with the cooks and the pantry so I could get a little extra cream or butter... Frequently I’d wait until [the chef’s] back was turned and pilfer it.<sup>121</sup>

Squalls was an incorrigible perfectionist. When she saw “too much white” in her sweets, she would not stop until they bore her own stamp. Like her fellow Creole chefs and cooks of color, Squalls worked according to her own standards, with skills earned despite myriad challenges. *Their* artistic and professional judgment made mid-century Creole cuisine famous and profitable. Guidebooks, menus, cookbooks, novels, and poems told stories. Burton and Lombard’s *Creole Feast* told history.

Whereas Squalls resisted her manager with a clandestine dash of vanilla and a stolen pint of cream, other Creole chefs made their restaurants an explicitly political space. Leah Chase and her husband, Edgar “Dooky” Chase Jr., took over his parents’ Tremé restaurant, Dooky Chase, in

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<sup>121</sup> Burton and Lombard, *Creole Feast*, 18, 20.

1957. Leah Chase later recalled the restaurant as the epicenter of planning for New Orleans's civil rights movement, explaining, "I feel like in this restaurant we changed the course of the world over bowls of gumbo....That's how we always did the planning – over gumbo."<sup>122</sup> Dooky Chase regularly hosted the meetings of local black men's and women's social and political clubs. *Times-Picayune* articles throughout the 1950s noted lunches at Dooky Chase sponsored by the Frontiers of America as well as the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. At a 1957 Urban League meeting, Julius Thomas, industrial relations director, reassured the assembled crowd that public school integration would come soon.<sup>123</sup> Two years later, the restaurant hosted an even more illustrious visitor, Namaso Neruis Mbile, a national assemblyman belonging to Nigeria's opposition party. He noted the widespread racial segregation he had experienced in the United States but nevertheless encouraged listeners, counseling, "Negroes must not fight evil with evil or bitterness with bitterness." Earlier in the day, Mbile had received a key to the city and a "certificate of honorary citizenship" at city hall, yet he could not have celebrated afterward with a meal at nearby institutions like Antoine's or Arnaud's. Instead, he traveled across the French Quarter to Tremé to eat at Dooky Chase, which welcomed diners of any skin color.<sup>124</sup>

When Leah Chase and her husband took over management of the restaurant, they had set out first and foremost to give African-American diners in New Orleans a culinary institution that they had long lacked. For generations, black Creole chefs, cooks, and servers had created the Creole fine dining experience for white consumers but had never enjoyed it themselves. In the 1940s, when Chase began work as a waitress in French Quarter cafés, she recalled, "There were

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<sup>122</sup> Mary Foster, "Dooky Chase Gumbo Fueled Civil Rights Movement," *Associated Press*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>123</sup> "Segregation End Near, Group Told," *Times-Picayune*, February 15, 1957, 3.

<sup>124</sup> The quote represents the reporter's paraphrase of Mbile's speech; "Nigeria Leader is Visitor Here," *Times-Picayune*, August 22, 1959, 47.

no restaurants for black people to go to.” By the 1950s, still, “Tables weren’t being set in black restaurants. When you went in they would just hand you a fork and a knife or whatever,” she described.<sup>125</sup> Chase envisioned something different: a beautiful dining room in which people of color could enjoy delicious food, in the middle of New Orleans. “I wanted mirrors on one wall and another wall with red velvet,” she described. Despite protests from her spendthrift mother-in-law, Emily Chase, Leah Chase insisted on a particular object for the renovated dining room. “I remembered a beautiful chair I had seen at a restaurant in the French Quarter called the Vieux Carré....Each chair was twenty-five dollars....But I won the battle.” In an era when African Americans fought to sit in the same streetcar, bus, and train seats as whites, Chase insisted on the same, elegantly designed chair for her restaurant dining room that white diners enjoyed in the French Quarter. To assuage any resentment, Chase promised her mother-in-law that she could paint the upstairs dining room – favored by Civil Rights leaders for planning sessions – any color she wanted. Emily Chase chose pink.<sup>126</sup> Chase understood that cooks and servers of color had long helped produce the aesthetic experience of the Creole meal. As a restaurant owner, manager, and chef, Chase sought to provide a place where African-American diners could finally *consume* that experience. Dooky Chase became the first white tablecloth restaurant for black New Orleanians.

Although decades passed, Leah Chase never moved the business from its original location, for reasons more philosophical than practical. “It would have been easy to relocate to what some would call a ‘better’ place,” she acknowledged. “We are surrounded by the projects.” But Chase explained that the restaurant sent a message to both the neighbors next door and

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<sup>125</sup> Leah Chase, *The Dooky Chase Cookbook* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1990), 12, 13.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

diners who came from far away.<sup>127</sup> Everyone deserved a beautiful place to eat. Her restaurant belonged to – and within – a community. There was more to her Creole cuisine than a menu printed in French for show, or a flamboyantly flaming bowl of café brûlot. Dooky Chase upheld a black Creole culinary heritage that had been built by the likes of Lena Richard, Nathaniel Burton, Rudy Lombard, Annie Laura Squalls, and many others. And on its visible corner spot in Tremé it would stay.<sup>128</sup>

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### **Conclusion: Finding a Bibliography in Unexpected Places**

On August 27, 1951, in the midst of *Item* columnist Hermann B. Deutsch's gumbo recipe contest, he received a letter from Henry M. Stevens, the advertising manager in charge of soups at Campbell's. Stevens referred to the image in the *Saturday Evening Post* ad that had so angered Deutsch, of the African-American woman at the hearth, a basket of dubious gumbo ingredients by her side. Stevens explained to Deutsch, "The kitchen in our advertisement was practically a replica of the frontispiece of a cook book put out by the Times Picayune Publishing Company in 1945. This publisher authenticated the drawing of the courtyard kitchen and reported that several were still in existence in...the French Quarter."<sup>129</sup> True enough, Campbell's had copied almost exactly an illustration that ran nearly continuously as a frontispiece in eight editions of the

*Picayune Creole Cook Book*, from 1922 until 1987 (fig. 5.15). Curiously, however, the African-

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<sup>127</sup> Leah Chase, *And Still I Cook* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2003), 22. For further biographical and historical information on Chase, see Carol Allen, *Leah Chase: Listen, I Say Like This* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>128</sup> For oral histories with other culinary professionals of color in New Orleans, see Milton Prudence, first African-American executive chef at Galatoire's restaurant, interview by Sara Roahen, July 19, 2006, transcript, Southern Foodways Alliance, accessed March 29, 2016, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/tommys-cuisine/>; and Willie Mae Seaton, chef at Willie Mae's Scotch House, interview by Sara Roahen, July 1, 2006, transcript, Southern Foodways Alliance, accessed March 29, 2016, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/willie-maes-scotch-house/>.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Henry M. Stevens to Deutsch, August 27, 1951, Box 9, Folder 60: Correspondence, 1951 August-September, HBD, LaRC.

American woman pictured at the hearth in the Picayune cookbooks tended a series of completely *empty* pots. For more than fifty years, the cookbook's authors updated the book's recipes but recycled the exact same image of the woman at the hearth. They kept her static and ahistorical, cooking, but not cooking any food. Deutsch had protested Campbell's illustration in the *Evening Post* as fully invented, a representation of a kitchen that "never was in New Orleans," he had written. But the very same illustration appeared in the Crescent City's preeminent cookbook, which surely sat on many of his readers' shelves. As Deutsch's error showed, midcentury white New Orleanians had long trafficked in an imagined "Creole" history that was so artificial at times they duped themselves.

Several years later, in 1958, a Tulane University dean asked Deutsch to teach a course on the history of Creole cuisine. Faced with composing a syllabus, Deutsch wrote to the dean, distressed. "There just ain't no such animal as a Creole Cuisine bibliography," Deutsch complained. "Nothing has been written about it except some cook books. In fact, there is nothing about cookery and its history that...I could discover."<sup>130</sup> Deutsch looked in the wrong places. A history of New Orleans's Creole cuisine sat in his own files, growing fatter and evermore complex with each letter and recipe he received. His generation's history of Creole cuisine had begun with the likes of the 1938 *New Orleans City Guide* and 1939 *Lena Richard's Cook Book* and continued with the unpublished words he received from home cooks. Rereading his contest's gumbo recipes with an eye to history could have revealed new things. For when Deutsch's readers wrote to him, they protested against what they perceived to be an appropriation of their Creole culture by "Yankees" and defended the vocabulary and imagery that went along with it. They did so during an era when their local cookbooks, newspapers, and city guidebooks proudly

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<sup>130</sup> Memo for Dr. [John] Dyer [Dean of University College, Tulane University] re Creole Cuisine bibliography, ca. 1958, Box 6, Folder 4, Deutsch notes for cookbook, 1956-1958, HBD, LaRC.

promoted the message that Creole meant white. *Item* readers' defense of mid-century New Orleans's proprietary relationship to the definition of "Creole" bolstered a much larger network of unequal social, political, and racial relationships. Whites sought to erase African Americans from New Orleans kitchens and their recipes just as they sought to delete them from the notion of what it meant to be Creole.

Chefs and cooks of color refused to be erased, however. They read and wrote and cooked their way to local and national fame. "I go to sleep thinking about food," Leah Chase remarked, at the age of sixty-seven. "I have a stack of cookbooks by my bed. You read things or hear ideas and then your mind starts turning."<sup>131</sup> Chase continued to read, her mind continued to turn, and she continued to cook. On her ninety-second birthday, Chase paused in her restaurant kitchen to receive gifts from diners who had come to celebrate her, and then she returned to the stove.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Chase, *The Dooky Chase Cookbook*, 14.

<sup>132</sup> Sheila Stroup, "Chef Leah Chase Still Warming up Her Kitchen at 92," *Times-Picayune*, January 10, 2015.

## Chapter 6: Fava Beans and Báhn Mi: Ethnic Revival and the New New Orleans Gumbo

In 1974, Tante Blanche had proven herself such a virtuous resident of heaven that St. Peter allowed her to return to earth for one day. So began a satirical essay by *Times-Picayune* real estate editor Frank L. Schneider. Tante Blanche had lived in New Orleans and she decided that her return to corporeality would only be complete with a bowl of homemade gumbo. To buy sausages, the old woman set off for the only place in the city where she could find best-quality ingredients: the French Market.

Since the early nineteenth century the French Market had impressed residents and visitors with its many smells: fresh and rotting fish, meat, vegetables, and fruits, all amidst the persistent aroma of brewing coffee. The day of Tante Blanche's visit was no exception, but the collection of scents emanating from one market stall confused her. She detected "honeysuckle, violets, lime, orange...hay, bayberry, cauliflower, bacon, avocado...mandarin, and yams." This was no ambitious grocer, however. "So many candles I have never seen before, all burning at the same time," remarked the bewildered shopper. Across the street she read a sign: "PARDON OUR MESS BUT WE ARE IMPROVING THIS ENTIRE SQUARE WITH NEW CANDLE SHOPS FOR ALL THE TOURISTS IN THE WORLD, MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GOOD PEOPLE OF NEW ORLEANS."<sup>1</sup> Candle and curio sellers had replaced food vendors in the French Market's halls, confounding Tante Blanche and earning the caustic ire of Schneider and other taxpaying New Orleanians.

For almost two hundred years, New Orleans's central food market, the French Market, offered a greater experience of linguistic, ethnic, racial, and social diversity than any other site in the city. But as food merchants left the French Market during the 1950s and 1960s – due to white

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<sup>1</sup> Frank L. Schneider, "Mon Dieu," unnamed source (likely *Times-Picayune*), 1974, Folder: "French Market," Rare Vertical Files, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

flight out of the city center and shoppers' new preference for chain supermarkets – the institution lost its reputation as a destination distinctively of New Orleans. Despite a major renovation in 1973, the first since its New Deal overhaul in the 1930s, the market suffered lagging sales and attracted only tourists. “The candle shop is a crowded, flashy potpourri,” *Times-Picayune* journalist Stella Pitts complained. “The gift shop offers beer steins from Germany...wooden elephants from India and only a handful of New Orleans items.” In a certain sense, the international range of imported souvenirs showed the French Market to be as cosmopolitan as in its earliest days, when the nearby waterfront had thrived. But locals disdained the late-twentieth-century market's mass-produced knickknacks. “I won't bring any visitors to see [the market],” a resident confided to Pitts. “Oh, it's pretty, all right – it reminds me of a new shopping mall I saw recently in Florida.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout its lengthy existence, New Orleans's central marketplace had served many purposes, but never before as a reminder of a Florida shopping mall. Observers mourned the loss of foods, smells, vendors, and their calls that had once made the French Market a unique, exoticized “Tower of Babel.” With the French Market fallen from grace, tourists, municipal politicians, local residents, and newspaper reporters looked to other sites throughout the city for proof that New Orleans continued its history as an exceptionally multiethnic place.

Two new kinds of food-centric public spaces rose in 1970s New Orleans, eclipsing the French Market as the city's representative ethnic food experience: the Piazza d'Italia, a flamboyant postmodern monument built by the Italian-American community to commemorate their history, and the small grocery stores, vegetable gardens, and weekend food market founded by Vietnamese refugees in the city's eastern suburbs. Sicilians immigrants and Vietnamese refugees arrived in New Orleans a century apart. Beginning in the 1870s, Sicilians fled famine and poverty and settled in the center of the French Quarter. In the 1970s, the Vietnamese escaped

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<sup>2</sup> Stella Pitts, “French Market Controversy is Nothing New,” *Times-Picayune*, April 13, 1975.



war and built new lives in the city's far eastern outskirts. Despite profound cultural, linguistic, spatial, and temporal differences, a common thread emerged in their stories: *food* facilitated their entrance as discrete ethnic groups into New Orleans society and their mobility within it.

Crucially important, however, were the American racial identities claimed by, or accorded to, these groups in the food-centric public spaces that they created.

Sicilian and Vietnamese New Orleanians built the Piazza d'Italia, suburban markets, and gardens during the American ethnic revival: a current of interest in the nation's pluralism that swept popular culture and academia alike in the aftermath of movements for civil rights and Black Power.<sup>3</sup> Piazza planners and New Orleans newspaper reporters used recently invented terms – such as “multicultural” and “multiethnic” – to interpret these sites, but proclaimed such perspectives to be nothing new in the Crescent City. Long before most Americans pondered the balance between assimilation and cultural diversity, authors of local histories, travel guides, and cookbooks had defined New Orleans's creole ethnicity as a unique blend of the many into one that appeared in no other American place.<sup>4</sup> New Orleans writers even used an indigenous

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<sup>3</sup> Essential histories of the ethnic revival and the subsequent interest in multiculturalism include Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta, eds., *America and the New Ethnicity* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1979); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Bill Kovach, “Struggle for Identity: White Minorities Revive Heritage,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1970; and Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963). For histories of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, integration, and their aftermath in New Orleans, see Donald E. DeVore, *Defying Jim Crow: African American Community Development and the Struggle for Racial Equality in New Orleans, 1900-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); Leonard N. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009); Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); and Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Campanella argued, “New Orleans is the only American city that can reasonably claim to have rendered its own ethnicity. Creole is a place-based ethnicity.” Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 161.

culinary metaphor – their city was a “gumbo,” rather than the archetypal “melting pot” – to communicate this concept and distinguish their city’s history from that of other American places. All groups contributed equally to New Orleans’s culture while maintaining their distinctive characteristics, the gumbo metaphor implied. Similarly, the late twentieth-century American ethos of multiculturalism claimed to celebrate the many parts that composed a diverse whole.

Yet the histories of the Piazza d’Italia and Vietnamese markets and gardens demonstrate the extent to which the impetuses and effects of America’s ethnic revival were far from equitable.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the production and consumption of ethnicity and race through food in postmodern New Orleans privileged the stories of some and suppress those of others. Investigating the people, places, and tastes associated with the ethnic revival in the Crescent City shows how New Orleanians used food to generate exclusive definitions of race and ethnicity in public spaces embedded in the city’s consumer culture.

Some voices in this history resound more loudly than others. This is because New Orleanians who had progressively been able to become fully “white” during the long twentieth century – such as the city’s Sicilian immigrants – controlled the public narrative of ethnic revival. The social and political capital and racial identity accumulated by second- and third-generation Italian-Americans allowed them the financial resources, land, media attention, and audacity to build a monument in the city center to an invented Italian history. A similar attitude of cultural authority – of claiming to belong comfortably in New Orleans, a perspective that could not be divorced from a white racial identity – characterized newspaper reporters’ coverage of the city’s so-called exotic new community of Vietnamese refugees, not yet able to fully

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<sup>5</sup> Alba agreed that America’s ethnic revival was a fundamentally competitive project. Paradoxically, this was due to the interplay of widespread assimilation *and* continued ethnic ties. He explained, “The persistence of ethnic identities [among white Americans] can...be understood as an outcome of assimilation in a societal context that remains fundamentally multiethnic and multiracial, and where, therefore, competition between groups defined in ethnic terms remains a powerful force.” Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, 293.

represent themselves to the larger public due to linguistic differences. Focusing on the food-centric public spaces built by Italian Americans and Vietnamese refugees in 1970s New Orleans reveals the key irony at the heart of America's new infatuation with its multiethnic past and present. Despite celebratory language that trumpeted the city's creolized diversity, the most influential voices continued to belong to those who claimed a white racial identity. An artificial line between black and white mattered just as much in New Orleans as in other American places, despite the city's longstanding, self-declared exceptionalism as a racially progressive locale.

For African-American New Orleanians, in contrast, the era of ethnic revival was not one of new public places, but of *placelessness*. Figuratively and literally, white New Orleanians made space for the Piazza d'Italia and the Versailles gardens, groceries, and food market during the same years that African-American residents felt squeezed out of their homes and neighborhoods. Long suppressed within the city's increasingly profitable tourist economy, persistently refused a full sense of belonging in New Orleans's cultural world, and violently denied the social and political privileges enjoyed by whites until federal action ordained it, African Americans had always most fully experienced and comprehended the changing meanings of ethnicity and race in New Orleans. They claimed no new food-centric public spaces during this era. Instead, activists constructed a project humbler in scale and scope than a monument that nevertheless demonstrated the most nuanced understanding of the potential for a multicultural future in the Crescent City. As in other eras, African-American New Orleanians insistently claimed space within cultural narratives of the city's past, present, and future.

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## I. Inventing an Ethnic Disneyland at the Piazza d'Italia

In early 1973, New Orleans Mayor Moon Landrieu invited Italian-American community leader Joseph Maselli to collaborate on the construction of a memorial to the history of Italian Americans in New Orleans.<sup>6</sup> Maselli later proclaimed Landrieu to be “an Italophile....One day the thought hit [the mayor], ‘What can I do for the Italians before I get out of office?’”<sup>7</sup> In fact, Landrieu had embarked on several simultaneous building projects – monuments honoring the city’s residents of French, Spanish, English, and African-American descent – in an effort to revitalize the city center while also riding the wave of ethnic revival that was sweeping New Orleans and the country. Mayor Landrieu explained, “I foresaw in the city...the lack of open space downtown for areas that would provide some focal point for celebrations.... It occurred to me that there were a number of ethnic groups who had contributed to the development of the city and we could not honor them all at once.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Landrieu decided that New Orleans’s ethnic groups should be celebrated separately, with statues and public plazas in different parts of the city.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Maselli was president of the Italian-American Federation, an umbrella organization uniting Louisiana’s sixteen Italian clubs, many of which had formed during the previous decade.

<sup>7</sup> Eliza Strickland, “The Fall and Rise of Piazza d’Italia,” *Italian America* VIII, no. 3 (Summer 2003), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Evans J. Casso with Joseph Maselli, ed., “An Idea Comes of Age,” ca. 1980, Box 2, Piazza d’Italia (hereafter cited as PDI), American Italian Research Library, Metairie, La. (hereafter cited as AIRL).

<sup>9</sup> Piazza d’Italia was by far the most ambitious of these ethnic monuments because the Italian-American community volunteered to fundraise for it and participate in its design. The Italian, Spanish, French, and British monuments were all originally located near the intersection of Poydras Street and the Mississippi River, an area termed the “International Center” in the 1970s. Place de France, a small park with a statue of Joan of Arc, was later moved to the French Quarter, adjacent to the French Market. In contrast, the Martin Luther King Memorial was constructed on the median in the middle of South Claiborne Avenue, far removed from the riverfront. Formerly the central artery of the city’s Creole of color community and shaded by live oaks, South Claiborne Ave. suffered from the city’s urban renewal projects, which converted it into a busy thoroughfare with highway access. The street is now lined with big box stores and fast food restaurants. Among all ethnic monuments constructed under Landrieu’s watch, the King Memorial is the least accessible to pedestrians and the most removed from the city’s central tourist area. See Sara Ayres, “Ivor Robert-Jones’ Standing Bronze Portraits of Winston Churchill in Oslo, New Orleans and Prague,” in *Abstraction and Reality: The Sculpture of Ivor Roberts-Jones*, Jonathan Black and Sara Ayres (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2013).

Seeking to build something both unique and grand, Maselli declared that rather than “a statue of Columbus or Garibaldi” Louisiana Italians must have a “living monument.”<sup>10</sup> Financed by an ambitious grassroots fundraising campaign, the resultant Piazza d’Italia converted a downtown block surrounded by parking lots and a high-rise office building into an urban Italian piazza (fig. 6.1). When the Piazza’s plaza opened in 1978, it quickly charmed architecture critics as a postmodern masterpiece. “Nothing quite like this has ever been seen in America before,” a writer declared in the magazine *Progressive Architecture*.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite the Piazza’s thoughtful design, certain elements of the site betrayed the distance that separated Louisiana Italians from Italian culture, ultimately revealing the Piazza to be a project of ethnic invention rather than revival.<sup>12</sup> Italian-American leaders used the Piazza d’Italia to solidify their community’s self-described transition over the course of the twentieth century from humble Sicilians to prosperous Italian Americans. Less explicit in the Piazza’s design, however, was the fact that the ethnic group’s mounting financial success and social prominence had occurred in tandem with, and largely thanks to, its progressive inclusion within the fold of white New Orleanians.

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<sup>10</sup> Casso with Maselli, ed., “An Idea Comes of Age,” Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>11</sup> Thus far, scholars have focused on the Piazza d’Italia from an exclusively architectural perspective. None have investigated the role of the local Italian-American community in constructing the Piazza as a product of the ethnic revival. “The Magic Fountain,” *Progressive Architecture* (November 1978), 87. For additional studies of postmodernism and hyperreality in connection to New Orleans and the Piazza d’Italia, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) and Stephanie Malia Hom, *The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the Impossible State of Destination Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> I will use “Italian” and “Sicilian” relatively interchangeably, emphasizing “Sicilian” during the decades immediately following immigration and “Italian” thereafter. As I will discuss, the overwhelming majority of Italian immigrants to Louisiana came from Sicily, but by the 1960s and 1970s they identified as Italian, as did many other communities around the country that had originally aligned themselves with specific towns or regions in Italy. On the generation of an Italian identity within the diaspora, see Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).



Figure 6.1. The Piazza d'Italia's combination of classical columns and postmodern neon delighted architecture critics and bemused, or annoyed, many New Orleanians. Here, people gathered for an opera concert on steps representing the Apennine Mountains. Piazza d'Italia, June 2014, photo by author.

Cultural assimilation, prosperity, and a whitening racial identity placed New Orleans's Italians in a position of social authority by the era of the ethnic revival, but this had not always been the case. Mayor Landrieu's invitation to collaborate with Maselli offered an opportunity to make permanent a history that had been frequently discontinuous and disputed for a community

then two or three generations removed from Sicily. Mid-nineteenth century steamship routes that ferried Mediterranean citrus fruits to New Orleans had encouraged emigration directly from Sicily to the Crescent City, bypassing New York.<sup>13</sup> After fleeing famine, Sicilian immigrants found work in all tiers of the Louisiana food industry: as laborers on upriver strawberry farms and sugarcane plantations, importers and venders of fruit in the city's public markets, peddlers of ice cream and candy on the streets, and proprietors of corner groceries, bars, and restaurants.<sup>14</sup> Poor Sicilians settled near people of color in New Orleans's French Quarter, earning it the nickname "Little Palermo" at the turn of the twentieth century, but with increasing wealth they moved to more spacious and suburban neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup> As the fortunes of Louisiana's Sicilians improved they thanked their patron, St. Joseph, with food. To celebrate his feast day on March 19, Sicilian families built St. Joseph altars in their homes. These elaborate constructions of fruits, vegetables, sweets, baked goods, and fish epitomized the community's history by expressing Sicilians' religious devotion in the medium of their labor in the food industry.

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Logsdon, "Immigration through the Port of New Orleans," in *Forgotten Doors: The Other Ports of Entry to the United States*, ed. M. Mark Stolarik (Philadelphia, PA: Balch Institute Press, 1988), 105-124; and Frederick Spletstoser, "Back Door to the Land of Plenty: New Orleans as an Immigrant Port, 1820-1860" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1978). For histories of Italian immigrants who passed through New York City or other ports of entry, see Stefano Luconi, *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Gary Ross Mormino, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1995* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); and Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Food-centric histories of Sicilians in Louisiana include Justin Nystrom, *Creole Italian: How Sicilian Immigrants Transformed the Culture of America's Most Interesting Food Town* (forthcoming); Jean Ann Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes: Recruitment, Labor Conditions, and Community Relations, 1880-1910* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); and Thomas L. Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise: The Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Famed journalist Lafcadio Hearn reported that by 1884 white New Orleanians had "mostly abandoned the [Vieux] Carré to the European Latins – French emigrants from the Mediterranean coasts, Italians, Sicilians, Spaniards, Greeks...and especially to the French-speaking element of color." Hearn, "Quaint New Orleans and its Inhabitants," *Harper's Weekly* XXVIII, no. 1459, December 6, 1884, 812.

The speed and volume of turn-of-the-century Sicilian immigration to Louisiana transformed the state both economically and socially and challenged its solidifying racial order. Between 1880 and 1910, Sicilian immigrants grew from five percent to thirty-nine percent of Louisiana's total population.<sup>16</sup> The rapid influx of unskilled and overwhelmingly illiterate Sicilian laborers, whose skin tended to be darker than that of other substantial immigrant populations in New Orleans, like Germans and Irish, spurred discrimination that placed the Sicilians in a nebulous zone between black and white.<sup>17</sup> Such distinctions held enormous importance during an era when public spaces and most social relationships divided along racial lines, as they did in every other southern American city. Sicilian immigrants were lynched in Louisiana, though to a far lesser degree than African Americans.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, though, the community's rapid commercial success helped speed their assimilation into the ranks of white Louisianians descended from European immigrants.<sup>19</sup> Only in the 1960s and 1970s did Louisiana

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<sup>16</sup> "Entire Sicilian communities were transported to Louisiana" at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote a *Dixie* magazine journalist, citing the research of Italian immigrant Anna Paone Lundberg. Kit Harger Lipps, "Italians, New Orleans Style," *Dixie*, March 19, 1978. On the reactions of white and African-American media to Sicilian immigrants, see Anthony V. Margavio, "The Reaction of the Press to the Italian American in New Orleans, 1880-1920," *Italian Americana* 4, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1978): 72-83; and Arnold Shankman, "The Image of the Italian in the Afro-American Press 1886-1936," *Italian Americana* 4, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1978): 30-49.

<sup>17</sup> On the tenuous racial identities of turn-of-the-century Italian immigrants, see Peter G. Vellon, *A Great Conspiracy Against Our Race: Italian Immigrant Newspapers and the Construction of Whiteness in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Jennifer Guglielmo, *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (Florence: Taylor & Francis, 2012); and Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> New Orleans residents blamed the 1890 murder of police chief David Hennessy on the local Sicilian mafia. Despite no judicial rulings of guilt, on March 14, 1891, a mob broke into the city prison and lynched eleven men. Marco Rimaneli and Sheryl L. Postman, eds. *The 1891 New Orleans Lynchings and U.S.-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: P. Lang, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> The history of New Orleans's Sicilians offers a good example of the trajectory described by Matthew Frye Jacobson, as a "probationary white group" at the end of the nineteenth century to one "granted the scientific stamp of authenticity as [a member of] the unitary Caucasian race" by the early twentieth. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 7-8.



Italians seek to substantially restore – or initiate – their identification with Sicilian and Italian cultural traditions. This timing placed them squarely within larger trends of ethnic revival.<sup>20</sup>

As an unusual brick-and-mortar product of the ethnic revival, the Piazza d'Italia represented the unique history of Sicilian immigrants in Louisiana in concrete form. When Joseph Maselli first set out in 1973 to gather ideas for a memorial, he drew inspiration from an unexpected source that hinted at the community's eagerness to celebrate their long-building economic success. Maselli recalled, "I had just gotten back from visiting the Galleria in Houston, Texas, and at that point we got to thinking, 'Why not a living monument to the Italian-American community?'"<sup>21</sup> Houston's Galleria, a development that combined a shopping mall with hotels and high-rise office buildings, struck Maselli as one model to emulate. As envisioned by New Orleans's Italian community, the Piazza was not just a commercial setting in which cultural objects could be bought and sold; it was a dynamic cultural and ethnic monument *because it was commercial*. The design of the Piazza d'Italia – crucially, with a St. Joseph altar at its center – showed how commerce was not just a means to an end for New Orleans's Italians; it was, and had been for generations, intrinsic to cultural celebration. In fact, the cultural nature of the Piazza d'Italia derived explicitly from its commercial functions, reflecting the extent to which the history of Sicilian entrepreneurship in Louisiana had pervaded notions of ethnic identity.

In form and function, the Piazza d'Italia exemplified the ways in which ethnicity could be bought and sold during America's ethnic revival.<sup>22</sup> Typically there exists a clear distinction

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<sup>20</sup> I will discuss this phenomenon in greater detail later in the chapter. Jacobson argued that the 1960s and subsequent decades were unique less because they represented a sudden revival of interest in ethnicity among Americans and more because a host of industries and institutions – Hollywood, publishing, television, academia, and national politics, among others – began to encourage and magnify that interest at that time. Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Casso with Maselli, ed., "An Idea Comes of Age," Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>22</sup> Scholars have explored ethnic formation, assimilation, and consumer culture as linked processes in several historical eras. Some argue for the value of ethnicity long before revival, when shopping at an immigrant-owned

between a souvenir shop and an archive or a street festival and a church. But Italian-American community leaders, officials from the mayor's office, and a team of architects purposefully blurred the physical and ideological boundaries between commercial and cultural spaces at the Piazza d'Italia.<sup>23</sup> The site would teach visitors about Italian history by integrating an outdoor public space, a museum, and a shopping mall.<sup>24</sup> Its plaza would host sacred as well as secular events, such as Catholic masses and opera concerts. A *campanile* and a series of chrome-tipped columns, illuminated by neon tubes at night, demarcated the new ethnic space.<sup>25</sup> Dominating the Piazza's center stood a three-dimensional fountain in the form of the Italian peninsula. Streams of water representing the Tiber, Arno, and Po rivers flowed down mountain ranges cut out of slate, granite, and marble (*fig. 6.2*). On St. Joseph's feast day, the podium at the plaza's center

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corner store instead of a chain grocer had the power to unite immigrants into a cohesive social group and promote their financial stability. Others argue for the importance of mass consumption and consumer objects, like radios and televisions, as mechanisms of Americanization. Still others note the use of ethnicity as a tool to segment consumers during the twentieth-century white ethnic revival. See Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70 (September 1980): 91-105; Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Simone Cinotto, ed., *Making Italian America: Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Jacobson, *Roots Too*; Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> For Halter, the cultural was the antithesis of the commercial; in popular culture, she found a continuing conversation between "culture and commerce." Planners of the Piazza d'Italia affirmed these two forces as uniquely compatible, however. Halter, *Shopping for Identity*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> The mayor's office and Italian-American community leaders collaborated on initial development of the Piazza d'Italia since the project was mutually beneficial. The Piazza's location served the mayor's interests by linking the new Superdome arena to the Mississippi riverfront and modeling the rehabilitation of historic downtown buildings. The Piazza became much more ambitious in scale and cost at the request of the Italian-American community. Anthony Gagliano, city project director for the Piazza, recalled, "The Mayor was at first shocked that we had come up with something of that magnitude and scope....At first we asked for \$200,000 from the City; now we were asking for considerably more. The City only had so much, and we had to raise the money elsewhere." For a general chronology of the Piazza project, see Casso with Maselli, ed., "An Idea Comes of Age," Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>25</sup> In southern Italy, "The sound of the church bell, *il campanile*, was a physical fact defining the perceptible social boundary of a southern Italian's world." Richard D. Alba, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 23.

converted to a St. Joseph altar. The flamboyant architectural design of the Piazza d'Italia embraced a range of possibilities for the performance of late-twentieth century Italian-American ethnicity in Louisiana.



Figure 6.2: Italian design elements of the Piazza d'Italia included columns, arches, a circular plaza echoing Gian Lorenzo Bernini's design of St. Peter's Square in Rome, and a *campanile*, or bell tower. Piazza d'Italia, June 2014, photo by author.

Piazza planners envisioned a jubilant mix of high and low Italian culture that sought to please all the senses even if it papered over regional distinctions. "Shopping is entertainment," the consulting firm Foran & Greer confirmed to Piazza designers at the project's outset. They

proposed to set the stage with a creatively assembled cast of characters, beginning with a security force dressed to resemble uniformed Italian “*carabiniere*” [*sic*]. As for tenants, the consultants envisioned a blend of the luxurious – Gucci, Ferragamo, and Bulgari – with the humble: wandering organ grinders and vendors selling ice cream, fruit, and peanuts, as had many impoverished Sicilian immigrants soon after their arrival in the Crescent City.<sup>26</sup> Altogether, consultants suggested approximately forty-five businesses for the space, one-third of which would focus on Italian food and drink. Visitors could purchase imported wines, cheeses, and meats; buy gourmet kitchen equipment to concoct Italian meals at home; or stop to sip an espresso at an outdoor café.<sup>27</sup> The Piazza’s upper levels and adjoining buildings would house the American Italian Activities Center, a library and museum telling the history of Sicilian immigration and assimilation to Louisiana life; banquet halls for weddings of Italian-American community members; and even an Alitalia travel agent ready to book flights to Italy. Such a dazzling blend of attractions emphasized the extent to which shoppers could enjoy Italian ethnicity as a set of experiences, tastes, and things, most of which were for sale.

The sheer theatricality of the Piazza referenced contemporary festival marketplaces elsewhere in the country, like Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco and Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, as well as local ethnic and religious celebrations, such as the St. Joseph’s Day feast.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the Piazza d’Italia blended the two kinds of spaces and activities in a new way.

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<sup>26</sup> Foran & Greer, Inc., “Piazza d’Italia: Report and Recommendations,” no page, Box 2, Folder 54: Foran & Greer Final Report (Leasing Portion) 6/22/78, Piazza d’Italia Project Records, 1976-1982 (hereafter cited as PDI Records), NOPL.

<sup>27</sup> Larry Smith & Company, Inc., “Piazza d’Italia Economic Analysis,” November 13, 1975, Appendix A-9: Piazza d’Italia – First Level, Preliminary Tenanting and Rent Schedules, Box 1, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>28</sup> On the history of these “festival marketplaces” and their combination of entertainment and consumer culture, see Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Merchant of Illusion: James Rouse, America’s Salesman of the Businessman’s Utopia* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004).

The Piazza was more ethnic than a shopping mall and more commercial than a typical monument (fig. 6.3). Consultants verified the truly unique strategy of commemorating an ethnic group in a predominantly mercantile atmosphere. Larry Smith & Company wrote, “The Piazza d’Italia



Figure 6.3. The transitional state of downtown’s Poydras Street in the mid 1970s was readily visible in this rendering of the Piazza d’Italia. Designers envisioned that the Piazza d’Italia, a few blocks away from the newly constructed Superdome, would stand comfortably next to high-rise office buildings and help reuse existing nineteenth-century storefronts. Foran & Greer, Inc., Piazza d’Italia rendering, “Piazza d’Italia: Report and Recommendations, Box 2, Folder 54: Foran & Greer Final Report (Leasing Portion) 6/22/78, Piazza d’Italia Project Records, 1976-1982 (hereafter cited as PDI Records), New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).

project is unusual in its concept in that it has as its objective the development of a memorial facility which will be intricately related to...commercial facilities.” Developers “anticipate a significant contribution of a cultural character from the commercial elements.... The consultant is not aware of any truly comparable project in the country.”<sup>29</sup>

Italian-American fundraisers found no tension, however, in the coexistence of the Piazza’s commemorative and commercial functions. To potential donors, they described the site in terms of an ethnic pride that bloomed out of nostalgia for the past and delight in the tangible products of the present. “Imagine how exciting it would be if you could hear your great grandfather’s voice relating a tall tale from the Old Country,” read a 1970s fundraising brochure for the American Italian Activities Center. Immigrants’ recorded oral histories would reside in this on-site research institution. Equally exciting, though, would be the “robust Sicilian wines; cameos from Torre del Greco; straw handicrafts from Sardinia and Florence; or Italian fashions from Turin, Milan, or Rome” that shoppers could find ringing the central plaza. As such a list made clear, Piazza planners embraced a pan-Italian identity for its profitable potential and cultural cachet, despite the fact that Louisiana’s Italian population was nearly entirely Sicilian.<sup>30</sup> “Imagine....the People from New Orleans and all over the world shopping in the bright stores for unique Italian products,” the brochure’s author persisted.<sup>31</sup> Ethnic pride would come not just from understanding the community’s historical links to its ancestors, this fundraising material claimed, but in purchasing contemporary Italian products, too.

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<sup>29</sup> Smith & Company, Inc., “Piazza d’Italia Economic Analysis,” Box 1, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>30</sup> As of 1978, the year the Piazza opened, “99 percent of the New Orleans Italian community [was] Sicilian.” Lipps, “Italians,” *Dixie*.

<sup>31</sup> “The American Italian Activities Center: In the Heart of New Orleans’ Piazza d’Italia,” ca. mid-1970s, Box 1, PDI, AIRL.

In planning for such a fantastical mix of tenants and experiences, Italian community leaders had found a ready collaborator in Charles Moore, the inventive architect who designed the fountain at the plaza's center. Moore professed a philosophy of what he called "loose fit" in his work, a vision that the Piazza d'Italia came to embody.<sup>32</sup> Moore explained this to mean "a set of images that are extensive enough and vague enough to have the chance of reminding someone of something.... You have to have things familiar so that people will feel comfortable, and then a surprise to make familiar things seem more vivid than ever."<sup>33</sup> For these reasons, Moore greatly admired Disneyland as a site that "allow[ed] play-acting... in the public sphere."<sup>34</sup> His approach to the Piazza d'Italia exemplified this perspective while adhering to the ways in which New Orleans had changed in the past several decades, as the city came to rely ever more heavily on tourism.<sup>35</sup> Moore designed the Piazza to be simultaneously contemporary and historical, of New Orleans and a world away. His use of theatrical spaces and engaging sensory

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<sup>32</sup> The Piazza d'Italia resulted from an unusual collaboration of two architects: Los Angeles-based Charles Moore and the local firm August Perez & Associates. When the American-Italian Cultural Foundation (AICF) and the city of New Orleans invited bids for the project, Moore proposed a plan emphasizing the Piazza's fountain while Perez focused on the spaces ringing the plaza. AICF invited the two architects to design the Piazza together. Perez initially urged a specifically conservative design for the site, writing in 1975, "This project is not the place for a bombastic architectural tour de force; rather, the architects must listen respectfully to tradition." Yet after Moore's bombastic tour de force of a fountain earned critical attention and a design award, Perez happily claimed credit for the project, placing it at the center of his firm's portfolio. In 1980, Perez recalled, "Charlie Moore created the fountain, all the rest was a Perez creation. In fact, the Piazza gave an impetus to my business.... We re-organized and re-fashioned ourselves and the Piazza d'Italia was the major thrust project in gaining recognition." Nevertheless, because Moore's design was so inventive and because the spaces surrounding the Piazza remained undeveloped, Moore came to be remembered as the primary architect of the Piazza d'Italia. Perez & Associates Architects, Piazza d'Italia Design Statement, January 1975, Box 2, Folder 59: Preliminary Development Info, NOPL PDI Records; Casso with Maselli, ed., "An Idea Comes of Age," no page, Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>33</sup> Printed in an article published by *The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* on September 2, 1978, as cited in "The Magic Fountain," *Progressive Architecture*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Moore, "You Have to Pay for the Public Life," in *You Have to Pay for the Public Life: Selected Essays of Charles W. Moore*, ed. Kevin Keim (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 127; originally published in *Perspecta* no. 9-10 (1965): 57-97.

<sup>35</sup> See J. Mark Souther, "The Disneyfication of New Orleans: The French Quarter as Façade in a Divided City," *Journal of American History* (December 2007): 804-811; Souther, *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of the Crescent City* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); and Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

components placed the Piazza on the same plane as other contemporary tourist experiences in the city, such as fine dining restaurants, a spruced up French Quarter, and the renovated French Market.

While the Piazza's design struck many visitors as surprising if not silly – one reporter described it as a “cross between a board game and a spaghetti Disneyland” – its uninhibited blend of cultural and commercial components felt familiar to many Louisianians of Italian descent because it was rooted in one of their most enduring traditions.<sup>36</sup> The St. Joseph altar, the oldest public ritual associated with Sicilian immigrants, exemplified this very synthesis. Sicilian immigrants began to “give” altars soon after they arrived in large waves at the turn of the twentieth century, using them to honor their protector while also showcasing their diligence and material success to their non-Italian neighbors (*fig. 6.4*).<sup>37</sup>

Believed to be the husband of the Virgin Mary and the foster father of Jesus on earth, St. Joseph was still essentially a modern saint, as Roman Catholic authorities did not designate an annual feast day in his honor until the early seventeenth century. A variety of devotional traditions to St. Joseph flourished in diverse regions of Italy, Spain, and Portugal. In the mid-twentieth century, Pope Pius XII declared St. Joseph to be the patron saint of workers.<sup>38</sup> Sicilians

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<sup>36</sup> Mimi Crossley, “Bit of Italian Fantasy Down in New Orleans,” *Houston Post*, no date, ca. 1978.

<sup>37</sup> French-speaking New Orleanians celebrated St. Joseph's Day as *Mi-Carême*, or a mid-Lent holiday, since the early nineteenth century. A March 20, 1905, article in the *New Orleans Item* described special sermons in honor of the saint's feast given by two Irish priests, seeming to indicate that the day was still not yet associated with Sicilian immigrants and their altars. The popularity of Sicilian altars and the public's involvement in the holiday grew enormously in the space of a generation, though. A 1931 article noted, “Thousands of persons visited the shrines and altars erected in honor of St. Joseph last night.” On the origins of St. Joseph Day celebrations in New Orleans, see Lyle Saxon, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1945). “St. Joseph Feast is Celebrated,” *New Orleans Item*, March 20, 1905, 5; “Altars Honor St. Joseph,” *The Morning Tribune*, March 19, 1931.

<sup>38</sup> For the varied histories of Roman Catholics' devotions to St. Joseph, see Roberto Cipriani and Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, eds., *Il cibo e il sacro* (Rome: Armando, 2013); J. Gordon Melton, ed., *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations* (Santa Barbara, CA:



who emigrated to Louisiana revered Joseph as the patron of Sicily and a powerful intercessor in desperate moments. Uniquely, they elaborated their devotion in terms of food. Families, clubs,



Figure 6.4. Most Sicilian immigrants to Louisiana found work in the Louisiana food industry. They used food to thank their patron, St. Joseph, at first on a modest scale in private homes and later in lavish, public settings. Rotolo family St. Joseph altar, 1926, American Italian Research Library, Metairie, La. (hereafter cited as AIRL).

and Catholic parishes in Louisiana differed on the precise origins of the altar tradition, but all claimed that medieval Sicilian peasants had prayed to St. Joseph during times of drought. When he answered their prayers, they recounted, the impoverished devout had only one substance with which to thank him: food.<sup>39</sup> They built altars in their homes in the weeks preceding St. Joseph's

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ABC-CLIO, 2011); and Angelo Torre, *Il consumo di devozioni: Religione e comunità nelle campagne dell' Ancien Régime* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Participants in Louisiana St. Joseph altars conveyed these origin stories to religion and folklore scholars, who offer the most comprehensive studies of this tradition. See Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff, "'Giving an Altar': The

feast day and filled them with images of the saint and homemade foods. Originally humble and constructed in private homes, in the 1960s, Louisiana's St. Joseph altars grew into highly elaborate compositions that filled entire rooms, if not churches and businesses.<sup>40</sup> Proud families posted ads in local newspapers to invite the public to view their altars. After a ceremony in which children dressed as members of the Holy Family had tasted all of the altar's food, visitors were free to admire the structures, eat, and depart with a lucky dried fava bean, honored for its hardiness in Sicilian drought.

Fervent religious belief and superstition drew Sicilian-Americans to give and attend altars, but dollars and cents likewise flowed from and between the structures, displaying the mix of commerce and culture that would characterize the Piazza d'Italia. The altars' hosts invited donations or begged for the funds necessary to build them. Oral histories with women who gave altars frequently revealed a very business-like process of bargaining and negotiation with St. Joseph that typically ended in the saint procuring an altar in his honor. Women promised altars in return for healthy babies, the return of a son from the battlefield, and the recovery of a lost job (fig. 6.5). When Josie Calcagno's husband became ill, he swore to St. Joseph, "Help me get well

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Ideology of Reproduction in a St. Joseph's Day Feast," *Journal of American Folklore* 100, no. 398 (October-December 1987): 446-460; Roslynn Plemer, "The Feast of St. Joseph," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 2, no. 4 (1968): 85-90; Ethelyn Orso and Peggy Kaveski, "Undisclosed Aspects of Saint Joseph Altars," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 3 no. 5 (1975): 14-18; Karen Warren, "Feast of St. Joseph: Labor of Love by the Faithful," *Folklife in the Florida Parishes Series, Vol. 1* (Hammond, LA: Center for Regional Studies, Southeastern Louisiana University: 1982); David C. Estes, "St. Joseph's Day in New Orleans: Contemporary Urban Varieties of an Ethnic Festival," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 6 no. 2 (1987): 35-43; and Ethelyn Orso, *The St. Joseph Altar Traditions of South Louisiana* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1990). Local historians and Louisiana church parishes complemented these scholarly writings with informal guides to constructing altars, which included recipes for foods typical of the feast. See Mike Palao, *St. Joseph's Day in New Orleans* (La Mar Management, Inc.: 1979); *Spirit of Independence: The St. Joseph Day Celebration* (Independence, LA: ca. 1980s); St. Joseph Guild of New Orleans, *Viva San Giuseppe: A Guide for Saint Joseph Altars* (New Orleans, LA: 1985); and Elenian Club of New Orleans, *The Elenian Club Cookbook* (New Orleans, LA: 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Andrew J. Kaslow, "The Afro-American Celebration of St. Joseph's Day," in *Perspectives on Ethnicity in New Orleans*, ed. John Cooke (New Orleans, LA: Committee on Ethnicity in New Orleans, 1979), 48.



Figure 6.5. In Sicily and Louisiana, women were almost completely responsible for preparing the food that filled St. Joseph altars. Many started their preparation weeks if not months in advance. St. Joseph altar prepared by Angelina Corona Accardo, Nancy Stillone Roppolo, and Rosalie Corona Canal, 1948, AIRL.

and I'll make you an altar." When his health improved, Josie considered, "Maybe we'd wait until next year," she remembered. But St. Joseph was a lender who always demanded his due. "I had always heard that if St. Joseph was unhappy, he'd enter your dreams," Calcagno described. "Well, I had a dream of a half-empty altar. Everything was done in half." Calcagno began work on the altar shortly afterward.<sup>41</sup> A sense of obligation worked in the other direction as well, though. In his 1945 collection of Louisiana folk practices, Lyle Saxon reported, "If a favor is asked of Saint Joseph and not granted, [his statue] is sometimes stood on its head as punishment

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<sup>41</sup> *Spirit of Independence*, 32.

until the wish is fulfilled.”<sup>42</sup> Sicilians understood the devotional tradition of the altar to be a contract, even if the other party signed with an invisible hand.

While petitioning for the saint’s intercessional powers, communities celebrated their own labors too. The food and objects that filled St. Joseph altars crystallized intangible hours of work. Giving an altar required the conjoined efforts of a family or church community and altars demanded significant investments of time and money. In some cases, the degree of sacrifice proved quite physical. Making *pignolate*, clusters of fried dough that represented pinecones, required women to repeatedly dip their hands in cool water as protection against the hot sugar. Still, “Some of the women...ha[d] burns on their hands for weeks afterward,” one observer reported (*fig. 6.6*).<sup>43</sup> When families then gave away all the food that they had created, their generosity communicated not just kindness, but also material success. Altars celebrated in a highly public, theatrical way the diligence with which the Louisiana Italian community worked. Sacrifice and success bore fruit in the altars’ amazing quantities of food, in both lean years and times of plenty. For one altar contemporary with the Piazza d’Italia, the host “prepared 110 pounds of spaghetti and 40 gallons of sauce.” A visitor remembered with awe, “She stood on a chair, [and] stirred the sauce with an oar.”<sup>44</sup> An employee of the Federal Writer’s Project described the offerings of an earlier, mid-century altar:

There were alligator pears, prickly pears, nuts, Japanese persimmons, fried cauliflower, fig cakes, snap beans, stuffed crabs, doughnuts, peanuts, crayfish, pineapples, grapefruit, mulberries, onions, celery, nectarines, oranges, almonds, tomatoes, grapes, plums, artichokes, dates and frosted layer cakes by the dozen.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Saxon, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, 99.

<sup>43</sup> Warren, “Feast of St. Joseph,” 5.

<sup>44</sup> Warren, “Feast of St. Joseph,” 5.

<sup>45</sup> Saxon, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, 98.

Such a cornucopia echoed the rainbow of produce sold by many Italians in the city's markets. Altars collapsed the work of present and past generations in this annual feast. Food was the substance of Sicilians' labor in Louisiana as well as the medium of their success and celebration.<sup>46</sup> Work and worship united on the altars, as they did at the Piazza d'Italia.



Figure 6.6. Sicilian-American women in Louisiana made *pignolate*, clusters of fried dough rolled in molten sugar, to represent pinecones said to have been played with by Jesus as a child. Burned fingertips manifested the many hours of physical work involved in giving St. Joseph altars. Women making *pignolate* for the St. Joseph altar, ca. 1940s, AIRL.

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<sup>46</sup> On the construction of an Italian-American identity around cultural practices and objects, especially food, see Simone Cinotto, *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Joseph Sciorra, *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); Sciorra, "Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian-Americans," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 3 (1989): 185-198; and Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

An additional clue to the sacred nature of labor in the Sicilian-American community could be perceived in the careful arrangement of items on the three-tiered altars. Sesame cookies sat next to holy cards. Lamb cakes, frosted with flaked coconut and symbolizing the Lamb of God, appeared next to fig pastries resembling the eyeballs of St. Lucy, believed to have been blinded before her martyrdom. When women positioned the dishes they had made next to statues of Saint Joseph, they leveled the sacred and the quotidian. One photograph of a group of women and the food they had created for a 1940s altar illustrated this message (*fig. 6.7*). The women encircled their food in an arrangement that echoed that of the twelve apostles in an illustration of the Last Supper visible on the wall behind them. Their labors, like those of Jesus' first followers, were holy. In their home kitchens, working with their hands and improvised tools, like pocket knives, bakers sculpted breads to resemble the most precious objects associated with the Catholic Mass: the monstrance and chalice, believed to hold the body and blood of Christ. In making, displaying, and consuming the foods on St. Joseph altars, Sicilian families sent the message that all the work of their hands classified as worthy of celebration.

As practiced in Louisiana, St. Joseph's feast grew to exemplify an Italian-American brand of culture that had logics of labor, commerce, and consumption at its heart. In a January 1975 planning document, the Piazza d'Italia's architects wrote, "The Piazza needs a center – a point to which the whole development can relate.... We searched for a single symbol that is central to the Italian-American experience in New Orleans and what we found is the celebration of St. Joseph's Day."<sup>47</sup> The persistently intertwined nature of commerce and culture in Louisiana's Sicilian community echoed the role that consumerism played as the ethnic revival

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<sup>47</sup> Perez & Associates Architects, "Piazza d'Italia Design Statement," January 1975, Box 2, Folder 59: Preliminary Development Info, PDI Records, NOPL.

unfurled in cities and neighborhoods across America. Nevertheless, the two forces shared the stage in a uniquely equal way at New Orleans's Piazza d'Italia.



Figure 6.7. Sicilian-American women proudly proclaimed the holy nature of their culinary labors for St. Joseph, as exemplified by the similar arrangements of this group of bakers and the twelve apostles visible in the image on the wall behind them. Women with fig cakes for the St. Joseph altar, ca. 1940s, AIRL.

Still, to certain eyes the Piazza betrayed an intrinsic cultural distance, if not artificiality, at its core. After an Italian journalist visited New Orleans in the early 1970s and interviewed Italian-American Federation president Joseph Maselli, the journalist reported himself completely baffled by the Piazza project. Competition for commemoration among American ethnic groups that had typically “abandoned without regret the language of their forefathers,” as he put it, struck him as perverse. “It is a bizarre phenomenon of today’s America,” the journalist wrote to

his Italian readers. “Even as the races melt ever more finely and fully,” the need to assert the accomplishments and histories of individual groups grew stronger. French and Spanish colonial presence was still readily visible in New Orleans, he explained. In addition, “The black population, which even a decade ago could not ride on buses reserved for whites, celebrate the splendors of jazz music in nightclubs” throughout the city. Frantic to not be left behind, the reporter perceived, the Italians of New Orleans proposed the Piazza as a way to prove their legacy.<sup>48</sup> And yet to this Italian, New Orleans’s Piazza d’Italia seemed far from Italian.

The journalist had detected the key irony at the heart of America’s new infatuation with its multiethnic past and present, at least as manifested in the Crescent City. Despite celebratory language that trumpeted the city’s diversity, ethnic clubs and groups – often recently assembled – dedicated themselves unambiguously to exalting their own faction. Advertising materials and planning documents related to the Piazza d’Italia demonstrated a sharp contrast between an external celebration of New Orleans’s diversity and an internal insistence on promoting the history and interests of Italians. “French, Spanish, Negro, Acadian, West Indian, German, Irish, Latin American, Italian-American: all these peoples...have created a cultural gumbo shared by all,” declared a glossy folder produced by Piazza planners to attract developers and the public. “Where else but in New Orleans could the past and present...co-exist so amicably? Piazza d’Italia is a tribute to Italian-Americans but only in a minor key, sotto voce, if you please. Above all, it is a blend...which is uniquely New Orleans. Is this not what America is all about?”<sup>49</sup> Such language depicted the Piazza’s Italian backers as humble partners in a uniquely heterogeneous city. “The Piazza d’Italia was conceived...by a group of responsible Italian-Americans, proud of

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<sup>48</sup> Mario Costa, “Una piazza d’Italia dentro New Orleans,” no source, ca. early 1970s, Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>49</sup> “Two Traditions Meet...” advertising pamphlet, ca. 1975-1976, Box 1, PDI, AIRL.



their ethnic heritage but, above all, mindful of their responsibilities as Americans to continually contribute to a more diverse...community,” another promotional booklet described.<sup>50</sup> New Orleans’s Italians constructed their monument and shopping complex not to broadcast their own successes, such materials alleged, but to contribute selflessly to the longstanding multicultural ambience that had made the city famous. Internal planning documents told a different story, however.

Project leaders and fundraisers worked hard to promote the primacy of their community’s culture and participation at the Piazza d’Italia, even to the exclusion of others, demonstrating the self-centered direction of their campaign’s gaze. In the fall of 1978 and spring of 1979, the American Italian Renaissance Foundation (AIRF), a non-profit organization established to develop the Piazza’s memorial and museum facility, deployed more than one hundred callers to solicit \$2.5 million in donations from local Italian Americans. “The Activities Center, to be built primarily by donations from the American Italian community, is the single largest undertaking without federal funds ever attempted by an ethnic group,” announced a pamphlet requesting support. “It will forever enshrine the Italian heritage in New Orleans.”<sup>51</sup> Planners understood their work to be an important campaign of ethnic and community pride.

Convincing prospective benefactors that the Piazza d’Italia would be authentically Italian proved to be a necessary – and delicate – operation for AIRF fundraisers. AIRF provided its volunteers with a script intended to assuage doubts that could be posed by reluctant donors. “Why don’t we have an Italian architect?” a skeptic might ask. AIRF instructed its callers to respond, “We do.... August Perez won the bid from the city for the overall Piazza and Perez’s

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<sup>50</sup> “Festival della Piazza d’Italia,” advertising booklet, October 12-18, 1975, PDI, Box 1, AIRL.

<sup>51</sup> “The American Italian Activities Center: In the heart of New Orleans’s Piazza d’Italia,” ca. late 1970s, PDI, Box 1, AIRL.

grandmother was a Russo.” Another might inquire, “What kind of shops will be in the building?” Again AIRF prepared a quick response, “Only those shops selling Italian or American Italian related products. That’s part of the restrictive covenant.”<sup>52</sup> Although Italian-American planners sought to bar non-Italian vendors from the Piazza, consultants warned the city privately that this strategy was neither “feasible,” “desirable,” nor legal. Rather, the consultants recommended, “Carefully marketed, we feel that the Piazza can be comfortably 80% ‘pure’ Italian in feeling.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, Piazza planners fundraised based on the conviction that Italians would bankroll the project and serve as its primary vendors and consumers, even if public promotional materials claimed that the site would honor Italians “only in a minor key.” Regardless, Italian-American Federation president Joseph Maselli saw no ambiguity in the Piazza d’Italia’s purpose, declaring, “It is...a legacy to the progeny of our distinctive race of people.”<sup>54</sup> The Piazza celebrated Italians, Maselli affirmed, not Italians’ many neighbors.

Such overt ethnic pride – especially for an *Italian* identity among a population that was virtually entirely of Sicilian descent – was a relatively recent phenomenon in New Orleans, further characterizing the Piazza as essentially a project of ethnic and racial invention under the guise of revival. Although a handful of social clubs and benevolent organizations, such as the Contessa Entellina Society, had existed in New Orleans since the late nineteenth century, most disbanded during the world wars. Similar to German immigrants in other regions of the country, Louisiana Sicilians had sought to drop affiliations with a declared enemy of the United States,

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<sup>52</sup> American Italian Renaissance Foundation, American Italian Activities Center Fund Drive Manual, ca. fall 1978 to spring 1979, Box 1, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>53</sup> Foran & Greer, Inc., “Piazza d’Italia,” no page, September 1977, Box 2, Folder 54, NOPL PDI Records.

<sup>54</sup> Casso with Maselli, ed., “An Idea Comes of Age,” Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

even shying away from sponsoring Italian refugee families in New Orleans after World War II.<sup>55</sup> New Italian clubs, such as the Greater New Orleans Italian Cultural Society, the Italian-American Marching Club, and the St. Bernard Italian-American Cultural Society, did not form until the mid 1960s or even 1970s. St. Joseph altars transitioned from private, family devotionals to expansive public events during these decades as well.<sup>56</sup> Thus, as the Piazza d'Italia rose in the mid 1970s, it offered a wholly new experience to residents who called themselves Italian.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, promotional materials surrounding the Piazza d'Italia's development confirmed the distance separating the city's Italian-American community from Italian culture. This gap revealed itself partly in a lack of familiarity with Italian language. Advertising brochures regularly misspelled common Italian words, such as *cappuccino* (fig. 6.8).<sup>58</sup> One pamphlet announced that the Piazza d'Italia offered a place to "savor what the French call 'joie de vivre,' the Italians 'gola della vita,'" inadvertently switching *gola*, meaning "gluttony," for *gioia*, "joy."

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<sup>55</sup> The American Committee on Italian Migration attempted to settle 1,000 refugee families in New Orleans, knowing the size and longstanding nature of Sicilian immigration there. But due to the community's hesitant response, only 55 families were settled. Anna Lundberg, "The Italian Community in New Orleans," in *New Orleans Ethnic Cultures: A Publication of the Committee on Ethnicity in New Orleans*, ed. John Cooke (New Orleans: Department of English, University of New Orleans, 1978), 45-46.

<sup>56</sup> Some scholars suggest that St. Joseph's Day traditions grew increasingly lavish during the 1960s due to competition with the city's Irish-American community, which sponsored extravagant St. Patrick's Day celebrations two days earlier. Ethelyn Orso, as cited in Cooke, Introduction, *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Even as public displays of allegiance increased, a native Italian and recent transplant to New Orleans complained to Piazza d'Italia planners that New Orleans was not very Italian at all. In 1976, as planners sought tenants for the project's shopping facilities, Concetta Randazzo Donato wrote to project leaders to express interest in leasing a space. Donato had run a gift shop in Philadelphia selling imported music and gifts. She wrote that she felt afraid that New Orleanians would not support her business, though, due to the "absence of nostalgic feeling in the Italian Populace." She explained, "I must say, upon arriving here I was more than a little remiss in finding, in a city of this magnitude, a city so cosmopolitan as New Orleans...the absence of an Italian newspaper or radio or TV programs." Letter from Concetta Randazzo Donato, to [Nick J.] Accardo, ca. 1976, Box 1, Folder 36: Potential Piazza Tenants, NOPL PDI Records.

<sup>58</sup> "Here's that piazza..." promotional folder, ca. 1975-1976, Box 2, Folder 76: Stanson & Grier [*sic*], NOPL PDI Records; "Festival della Piazza d'Italia," advertising booklet, October 12-18, 1975, Box 1, PDI, AIRL.

Here's that piazza in New Orleans  
with everything from  
capuccino to Mediterranean fountains.



Figure 6.8: Misspelled Italian words, such as *cappuccino*, in Piazza d'Italia development materials pointed to the distance separating late twentieth-century Louisiana Italian-Americans from Italian culture and language. "Here's that piazza..." promotional folder, ca. 1975-1976, Box 2, Folder 76: Stanson & Grier [sic], PDI Records, NOPL.

An advertising pamphlet offered a more elaborate, bilingual paean to the Piazza's amenities:

There's a piazza

Where you can drink capuccino [sic] or chianti / *dove puoi gustare un caffè o un*  
 Where you can dine on muffalettas, / *bicchiere di chiante* [sic],  
 Bring a sack lunch / *pranzare con fettuccine e*  
 Or enjoy chicken cacciatore, / *piccata al limone,*  
 Where you can buy Italian fashions / *dove ti aspetta l'ultimo grido della moda italiana,*  
 And leather goods or / *dove compri borse, scarpe e gioielli come*  
 A variety of Italian products, / *fossi a Via Veneto,*  
 Where you can dance / *dove danzi, canti e ami*

Or dangle your feet in a fountain, / *al suono dell'acqua zampillante*  
Or get married, / *della fontana*  
Where you can have a business [meeting] / *dove vai per affari*  
Or just stroll in Mediterranean surroundings. / *o solo per passeggiare / su un'isola mediterranea*

And it's in New Orleans.<sup>59</sup>

English- and Italian-language versions compelled the reader to understand the Piazza as equally legible by an American or Italian visitor, but the two pieces were not direct translations (*fig. 6.9*). In fact, distinctions between the two versions pointed to a New Orleanian brand of Italian culture that was fundamentally different from its European source. For example, the English text invited readers to come to the Piazza to “dine on muffalettas,” a sandwich invented in the French Quarter, or “bring a sack lunch,” a concept likely unfamiliar in Italy’s traditional dining culture. In contrast, the Italian version invited the reader to “dine on fettuccine with / a lemon piccata.” English-speaking shoppers read a nonspecific invitation to buy “leather goods or / A variety of Italian products,” whereas the Italian found a much more detailed invocation of an exclusive Italian experience. At the Piazza, one could buy “handbags, shoes, and jewelry as if / you were on the Via Veneto” in Rome, the text claimed. The author drew on distinct foods, places, and consumer products that would be familiar to American and Italian shoppers, but many of these experiences were not shared.

To New Orleans’s Italian-American community, the expansion of the St. Joseph altar tradition and construction of the Piazza d’Italia offered highly visible and profitable ways to answer any doubts about cultural authenticity among Louisianians of Sicilian descent.<sup>60</sup> Piazza

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<sup>59</sup> “Here’s that piazza...,” NOPL PDI Records.

<sup>60</sup> Despite ardent expressions of ethnic unity and pride, some in the Italian-American community recognized and feared the historical and cultural divide that had grown between late twentieth-century Louisiana Italians and their forefathers. In 1973, as community leaders first met to generate ideas for the Piazza d’Italia, the Louisiana magazine *Italian-American Digest* published a table at its centerfold that illustrated in neat columns the differences between the “southern peasant family in Italy” and the “first and second generation Italian family in America.” To a



Figure 6.9. Planners creating both Italian- and English-language versions of Piazza d'Italia development materials in an attempt to communicate that the Piazza belonged authentically to both cultures. Yet differences in the textual content showed that cultural referents were not completely parallel. "Here's that piazza..." promotional folder, ca. 1975-1976, Box 2, Folder 76: Stanson & Grier [sic], PDI Records, NOPL.

planners believed that the consumption of Italian food, music, and imported goods would bear fruit in strengthened community ties, pointing to the essentially self-centered gaze of the revival among New Orleans's Italian Americans. Despite such hopes, the Piazza's heyday was short-

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readership of mostly second- or third-generation Italian Louisianians, the columns sketched a clear trajectory of social decline. Distinct from the peasant family in which the "mother [had been the] center of home only," the second-generation family had a mother who "reserve[d] time for much social life and work[ed] for wages." Far from the earlier era's "strong in-group solidarity," this younger generation subsisted on "little in-group solidarity." In sum, the author warned of changing gender roles and weakening community bonds. At the very moment that American ethnic groups looked backward and embarked on a campaign of cultural revival, key social and historical institutions of the Italian-American community were at risk, this table warned. Italian-American Federation of Louisiana, *Italian-American Digest* (Atlantic Printing, Inc.), ca. fall 1973, Vertical Files: Italians – New Orleans, NOPL.

lived. Its restaurants and shops were never built. The Italian-American community had insisted on an ambitious project that nevertheless relied heavily on the city, whose promise to develop the adjacent site and maintain the Piazza went unfulfilled due to major fiscal problems. By 1988, a decade after critics had hailed the Piazza's fountain as a postmodern masterpiece, a local journalist eulogized the site, writing, "Today the ramshackle piazza has the dubious distinction of having become the world's first post-modern ruin."<sup>61</sup>

Food-centric public spaces like the St. Joseph altars and Piazza d'Italia presented a persona that was both proudly ethnic and successfully assimilated, rooted in the state's past and a savvy participant in the commercialized cultural environment of the present. Implicit, but hardly invisible, in the Italian-American community's ambitious building campaign were the varied social privileges amassed during decades of economic and cultural assimilation.<sup>62</sup> Initially excluded from the ranks of New Orleans's social and racial elite, by the era of ethnic revival Louisiana's Italians claimed pride in a history that their forefathers had sought to shed. Now

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<sup>61</sup> The city closed the Piazza d'Italia in 2001, yet Italian cultural groups continued to use the space for special events. In May 2015 the city revitalized original plans for the site, requesting proposals to develop the parking lots next to the Piazza. As of December 2015, the city appeared ready to build a 355-room Hard Rock Hotel adjacent to the Piazza d'Italia. Frank Schneider, "With Help of Some Friends, Piazza Fountain is Flowing," *Times-Picayune*, August 19, 1987; Roger Green, "Once Proud Piazza Falls into Decay," *Times-Picayune*, June 18, 1988; Eliza Strickland, "The Fall and Rise of Piazza d'Italia," *Italian America* (Summer 2003): 12-13; "Piazza d'Italia Down to one Developer: A Hard Rock Hotel," *Canal Street Beat*, December 21, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Italian journalist Giuseppe Antonio Borgese traveled throughout the United States from 1931 to 1934 and wrote a book recording his impressions of America's multiethnic society. Significantly, Borgese used a culinary metaphor to describe his interpretation of assimilation as a violent sequence of revulsion to acceptance. He explained, "One drinks a little glass of tomato juice....At first this horrifies the foreigner, it's like a drink of blood; the second time it disgusts him; eventually it pleases him; and this, the tomato juice, is the *experimentum crucis* of Americanization." Borgese found American society to feel stagnant after passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, writing, "Perhaps the *melting-pot*, that famous crucible of people, is rather a kind of cylindrical tube in which the various social and national essences sit one atop the other, with no chance of melting? The races brush up against each other but do not touch: black and white, blond and brown, coexist in an atmosphere of tepid tolerance without knowing or loving each other." My translation. G.A. Borgese, *Atlante Americano* (Modena: Guanda Editore, 1936), 216-217, 223.

unambiguously “white,” New Orleans’s late twentieth-century Italian-Americans had arrived in a position where they could play with and profit from their ethnic ties, rather than hide them.<sup>63</sup>

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## II. Groceries, Gardens, and Vietnamese Po-boys: Discovering New Orleans’s Exotic Suburbs

During the same years that the Piazza rose on Poydras Street, newspaper reporters introduced readers to a group of newcomers to the city who offered a culinary and cultural exoticism more reminiscent of nineteenth-century New Orleans than the present.<sup>64</sup> On May 27, 1975, history repeated itself. “The Tower of Babel couldn’t have been much more confusing than the local Trailways Bus Station about 2:30 p.m. Monday,” a *Times-Picayune* reporter described on the paper’s front page. The reason: “19 Vietnamese refugees arrived from Eglin Air Force Base in Northwest Florida.”<sup>65</sup> More than one hundred years earlier, local writers and tourists had regularly described the city’s French Market as a Tower of Babel, a diverse mix of people and languages that made New Orleans feel excitingly un-American. “It is a more incessant, loud, rapid, & various gabble of tongues of all tones than was ever heard at Babel,” wrote the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe when he first encountered the French Market in 1819.<sup>66</sup> By 1975, locals spurned the French Market as hackneyed. Fresh energy arrived from this infusion of new residents. “Pandemonium reigned,” the reporter recalled, “because apparently only one of the 19

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<sup>63</sup> Herbert Gans theorized this approach as “symbolic ethnicity.” Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1979): 1-20.

<sup>64</sup> “Vietnamese po-boy,” in the title of this section, refers to *bánh mì*, a Vietnamese sandwich made of meat, pâté, pickled vegetables, and herbs on French bread. Just as the *muffuletta* came to be identified with New Orleans Italians, as a dish original to the city and eagerly adopted by locals and tourists, so was the Vietnamese *bánh mì* quickly translated into the terms of New Orleans cuisine. In 1987, a New Orleans reporter described *bánh mì* as “a Vietnamese version of a po-boy.” Gayle Ashton, “Vietnamese retain ways of their former home,” *Times-Picayune*, January 25, 1987.

<sup>65</sup> Joan Treadway, “Resettlement Begins Here for Nineteen Vietnamese,” *Times-Picayune*, May 27, 1975, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, entry dated January 9, 1819, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820*, ed. Samuel Wilson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 18.



spoke any English and no one present spoke Vietnamese.” This small group of refugees represented only the first few of thousands who would change New Orleans’s culinary, social, and racial dynamics.<sup>67</sup>

Strikingly similar to the city’s nineteenth-century Sicilian immigrants, New Orleans’s late twentieth-century Vietnamese refugees entered New Orleans’s cultural world through food. They added a new ingredient to New Orleans’s multiethnic gumbo and formed the city’s first significant Asian community. Selected cultural qualities of the refugee group – such as their familiarity with Roman Catholicism and distinctive cuisine – smoothed their acceptance into New Orleans society. Yet distinct from the city’s contemporary Italian Americans, who controlled the public narrative of their ethnic revival project, newspaper reporters mediated completely the early histories of Vietnamese refugees.<sup>68</sup> Writers promoted the community’s groceries, restaurants, vegetable gardens, and weekend food market in the far eastern suburbs as exciting and novel cultural destinations for adventurous New Orleanians. In introducing a broad readership to a group initially segregated from the city’s mainstream by linguistic differences, the media fueled perceptions of the Vietnamese as exotic and authentically ethnic. Press coverage of the refugees’ adaptation to Louisiana life emphasized success stories that seemed to confirm that New Orleans’s creolizing society still worked. Importantly, despite the refugees’

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<sup>67</sup> Treadway, “Resettlement Begins Here,” *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>68</sup> Due to the recent nature of refugees’ arrival and linguistic differences, historians are only beginning to explore the stories of the Vietnamese in New Orleans. Newspaper reporting, municipal sources, and geographers’ and anthropologists’ studies comprise the current body of scholarship on this group. For example, see S. Leo Chiang, *A Village Called Versailles*, film (Harriman, NY: New Day Films, 2009); Charles H. Rowell and Vien Nguyen, “Father Vien Nguyen,” *Callaloo* 29, no. 4 (2006): 1070-1081; and Jesse W. Nash and Elizabeth Trinh Nguyen, eds., *Romance, Gender, and Religion in a Vietnamese-American Community: Tales of God and Beautiful Women* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1995). For transcribed oral histories with Vietnamese culinary professionals in New Orleans, see Linh Garza, interview by Rien Fertel, February 18, 2015, transcript, Southern Foodways Alliance, accessed March 29, 2016, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/linh-garza/>; Ngoc Le and Triet Tra, interview by Rien Fertel, translated by Ngoc Le, January 30, 2015, transcript, Southern Foodways Alliance, accessed March 29, 2016, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/ngoc-le-and-triet-tra/>; and Peter Nguyen, interview by Sara Roahen, February 22, 2007, transcript, Southern Foodways Alliance, accessed March 29, 2016, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/vietnamese-farmers-market-community-gardening-project/>.

initially impoverished state, reporters never interpreted the Vietnamese within the same social framework as poor African Americans. Rather, in the eyes of observers, the Vietnamese and their food appeared intriguing, rather than threatening or burdensome. The refugees' arrival seemed to offer a convenient opportunity for many to proclaim American multiculturalism in action in New Orleans's backyard, even during an era of intense hardship for the city's black residents.

Vietnamese refugees settled in Louisiana for geographic, cultural, and religious reasons.<sup>69</sup> As refugees fled South Vietnam and Cambodia in the frantic first wave of exits from the region in spring 1975, United States forces funneled them into four hastily established camps. Two of these, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, stood in relatively close proximity to New Orleans. Refugees later explained that they felt attracted to New Orleans when they learned about its climate and French cultural history. In addition, many refugees had worked in the fishing, shrimping, and oyster industries in Vietnam and anticipated similar opportunities on the Gulf Coast. Dzuyet Hoang remembered an American official asking if he would like to relocate to Washington, D.C. But then, he explained to the *Times-Picayune*, "They say New Orleans is a city on the coast, the climate is warm and have many seafood. And we say, 'Oh yeah, oh yeah.' We choose New Orleans."<sup>70</sup> Though half a world apart, environmental parallels between tropical Vietnam and sub-tropical Louisiana eased the refugees' transition in terms of employment and cuisine.

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<sup>69</sup> For general histories of Vietnamese refugees in the United States, see Sucheng Chan, ed., *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006); Nazli Kibria, *Family Tighrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> Gayle Ashton, "Carving a Slice of the American Dream," *Times-Picayune*, April 21, 1985, 12. See also Carl Bankston and Min Zhou, "Go Fish: The Louisiana Vietnamese and Ethnic Entrepreneurship in an Extractive Industry," *National Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (July 1996): 37-55.

Sponsorship by Associated Catholic Charities also provided a major incentive to arriving refugees to settle in Louisiana. Many were Roman Catholic and had fled from North to South Vietnam when the Communists came to power in 1954. The Louisiana Catholic Church assisted these twice-over refugees with their transition to New Orleans, especially in finding them housing. Working closely with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, Associated Catholic Charities helped settle hundreds of Vietnamese refugees together in a handful of apartment complexes in the city's eastern suburbs, especially the Versailles Arms and Versailles Gardens apartments. This intervention became controversial as many African-American residents accused apartment managers of discrimination. By May 1978, three years after the fall of Saigon, more than 7,000 Vietnamese refugees had come to Louisiana, approximately 70% of them to the New Orleans metro area.<sup>71</sup> By 1980, Louisiana ranked third among all states in the number of Vietnamese refugees resettled in America.<sup>72</sup> New Orleans's gumbo pot had quickly expanded.

Newspaper coverage of the refugees' adaptation to New Orleans life exoticized the newcomers as profoundly foreign. Press reporting tended to depict Vietnamese communities like the Versailles apartments as cloistered outposts that adventurous New Orleanians could penetrate, but only if they were willing to leave the familiarity of the French Quarter. Versailles Gardens was a "transplanted Vietnamese village," a *Times-Picayune* reporter described in 1982.

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<sup>71</sup> Wade R. Ragas and Vincent Maruggi, "Vietnamese refugee living conditions in the New Orleans Metro area," Working Paper No. 111 (New Orleans: Division of Business and Economic Research, University of New Orleans, November 1978).

<sup>72</sup> Between 1980 and 1990 Louisiana's Vietnamese population grew by approximately 62%, ranking it fifth among all states, with approximately 17,600 Vietnamese Americans. Still, this growth rate was only twenty-sixth highest in the country, far behind the explosive growth of California and Massachusetts, which experienced increases of Vietnamese-American residents at rates of 213% and 387%, respectively. Table 2.2 Distribution of Vietnamese Americans in the United States, by State, 1978, 1980, and 1990, Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston, III, *Growing Up American: The Adaptation of Vietnamese Children to American Society* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), accessed August 21, 2015, [https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/zhou\\_tables%20figures.pdf](https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/zhou_tables%20figures.pdf).

“It remains a world unto itself, a world sealed off from the rest of New Orleans by the barrier of language and the profoundly foreign mind-sets” of its residents. Sitting in Ly Van Nguyen’s coffee shop, the writer recounted a transporting scene. “Above [Nguyen’s] head the black light illuminated swirls of incense. I imagined I was in Vietnam until ‘Born to Run’ boomed over the tape player.”<sup>73</sup> A short drive from the city center had enabled the reporter to feel like he was on another continent. One woman who employed Vietnamese refugees recounted her initial surprise at their appearance, which set them apart from her locally born employees. The Vietnamese were “small, tiny, pretty, little-bitty, fragile-looking people who spoke a completely different language,” she recalled.<sup>74</sup> The refugees struck many New Orleanians as curiously unfamiliar in language and look, even though they had arrived in a proudly self-proclaimed multiethnic gumbo.

Nevertheless, food writers found the community’s cultural and physical isolation alluring. Such a narrative adhered to the city’s longstanding reputation of culinary exoticism, which had drawn travelers since the nineteenth century. Even in the late twentieth century, and despite a language barrier, food allowed for an initial channel of contact between native-born New Orleanians and the Vietnamese. A 1980 *Times-Picayune* guide to the city’s ethnic grocery stores facilitated such exploration. “Ethnic grocery stores are present in a variety that is amazing in this city so dominated by its own indigenous cuisine,” the writer began. Despite the fact that many ethnic and racial groups had come to New Orleans during the past three hundred years, the writer suggested that their cuisines had progressively melded into a single “red-beans-and-rice diet” as intermarriages and urban change scattered ethnic enclaves. To remedy the city’s growing

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<sup>73</sup> Bill Grady, “Little Vietnam: Life in a Transplanted Village,” *Dixie* magazine, *Times-Picayune*, January 17, 1982.

<sup>74</sup> Gayle Ashton, “Prejudice: Refugees Struggle for Acceptance,” *Times-Picayune*, April 21, 1985.

culinary homogenization, the reporter profiled nine Italian stores, five Vietnamese, five Spanish, four Jewish, three Chinese, one Filipino, and one Indian shop.<sup>75</sup>

As presented by the *Times-Picayune*, the city's late twentieth-century ethnic grocers offered readers a sense of cultural adventure while also bolstering normative conceptions of the immigrant's proper path. Although the shops appeared "something less than spic-and-span" in the reporter's eyes, she proclaimed, "[T]here is an ambience at an ethnic grocery store that you just won't find at a slick suburban supermarket. Maybe it's the pungent, not altogether pleasant aroma they all share. Or the visual splash of bright, mysterious...labels." Just as gratifying, it seemed, "Their proprietors...reinforce all the positive stereotypes we have of immigrants – hardworking, energetic, ambitious."<sup>76</sup> Like many groups before them, especially impoverished Sicilians, the majority of Vietnamese found their first jobs in the city's food industry.<sup>77</sup> Rather than subsisting as fruit peddlers in the streets or laborers on the docks, they worked as bakers and clerks at Schwegmann's Supermarket, the region's largest employer of Vietnamese refugees, as well as waiters, cooks, restaurant proprietors, and shrimpers.<sup>78</sup> By 1985, a decade after refugees began to arrive, the Fairmont Hotel's pantry staff, who prepared cold food for diners, were fully Vietnamese.<sup>79</sup> Although foreign in some ways in the eyes of many white shoppers, Vietnamese

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<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Mullener, "A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area," Part I, *Times-Picayune*, September 21, 1980.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> For census data showing the longtime and continuing prevalence of immigrants in the American food industry, see Krishnendu Ray, "Migration, Transnational Cuisine, and Invisible Ethnicities," in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala, eds. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 211-212.

<sup>78</sup> Ragas and Maruggi, "Vietnamese refugee living conditions in the New Orleans Metro area," 21, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Vietnamese refugees also dominated the workforce at Café du Monde, the longstanding coffee and beignet restaurant at the heart of the French Market. Their experience working there generated an affection among the Vietnamese community for Café du Monde's signature blend of coffee and chicory. By the turn of the twenty-first century, tins of Café du Monde coffee could be purchased in grocery stores in Vietnam. Louise McKinney, *New*

food workers took the first step on a familiar, approved path that had been trod by newcomers before them.

Vietnamese businesses headlined the *Times-Picayune's* guide to ethnic groceries as the city's most novel food shopping experience. Even though the writer presented Vietnamese and Italian groceries as similarly "ethnic," descriptions of the shops and their owners outlined clear distinctions between these very different waves of immigrants and refugees and their respective roles in the city's social world. In general, the survey presented Vietnamese food stores as mysterious, exotic, and feminized and Italian businesses as familiar, historical, and masculine. Asian stores offered completely new tastes, whereas Italian grocers sold nostalgia. At Oriental Food Store in the suburb of Harvey, the writer described, "strange and enticing foods" filled the shelves. "There are canned vegetables and fruits that you never dreamed existed, all with poetic names such as lily flowers and grass jelly." The reporter's enthusiasm for the food's charms at times transferred to descriptions of the stores' proprietors, depicting both as unfamiliar objects to appraise. A "stunning young Vietnamese woman" operated Vietnam Center in Marrero, according to the writer, whereas the owner of Philippine Imports on Cleary Avenue spoke with a "giggle and a shriek reminiscent of Bloody Mary in 'South Pacific.'"<sup>80</sup>

In contrast, the reporter described Central Grocery, the French Quarter's Italian landmark and inventor of the muffuletta sandwich, as "the granddaddy of all New Orleans' ethnic grocery stores" – the patriarch and progenitor, founded in 1906. There, the "unmistakably Mediterranean faces of the Tusa men," alongside dried spices, Perugina chocolates, and espresso beans, helped transport shoppers to Italy. Fellow old-timers included "good old" Puglia's Quality Foods,

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*Orleans: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44-45; Gayle Ashton, "Refugees Showed They Are Survivors," *Times-Picayune*, April 22, 1985.

<sup>80</sup> Mullener, "A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area," Part I, *Times-Picayune*.

founded in 1948, and Progress Grocery Company, founded in 1924, whose owner John Perrone “misse[d] the old days when the Quarter was different,” the writer reported.<sup>81</sup> Grocers’ generations could largely be determined by geography; the old guard stood in the French Quarter, while newer grocers set up on the periphery. Temporally, Italian and Vietnamese grocers bookended the city’s social and culinary histories, with other groups – Jewish, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Indian – arranged between.<sup>82</sup>

While the *Times-Picayune* guide presented these businesses as places of culinary interest to its readers, the groceries met important cultural and social needs for ethnic communities as well, akin to the role that Italian-American leaders hoped the Piazza d’Italia would play. “Since there are very few ethnic neighborhoods in this city,” the newspaper reporter explained, “the groceries tend to act as magnets, attracting people who come from all over.”<sup>83</sup> This was especially true for newer waves of immigrants, who found themselves in suburban housing developments that likely looked and functioned quite differently from their previous communities. Indian native Hemant Shah worked for the Louisiana Department of Public Works during the week and ran India Imports, a grocery store on the second floor of a suburban office building, on the weekend. His customer base of approximately 300 Indian families knew to come only on Saturday or Sunday.<sup>84</sup> Rows of mom-and-pop stores – from restaurants to a tailor to a

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<sup>81</sup> Mullener, “A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area,” Part II, *Times-Picayune*, September 28, 1980.

<sup>82</sup> Large numbers of Jewish immigrants actually predated Sicilian refugees, but the reporter noted that by the late twentieth century, the number of shoppers at kosher delis in New Orleans had dropped sharply. Describing Bill Long’s delicatessen on Freret St., the reporter wrote, “If you really want to feast on Jewish food, you’re either going to have to go to New York or find yourself a Jewish mother. There just aren’t any definitive Jewish delis in this town.” Several doors down on the same street, Ralph’s Kosher Meat and Delicatessen served clients who kept kosher, but “there are only about 200 kosher families left in New Orleans,” the reporter specified. Mullener, “A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area,” Part III, *Times-Picayune*, October 5, 1980.

<sup>83</sup> Mullener, “A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area,” Part I, *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>84</sup> Mullener, “A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area,” Part III, *Times-Picayune*.

public notary – filled all-Vietnamese suburban strip malls in Versailles, supporting many of the needs of the nearby growing enclave. Refugees living in Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida drove hundreds of miles to shop at this center.<sup>85</sup> In another New Orleans suburb, Vietnamese women brought homegrown produce and baked goods on weekends to Oriental Food Store in Tien Nhatrang Center to augment the store’s offerings. “[T]he store turns into a kind of marketplace” on weekends, the *Times-Picayune* reporter described.<sup>86</sup> Commercial and cultural activity happened both inside and outside the business’s walls.

Not all adaptive uses of space charmed refugees’ neighbors, however. Vietnamese residents in Versailles commonly dried fish and shrimp on their apartment balconies in the hot Louisiana sun, irritating native-born New Orleanians. “Their American neighbors would come home and get a whiff....There were a lot of problems culturally,” recalled Versailles apartment manager Melanie Ottaway.<sup>87</sup> Refugees also made spontaneous use of the green space that surrounded their apartment complexes in a way that would have been impossible if they had settled closer to the city center. In the swampy soil, similar to that which they had left in Vietnam, they planted taro, bitter cucumber, lemongrass, water spinach, and ginger.<sup>88</sup> Versailles apartment management and developers protested that the plants interfered with drainage in the

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<sup>85</sup> Geographers described the Versailles development’s impressive range of amenities. “The strip is comprised of restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, pharmacies, jewelry stores, tailor shops, beauty salons, bars, video stores, doctors’ offices, notaries public, and a Laundromat.” Christopher A. Airriess and David L. Clawson, “Versailles: A Vietnamese Enclave in New Orleans, Louisiana,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 12, no. 1 (1991): 10-11.

<sup>86</sup> Mullener, “A Survey of Ethnic Grocery Stores in the Area,” Part I, *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>87</sup> UNO’s 1978 study also noted fish and shrimp drying as a particular point of contention between refugees and Americans. Ragas and Maruggi, “Vietnamese refugee living conditions in the New Orleans Metro area,” 14; Gayle Ashton, “Prejudice: Refugees Struggle for Acceptance,” *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>88</sup> These new landscapes created a sense of dislocation for visitors. Geographers Airriess and Clawson wrote, “A glimpse of the gardeners bending over in plots full of taro, cassava, sweet potatoes, hot peppers, and lemon grass evokes images of the rural Asian tropics.” Airriess and Clawson, “Versailles: A Vietnamese Enclave,” 8-9; Airriess and Clawson, “Vietnamese Market Gardens in New Orleans,” *Geographical Review* 84, no. 1 (January 1994): 21.



area. Also citing aesthetic concerns, they forced the gardens to be dug up and relocated twice.<sup>89</sup> With a permanent home by 1981, however, the gardens flourished. Having settled in a new city without a familiar town center, public square, or designated farmland, many refugees created their own commercial and cultural spaces in the New Orleans suburbs.<sup>90</sup>

Press coverage like the *Times-Picayune*'s guide to the city's ethnic grocery stores helped generate interest in the next logical steps in processes of culinary and cultural acquaintance – cooking and eating – which cast Vietnamese refugees as increasingly accessible. In September 1982, Sandra Day, the newspaper's food editor, wrote an ambitious guide to Vietnamese cuisine in the Crescent City. Some of the devices she used to entice readers echoed those that writers had long employed to mark the city's Creole cooking as exclusive and exceptional. In doing so, she welcomed Vietnamese food into the fold of New Orleans cuisine. "Vietnamese cookery is considered to be the *nouvelle cuisine* of Oriental cooking," Day declared. Chinese was out and Vietnamese was in.<sup>91</sup>

Procuring the recipe for purportedly authentic egg rolls could be as challenging as securing a prized family formula for a creole gumbo, however. "In Vietnam, recipes by tradition are carefully guarded secrets, and mothers are unwilling to give out secrets even to their daughters," Day disclosed. "Although younger generations are more willing to give out their

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<sup>89</sup> Valerie Faciane, "Chef Lagoon Gardens Moved to Aid Drainage," *Times-Picayune The States-Item*, February 20, 1982, 14; Airriess and Clawson, "Vietnamese Market Gardens," 18.

<sup>90</sup> These gardens were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but residents have rebuilt many of them. The Vietnamese-American community in New Orleans East attracted national attention for its quick return following the hurricane, led largely by the local Vietnamese Catholic church, as well as its collaboration with African-American neighbors to prevent the city from opening a landfill for storm debris in their neighborhood. Karen J. Leong, Christopher A. Airriess, Wei Li, Angela Chia-Chen Chen, and Verna M. Keith, "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East," *Journal of American History* 94 (December 2007): 770-779.

<sup>91</sup> Even seven years after refugees first arrived in New Orleans, Day portrayed their cuisine as still relatively unfamiliar to most readers, writing, "With some 10,000 Vietnamese in the New Orleans area, word about their delightful cuisine is bound to get out. If you haven't had the opportunity to sample it, you will." Sandra Day, "Những món ăn thuần túy," *Times-Picayune*, September 23, 1982.

recipes...secret ingredients are still frequently ‘forgotten’ so that a recipe can’t be exactly duplicated.”<sup>92</sup> Day’s emphasis on the covert nature of culinary treasures, carefully passed down – or not – within a family line would have been familiar to many readers of longstanding local volumes like *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book*, which helped generate a culinary canon affirmed by many New Orleanians. Day’s portrayal of Vietnamese dishes as a novel form of cultural knowledge to acquire and protect taught New Orleanians that this foreign cuisine could be understood in similar terms to their own.

Day’s article included several ambitious recipes – offered by two Vietnamese women, with ingredients purportedly intact – that instructed readers to simmer beef bones and fragrant spices for beef noodle soup and roll and fry egg rolls stuffed with crab, shrimp, pork, and vegetables. One recipe for catfish in sweet and sour soup called for okra, casting a pair of popular regional ingredients in new roles, at least to New Orleanians. This particular dish captured culinary and cultural assimilation in action, showing how shared ingredients could bridge the divide between previously unknown groups. Day also advised readers to be persistent shoppers as they acquired then-unfamiliar items like ginger root, mint, star anise, and tofu. Authentic ingredients were crucial to constructing Vietnamese recipes and Day recommended a new food source that whet the appetites of adventure-seeking New Orleanians like no other: the Versailles farmers’ market.

Soon after Vietnamese refugees settled in the city, the Versailles weekend food market became New Orleans’s new exotic food destination, definitively replacing the French Market as the city’s most unique ethnic institution. From humble beginnings on front lawns and sidewalks, the marketplace grew to an assembly of dozens of Vietnamese women, most selling surplus vegetables from their gardens and freshly prepared foods in the apartment complex parking lot.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Shoppers found an abundance of herbs, vegetables, fish, live birds, and holiday foods like rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves. Vendors' wares offered special benefit to elderly refugees, who could not drive to a faraway supermarket or read the English-language product labels on shelves.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, for local reporters and food writers, trekking to the early morning Saturday market, with its unfamiliar smells, sights, and sounds, offered a trip of adventure rather than subsistence and replicated similar pilgrimages to the French Market a century earlier.

The relatively spontaneous, far-flung, and humble nature of the Vietnamese market contrasted sharply with the elaborately planned centrality and grandeur of the Piazza d'Italia. Nevertheless, these qualities lent the Vietnamese spaces a raw authenticity, at least in the eyes of non-Vietnamese, that some city residents seemed to desire. "It is a scene unlike anything American," a *Times-Picayune* reporter affirmed of the Versailles food market. "It was 6 a.m. Saturday. The early-morning light was broken by the chatter of old women selling their vegetables.... As the sun rose higher, the small market area bustled with activity."<sup>94</sup> Another reporter recounted her early morning foray primarily in terms of senses of smell and sound. "Women are setting out small bundles on tables and mats spread on the ground. There is a slight odor of fish in the air. In the semi-darkness, caged geese scabble across the wooden floor of their pen."<sup>95</sup> Both descriptions echoed the accounts of travelers of almost a century earlier, who had sought to experience the French Market's people, languages, and foods in the pre-dawn cool. The 1896 edition of the *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* had advised, "The markets in New

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<sup>93</sup> Airriess and Clawson noted that because many elderly residents of the Versailles apartments maintained garden plots, they participated in the market as vendors as well as shoppers, deriving further benefits of "emotional well-being and economic empowerment." Ashton, "Vietnamese retain ways," *Times-Picayune*; Airriess and Clawson, "Vietnamese Market Gardens in New Orleans," 20.

<sup>94</sup> Kurt Mutchler, "Market Place," *Times-Picayune*, April 22, 1985.

<sup>95</sup> Ashton, "Vietnamese retain ways," *Times-Picayune*.

Orleans are well worth a visit.... To see them in their perfection, [the tourist] will have to arise early enough to get to the market by sunrise.”<sup>96</sup> The same sun rose over both markets, women played a comparably prominent role as food preparers and vendors, and the linguistic mix of both groups led to comparisons to the Tower of Babel. Visitors reveled in the perceived exoticism inherent in both environments. Despite the obvious geographic, historical, and cultural differences between the French Market and Versailles market, the latter offered a sense of New Orleans’s culinary and ethnic history come full circle.

The market’s intriguing activity, the speed with which many refugees found work in the city, and the generalized success of Vietnamese students in New Orleans schools prompted press coverage that touted the group as an assimilation success story. Newspaper reporting on the tenth anniversary of refugees’ first arrival cast the group as hardworking and humble, able to quickly adapt to American life. Such narratives, which conformed to America’s developing stereotype of the “model minority,” seemed to confirm to readers that New Orleans’s multiethnic gumbo continued to offer commercial and cultural success to eager workers.<sup>97</sup> In April 1985, the *Times-Picayune* printed a ten-year timeline of the Hoang family that began with their evacuation from Vietnam a decade earlier. The feature charted a steadily ascending trajectory as the Hoangs reached quintessential American landmarks.

Despite their tumultuous journey to the United States, both Dzuyet Hoang and Tien Tran found jobs within six weeks of coming to New Orleans. The following year, in 1976, they bought a used car. Tran gave birth to a daughter, Christine Mary Hoang, “the first American citizen in the family,” the reporter noted, in 1977. In 1978, the Hoangs bought a home. Despite

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<sup>96</sup> *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Nicholson & Co., 1896), 33.

<sup>97</sup> Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

their daughter's birth the previous year, the house was "the first thing that make us happy again," declared Tran. Following the arrival of a son and a second job, the Hoangs became citizens in 1984 and voted in their first presidential election. "We feel proud," asserted Hoang in 1985. "Self-independent. We don't have to rely on the government. We're tired, but we feel proud."<sup>98</sup> The Hoangs' steady achievement of very traditionally American benchmarks – job, car, house, children, political participation – cast New Orleans as a welcome environment to any resident willing to work.

Still, while the majority of Vietnamese in New Orleans found jobs within a few months of their arrival, as did refugees in other states, such statistics hid the fact that they worked mostly in positions that were low paying and unstable. A short timeframe of government support and the desire to become financially and socially independent led most refugees to take any position that was immediately available, however menial.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, in the same years that Italian Americans built the Piazza d'Italia in downtown New Orleans, newspapers' chronicles of the upward mobility of many Vietnamese refugees sought to demonstrate that they too had embarked on a path of progressive commercial and cultural success, just like the Sicilians had a century before them.

Seemingly quick progress for Vietnamese refugees was possible partly because many white New Orleanians had affirmed their rightful place in the city soon after their arrival, creating a story of assimilation that had begun with food. When the New Orleans Museum of Art celebrated Young People's Day in 1979, a *Times-Picayune* reporter described the scene as a seamless mix of many cultures. "Youngsters were dazzled by the brightly colored costumes and

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<sup>98</sup> Gayle Ashton, "Carving a Slice," *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>99</sup> Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience*, 77-89.

graceful rhythm of the Versailles Vietnamese Community Dancers,” she wrote. As attendees watched the different groups perform, “A warm feeling of community engulfed the audience.... For four glorious hours more than 3,000 people filled every corner” of the museum, including “Vietnamese school girls, black youths, young couples clad in jeans...nuns, Girl Scouts, old men, Eurasian and Middle Eastern groups.”<sup>100</sup> Though the newest additions, the Vietnamese belonged unambiguously in this diverse mix, such a list proclaimed. Some Vietnamese refugees declared that they sensed this welcome. Nursing student Trang Le explained, “In school, we read the United States is a melting pot....New Orleans is a very good example.”<sup>101</sup> Dominic Thien, a printer, compared his neighbors in Louisiana to those he had encountered in Illinois and Kentucky. “In the north, people are polite but they have secret discrimination,” he said. “But here there are people of different races and that why people of every nationality is considered same.”<sup>102</sup> Such a purportedly straightforward, amiable entrance into New Orleans’s cultural world had begun largely in the realm of food, at sites like grocery stores and the Versailles weekend market.

Not all was smooth going, of course, especially between Vietnamese and African Americans who found themselves to be neighbors in challenging economic circumstances. Fights at Versailles bus stops in the early 1980s prompted increased police presence in the neighborhood.<sup>103</sup> The refugees benefitted from easier access to affordable housing and

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<sup>100</sup> Pat Spratlin Antenucci, “It Was Her Day: Accent on Young People, Family Fun at NOMA,” *Times-Picayune*, December 9, 1979, 105.

<sup>101</sup> Gayle Ashton, “Vietnamese Made Grade in Classroom,” *Times-Picayune*, April 23, 1985.

<sup>102</sup> Gayle Ashton, “Prejudice,” *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>103</sup> Additionally, Vietnamese refugee Tien Tran alleged that the family’s African-American neighbors harassed her father-in-law by stealing items out of their yard. She told a reporter, “If he raise some duck, they stole the duck. And we buy the new grass cutter, and they stole it. And we buy the fishing pole, they stole it. And we buy gasoline for our car, full, the next day we go to work, it’s empty. So that make us so very mad.” An 89-year-old refugee

government assistance, at least initially, which caused resentment among some African-American New Orleanians struggling to make ends meet in a still deeply segregated city. Yet the arrival of Vietnamese refugees coincided fortuitously with a new awareness among the broader public regarding the meanings of ethnicity, race, and assimilation in America. Non-Vietnamese visitors at grocery stores and the Saturday market, which the community had built out of necessity, put these spaces to work for their own interests by using them to claim that the city continued its heritage as a multiethnic gumbo. University of New Orleans anthropologist Martha Ward confirmed this food-centric process of cultural acceptance for Vietnamese refugees. Ward predicted that twenty years in the future, “New Orleans will be proud of its Asian population and we’ll all go to the Têt Festival every year... All will be forgiven if they throw beads and cook good food.”<sup>104</sup> Play the game by throwing Mardi Gras beads and bringing delicious food to the table, Ward instructed. This formula could make a New Orleanian out of anyone. Nevertheless, for some city residents this equation did not always work. For African-American New Orleanians, the era of ethnic revival was not one of new public places but of placelessness.

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### III. Teaching the History of a Place That No Longer Existed

Absent from most newspaper reporting on the Vietnamese refugees’ arrival was an analysis of their impact on African-American New Orleanians, who strove to find jobs, affordable housing, and quality education during these years. Figuratively and literally, white

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explained to another reporter, “When the Vietnamese man receives his check from his office, he gets stopped by two black men and they try to take the check away from him. It is very dangerous on the weekend in America.” *Times-Picayune* coverage often portrayed Vietnamese refugees as the victims of white prejudice and African-American crime. Gayle Ashton, “Prejudice,” *Times-Picayune*; (N.B. the second quote represents the reporter’s paraphrase, via an interpreter) Grady, “Little Vietnam,” *Times-Picayune*, 16. On race relations in Versailles, especially after Hurricane Katrina, see Eric Tang, “A Gulf Unites Us: The Vietnamese Americans of Black New Orleans East,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2011): 117-149; Leong et al., “Resilient History,” *JAH*.

<sup>104</sup> Gayle Ashton, “Prejudice,” *Times-Picayune*.

New Orleanians made space for the Piazza d'Italia and the Versailles gardens, groceries, and food market during the same years that African-American residents felt squeezed out of their homes and neighborhoods. Italian Americans and Vietnamese refugees were easily able to purchase or claim space in downtown and suburban New Orleans. In contrast, African-American New Orleanians experienced a significant reduction in the quantity and quality of private and public spaces available to them during these years. Vietnamese refugees displaced African-American renters in Versailles. Residents of long-established neighborhoods like Tremé/Seventh Ward angrily declared that urban renewal and poverty had robbed them of one of the only quarters of the city that had belonged to them. In response to such spatial and social upheaval, one group of activists and students resolved to use the *classroom* as a space where they would teach ethnic and racial pride and seek to preserve their community's unique history. Although they chose New Orleans's archetypal gumbo pot for their project logo, the group claimed no new food-centric public space comparable to the Piazza d'Italia or Versailles market.

Telling the history of Vietnamese refugees' arrival from the perspective of pre-existing African-American residents of Versailles reveals a more complicated story than that offered by journalists excited by the weekend food market. An early study of the status of Vietnamese refugees in the city conducted by the University of New Orleans (UNO) acknowledged a notable "racial change" among residents of the Versailles apartment complexes in the first three years after the refugees' arrival. But, the authors specified, "It is important to note that no documented or verified cases of overt discrimination based on preferences for Vietnamese households were discovered." The study also speculated that because most refugees sought jobs in suburban locations they likely did not compete with African-American New Orleanians, who searched for work closer to the center of the city, or so the authors assumed. "The impact of Vietnamese



resettlement upon employment and unemployment of already deprived groups is negligible,” the UNO report decided.<sup>105</sup>

The Urban League of Greater New Orleans blasted these conclusions, asserting that the speedy settlement of Vietnamese refugees in fact exposed longstanding neglect of the city’s poorest African Americans. In its own counter-report, the League criticized the UNO study for underestimating the number of refugees who had arrived and inadequately appreciating the critical shortages in housing and employment that had challenged African-American New Orleanians for years. Rose Butler, author of the Urban League report, specified that from 1975 to 1978, the window when approximately 7,000 Vietnamese refugees had arrived in New Orleans, about 33,000 African-American New Orleanians had requested assistance in finding affordable housing but did not receive it.<sup>106</sup> Table 1 compares the shifting demographics in three apartment complexes where many refugees were placed and shows rapid change in the space of a few years.

**Table 6.1.** Rates of occupancy by race at Versailles Arms I and II and Normandy Apartments in New Orleans

Year	Black	Indochinese	White
1975	245	1	217
1976	205	206	105
1977	172	266	72
1978	124	344	54

*Sources:* Data from public records of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Annual Occupancy Reports, as cited in Ragas and Maruggi, “Vietnamese refugee living conditions in the New Orleans Metro area,” 16.

<sup>105</sup> Ragas and Maruggi, “Vietnamese refugee living conditions in the New Orleans Metro area,” 13, 22.

<sup>106</sup> Rose W. Butler, “Critique of the Ragas-Maruggi Study,” Urban League of Greater New Orleans, Inc., January 1979, 42-43.

*Note (Continued):* Spring 1979 occupancy records showed an even more diminished presence of black and white families in the Versailles complexes, with 15 black and 5 white families living there at the time. Therese L. Mitchell, "Subsidized Housing Criticized," *Times-Picayune*, February 13, 1979, 6.

Such figures clarified the extent to which subsidized housing appeared to have been created for the Vietnamese as soon as they needed it but eliminated for other groups. "Normal market turnover coupled with an eagerness to live near other Vietnamese could produce concentrations of Indochinese in a few apartment complexes," the UNO study authors had suggested.<sup>107</sup>

Nevertheless, interviews with a sampling of Versailles tenants described provocations by apartment management that ranged from rapid rent increases to negligent maintenance, which they perceived as unambiguously racially motivated. One former tenant explained that she felt the manager "was forcing Blacks out by not doing maintenance work."<sup>108</sup> Another detailed how management had recently added a twenty-five dollar legal fee for tardy rent checks, five dollars for parking, and a two-dollar "pesticide fee." Furthermore, managers refused to fix his broken air conditioner, alleging non-payment of rent, a charge that was successfully overturned in court.<sup>109</sup> As such investigations indicated, the Vietnamese refugees did not settle into empty apartments. When they built gardens and a market in the area surrounding their apartment complexes, they did not come as pioneers on unused land.

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<sup>107</sup> Ragas and Maruggi, "Vietnamese refugee living conditions in the New Orleans Metro area," 13.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Former Tenant, Versailles Arms I, by Cheryl Wilson, March 12, 1979, Appendix I, Synopsis of Interview, Indo-Chinese Refugee Resettlement Task Force, "Impact Analysis of Indo-Chinese Resettlement in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area: A Task Force Study," prepared for Mayor Ernest Morial (New Orleans: Office of Policy Planning, 1979).

<sup>109</sup> Such penny-pinching on the part of Versailles apartment management hid the fact that between 1975 and 1979 they had received upward of \$1.6 million in federal subsidies for their assistance in resettling Vietnamese refugees. Interview with Present Tenant, Versailles Arms Apartment Complex, by Athrin L. Worthy, Carlton Bennett, and Joseph Shorter, February 1979, *Ibid.*; Therese L. Mitchell, "Subsidized Housing Criticized," *Times-Picayune*, February 13, 1979, 6.

Poor black and white tenants who were forced out of the Versailles apartments, either by eviction or rising costs, had few other options in the city's contemporary housing market. Complaints from the African-American community in 1978 about the spatial pressure exerted by Vietnamese refugees prompted Mayor Ernest Morial, the city's first African-American mayor, to request that Associated Catholic Charities halt refugee relocation assistance except for purposes of family reunification.<sup>110</sup> A March 1979 investigation by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development claimed to find no evidence of racial discrimination at apartments like Versailles Arms. But a final follow-up study commissioned by the mayor that same spring inclined back to the conclusions of the Urban League. "While the Indo-Chinese may be small in number," the authors wrote, "their socio-economic condition is severe enough to impact that section of the New Orleans population which has long been economically depressed, namely, the low-income and poverty-stricken minorities."<sup>111</sup> Despite triumphal depictions of Vietnamese refugees slipping easily into New Orleans's multiethnic gumbo pot, a deeper look at the groups most immediately impacted by their arrival showed that not all benefitted.

Such spatial changes for African-American New Orleanians were hardly unique to the city's eastern suburbs. Tremé/Seventh Ward, the longstanding heart of New Orleans's black community, suffered even more dramatic transformations, independent of Vietnamese refugees, that wrought devastating physical and cultural consequences. These sectors adjacent to the

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<sup>110</sup> This slow-down was partly responsible for Louisiana's overall decline in the number of Vietnamese refugees resettled in comparison to other states. By 2010, Louisiana had dropped to tenth among states with significant Vietnamese populations, with not even five percent of the number living in the most populous state. Louisiana counted 28,352 residents of Vietnamese descent in 2010, compared to 581,946 living in California. Butler, "Critique of the Ragas-Maruggi Study," 4; United States Census Bureau, "The Vietnamese Population in the United States: 2010," accessed August 20, 2015, [http://www.bpsos.org/mainsite/images/DelawareValley/community\\_profile/us.census.2010.the%20vietnamese%20population\\_july%202.2011.pdf](http://www.bpsos.org/mainsite/images/DelawareValley/community_profile/us.census.2010.the%20vietnamese%20population_july%202.2011.pdf).

<sup>111</sup> "No Racial Bias at Apartment Complex – HUD," *Times-Picayune*, March 30, 1979, 17; Indo-Chinese Refugee Resettlement Task Force, "Impact Analysis of Indo-Chinese Resettlement in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area: A Task Force Study," prepared for Mayor Ernest Morial (New Orleans: Office of Policy Planning, 1979), 53.

French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny had flourished as a uniquely self-sustaining community for Creoles of color since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>112</sup> Blocks of businesses, churches, and fine homes ensured that residents enjoyed prosperous lives even in the center of segregated New Orleans. But integration, white flight, and urban renewal changed the area forever.

Neighborhood establishments closed once nearby residents could shop anywhere in the city.<sup>113</sup>

Between 1960 and 1970, 60% of the area's white residents moved out, converting the neighborhood from 72% black to more than 86% black. More than one third of all families living in Tremé/Seventh Ward by the late 1970s were impoverished.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the city built a major highway through the center of Tremé in the late 1960s, razing nine blocks of historic buildings. The project also obliterated an alley of live oak trees that had formed a shaded avenue and public park for residents long excluded from most of New Orleans's public spaces.<sup>115</sup> For residents of Tremé/Seventh Ward, the 1960s witnessed the disappearance of the very ground under them and trees over them.

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<sup>112</sup> The descendants of nineteenth-century *plaçage* relationships, in which a white man established a second family with a woman of color, were often free, wealthy, well educated, and commercially successful. Alongside previously established free people of color in New Orleans, they sought to distinguish themselves politically, socially, and spatially from former slaves in the aftermath of the Civil War. Ex-slaves tended to be less educated, darker skinned, and more recently arrived in Louisiana. Until the Civil Rights Movement and even beyond, some of New Orleans's "Creoles of color" insisted that they were neither black, Negro, nor African-American. Virginia R. Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1986), 134-136. On the history of Tremé as a social and cultural center for New Orleanians of color, see Michael E. Crutcher, Jr., *Tremé: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); and Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>113</sup> St. Mark's Community Center, *Tremé/7th Ward Griots: A New Orleans Ethnic Heritage Program, Field Edition*, funded by the Office of Education, Ethnic Heritage Studies Program (1979), 63-64.

<sup>114</sup> City of New Orleans – Community Development Plan 1977, Tremé/Seventh Ward, Box 2, Folder: EHP – Demographic Studies, MS 327 St. Mark's Community Center Ethnic Heritage Project (hereafter cited as MS 327), Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as Amistad).

<sup>115</sup> This highway had originally been slated to run through the French Quarter and hug the Mississippi River, but wealthy and white residents and business owners successfully protested the plan. This replicated a pattern common to many American cities of the era, in which major highways associated with urban renewal cut through poor neighborhoods where ethnic enclaves and people of color predominated. See Raymond A. Mohl, "Stop the Road: Freeway Revolts in American Cities," *Journal of Urban History* 30, no. 5 (July 2004): 674-706.

New Orleanians of color debated a significant cultural schism during the same years that their neighborhood suffered disturbing physical changes. In response to national movements for civil rights and Black Power, by the 1960s and 1970s many young New Orleanians of color identified as black rather than Creole in order to ally themselves with groups and histories beyond the Crescent City. They understood “Creole” to be a remnant of a shameful past when white men had established second families with women of color.<sup>116</sup> Other New Orleanians objected to the identifier “Creole” for more overtly political reasons. They declared it to be a divisive tool long used by white New Orleanians to encourage segmentation within the community of color, hoping they could never unite into a single political bloc. In 1978, Emilio “Monk” Dupre, president of the Seventh Ward’s Community Organizations for Urban Politics, declared, “I think the term Creole has been really over-used....[I]f it becomes a divisive force in the black community, it has no use....[W]hen everybody agreed that they all were in the same boat things started moving a lot faster.”<sup>117</sup> New Orleanians like Dupre rejected what had once been a marker of exclusionary pride.

Yet such a perspective left some New Orleanians between worlds. Ronald Joseph Ricard told a reporter, “I’m too white to be black and too black to be white....I’m Creole too.” Ricard characterized the distinction between Creole and black as largely generational rather than political or philosophical.<sup>118</sup> Those with longtime ties to the neighborhoods of Tremé/Seventh

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<sup>116</sup> Domínguez, *White by Definition*, 172-180.

<sup>117</sup> “Creole/Non-Creole Conflict,” oral history with Emilio Dupre, interviewed by Richard Carter, in *Quartee Red Beans, Quartee Rice: Stories of the Tremé/7<sup>th</sup> Ward*, ed. Donna Davis, The Ethnic Heritage Project (New Orleans: St. Mark’s Community Center, January 1979).

<sup>118</sup> Ricard remembered that when he was a child, “We never associated with ‘black’ people, just like whites never did. Creole parents used to have two great fears, either their child would grow up and marry a black person or pass for white and never be seen by the family again.” J.E. Bourgoyne, “Tradition is Losing its Hold on Creole of Color Community,” *Times-Picayune*, August 14, 1977. On the history of passing, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Ward, like Ricard, understood “Creole” to be a word that linked them to a unique urban community and verified their families’ long roots in New Orleans. Importantly, Ricard identified proudly as Creole during an era when some white New Orleanians *still* persisted in the racist fantasy that the term could never refer to African Americans. The reporter explained to readers, “Descendants of French and Spanish settlers of Louisiana, called Creoles, are Caucasians. They do not like when someone makes the mistake of thinking that ‘creole’ implies black blood.” New Orleanians like Ricard balanced in a difficult position: between a white society that continued to spurn them as Creoles, and a black society that called on them to modernize and shed this complicated term.<sup>119</sup> In these ways, Tremé/Seventh Ward residents experienced simultaneous physical and cultural upheavals of their historic neighborhood in the 1970s.

Thus, during years when Italian Americans built a flamboyant monument to their history and newspaper reporters delighted in the exotic sounds and smells of the Versailles market, African-American New Orleanians rushed to preserve the history of a place that no longer existed, at least in the form it had for almost a century. Challenged by limited physical space, negligible funding, and press reporting that focused on African-American poverty, crime, and educational failures, Tremé/Seventh Ward residents participated in the ethnic revival by constructing an intangible product. A group of activists and high school and college students based at the St. Mark’s Community Center in Tremé proposed to use the *classroom* as a space where they would teach cultural pride and preserve their community’s unique story. To that end, they wrote a curriculum to teach New Orleans eighth-grade schoolchildren about their ethnic and racial identities and history in the city. Using the tools of ethnic revival, they instructed students

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<sup>119</sup> On the much-disputed adjective “Creole” and its shifting relationship to race, see chapter 5, as well as Domínguez, *White by Definition*; Sybil Kein, ed., *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); and Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

how to conduct oral histories with neighborhood residents and wrote new definitions for terms such as “assimilation,” “majority,” and “creole” that privileged the perspectives of black New Orleanians, especially illiterate community elders, above those of professional historians.<sup>120</sup> The St. Mark’s curriculum sought to give students a new appreciation for the complexities of New Orleans’s history and their rightful place at its center.

When the St. Mark’s researchers proposed their curriculum to the U.S. Office of Education in 1975 in the hopes of winning a grant, they demonstrated a radically different motivation and perspective on New Orleans history than did Italian Americans who were building the Piazza d’Italia during the same years. “The history of urban growth has been a history of the displacement of one ethnic group by another,” the authors began, and “inner city ghetto dwellers are latter-day Native Americans,” pushed from one unwanted sector of the city to the other. As Sicilian immigrants prospered, they had moved from the cramped French Quarter – disparagingly known as “Little Palermo” at the turn of the century – to spacious suburbs like Metairie. The residents of Tremé/Seventh Ward had enjoyed no equivalent choice. The ample public and private money that built the Piazza d’Italia, plus the enthusiastic press coverage that celebrated the Piazza and Versailles market, stood in stark contrast to the complete dearth of materials, funding, and attention that St. Mark’s researchers witnessed in their corner of the city. “Interest in the black people of Tremé ended after urban removal began,” they asserted. “The people who moved out to other ghettos were not followed, recorded, documented: their artifacts are not included in the folk museums....Their history is an oral history, and with no one to talk to, the roots of this tradition are dying.” The St. Mark’s researchers and Piazza planners reached

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<sup>120</sup> In the curriculum’s Glossary of Terms, the authors defined “majority” to mean “more than half, e.g., more than 50% of New Orleans school children are black – they are a majority.” Though a simple gesture, authors made a powerful statement to African-American students whose families had long been treated like political and social minorities. St. Mark’s Community Center, *Tremé/7th Ward Griots: A New Orleans Ethnic Heritage Program, Field Edition*, funded by the Office of Education, Ethnic Heritage Studies Program (1979), 18.

for similar goals: preserving their group's stories and placing them in the larger context of New Orleans's history. The St. Mark's project originated not in a satisfied gaze backward, however, but a deep frustration at the extent to which the city had disrespected their community. As for the residents of Tremé, "Its people are angry, squeezed out blacks," the authors wrote.<sup>121</sup> The researchers declared the ambitious goal of preserving the history of a community no longer rooted in a particular place.

To accomplish this, the St. Mark's ethnic heritage curriculum sought to make the classroom into a space of ethnic pride and a new sense of historical understanding. "Objectives are to increase student appreciation of New Orleans cultural heritage," the authors wrote, and "help them understand their own racial and ethnic groups."<sup>122</sup> Lessons prompted students to investigate local businesses and churches via a walking tour of the neighborhood, place their own families within the chronology of New Orleans history, and imagine themselves in the shoes of real historical personalities. For example, a series of lesson plans entitled "Role-Playing Ethnic History" invited students to consider a series of historical events from a variety of angles. To envision the circumstances surrounding the mob killings of eleven Sicilian immigrants in 1891, students played the parts of an immigrant and his wife, a neighboring African-American woman who had befriended them, and an Irish police officer. Following the classroom encounter the teacher asked students, "Would anyone have acted the role differently? What choices did each person have? What do you think really happened?"<sup>123</sup> The lessons sought to illuminate the

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<sup>121</sup> "Tremé Oral History / A Model for Recovery of Urban Ethnic Heritage," 1<sup>st</sup> year draft: December 1975, Box 1, Folder: Draft Proposals – EHSP, MS 327, Amistad.

<sup>122</sup> St. Mark's Community Center, *Tremé/7th Ward Griots*, 4.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.



degree to which historical events and the ways that people recorded and remembered them involved contingency and doubt.

Although largely theatrical, these exercises also taught students that they, too, could be actors in the city's history, an attitude not to be assumed for residents of Tremé/Seventh Ward. Another classroom activity titled, "Who Are They? Really?" asked students to list traits of their own ethnic or racial group and compare them with those of another. "This exercise is designed to survey our ideas about ethnic and racial differences," the instructions explained. Students' responses provided ample material for a challenging classroom discussion. A sampling of completed worksheets spelled out the extent to which students had internalized deeply destructive stereotypes about the meanings of race in New Orleans. Although one white student noted on the bottom of his or her worksheet, "I would think we are almost the same; it depends on the people – person," other students readily listed adjectives that cast African-American New Orleanians as dishonest, unlucky, or worse and whites as the polar opposite. One student who identified as black wrote that members of his or her own group were "stupid, ignorant, lazy, cruel, rude, and religious," whereas whites were "sensitive, generous, intelligent, faithful, quiet, and friendly." Another black student noted that blacks were "sly...they steal...[they were] purse snatchers," and, again, they "steal." In the same student's eyes, whites "get all the money...live in pretty houses...get more jobs...[have] more a/c," and "live in [the] Garden District."<sup>124</sup> Teaching students that *all* New Orleanians had played equally prominent roles in the city's history, and encouraging not just awareness but pride, seemed tall tasks when reading the variety of points on which students perceived difference, rather than similarity.

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<sup>124</sup> Student responses, Box 5, Folder: EHP Activity #3 Form "Who are they? Really?" ca. 1977-1978, MS 327, Amistad.

To remedy such ingrained attitudes, the St. Mark's curriculum exhibited a strongly activist subtext in its dissatisfaction with the way that New Orleans public schools taught students the history of their state and city. Disparate economic and social situations of New Orleans residents, as well as groups' perceptions of their own and others' lots, had grown in part due to substandard history instruction in schools, the researchers asserted. Notes related to the St. Mark's grant proposal outlined the researchers' disgust with the texts then on shelves in Louisiana classrooms. Public school students, who were 80% African-American, had until recently learned their state's history by reading *A Story of Louisiana*, authored in 1924.<sup>125</sup> A recently published text, *Louisiana, The Pelican State*, written by Edwin Davis in 1972, seemed to offer no more of a progressive view. The researchers wrote, "The treatment of slavery is scattered and fragmentary....It is difficult to understand how a history book published in 1972 can avoid discussing in some detail the desegregation of schools and the civil rights revolution of the 1960s."<sup>126</sup> To fill in the negligent gaps left by these readings, the researchers offered a deeply revised history of the city. They began their curriculum with detailed essays on ten ethnic groups that had come to New Orleans, casting all as equal contributors to the city's construction. A

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<sup>125</sup> In a 1978 interview, Margery Shroyer, the St. Mark's project coordinator, as well as the only white participant in the project, explained her perspective on the mismatch between Louisiana history texts and students. "The traditional books were fine for me because I'm white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant, but they tell little or nothing about the other ethnic groups in this country. It's no wonder that so many kids are turned off to history." While Shroyer clearly believed fully in the curriculum's philosophy, she nevertheless assumed that one telling of history had been adequate for her and her classmates – because it told their story, presumably – even if the same version would have been insufficient for or offensive to African-American students. Even during this era of multiculturalism and ethnic revival, Shroyer seemed to take for granted the notion that separate histories could serve distinct groups, rather than favoring a single, more equitable history for the city of New Orleans. Shroyer's quote reflected the reasoning of Mayor Moon Landrieu (previously mentioned) when he planned for ethnic monuments around the city, including the Piazza d'Italia. In 1980 he explained, "It occurred to me that there were a number of ethnic groups who had contributed to the development of the city and we could not honor them all at once." Such examples showed this era in New Orleans to be a celebration of many, discrete parts, rather than a unified, diverse whole. Joan Kent, "Creoles' Pride: Gumbo Heritage," *States-Item*, June 16, 1978; Casso with Maselli, ed., "An Idea Comes of Age," Box 2, PDI, AIRL.

<sup>126</sup> Handwritten draft related to St. Mark's application for a grant from the Office of Education, 9A, ca. 1976, Folder: Draft Proposals – EHSP, Box 1, MS 327, Amistad.

bibliography of additional readings followed each essay. In contrast to the state's standard history texts, the St. Mark's researchers presented a model in which all students could see themselves reflected.

The curriculum also encouraged students to understand historical sources in a new way, largely by emphasizing the value of oral history and the community elders who served as its reservoir. The official title of the final curriculum, *Tremé/7<sup>th</sup> Ward Griots: A New Orleans Ethnic Heritage Program*, placed this perspective front and center. "A griot is a storyteller," the curriculum's first lesson plan began. "In Africa, he is an oral historian...Griots have often been illiterate. They remember the history instead of reading it, and their memories are sharp and clear."<sup>127</sup> The researchers urged a deep pride and trust in figures like grandparents and elderly neighbors as the true historians of a community. Well into the twentieth century, many white writers, such as cookbook authors, mocked African-American illiteracy as indicating a lack of professionalism and reliability.<sup>128</sup> But the St. Mark's curriculum prized unwritten memories and histories as highly accurate and useful, especially in contrast to the commonly accepted historical canon that had so flagrantly ignored or misrepresented the experiences of African Americans. "Facts about kings and presidents...may explain what happens to our money, our houses, our jobs," the authors explained. "But oral history – storytelling – makes us want to act, to change ourselves and the community we live in."<sup>129</sup> Accordingly, in preparation for the curriculum's final draft, eleven project participants recorded interviews with almost 100 elderly residents of Tremé/Seventh Ward and collected their transcripts in a bound volume and a video documentary.

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<sup>127</sup> Activity #1 Handout – "Griots – What is Oral History?" St. Mark's Community Center, *Tremé/7th Ward Griots*, 75.

<sup>128</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>129</sup> Activity #1 Handout, St. Mark's Community Center, *Tremé/7th Ward Griots*, 75.

Interviewees shared memories of work, voting, cooking, holidays, and alliances and divisions within the black community over issues like hairstyles and political activism.<sup>130</sup> In binding these recollections together into a hardcover book, *Quartee Red Beans, Quartee Rice: Stories of the Tremé/Seventh Ward*, the St. Mark's curriculum taught that these were the neighborhood's official histories. Though representing diverse perspectives, they belonged together.

For these reasons, St. Mark's researchers chose the gumbo pot as their project logo, a metaphor from which African-American New Orleanians had so often been excluded. Three figures – one light skinned, one dark skinned, and the third a blend of both – combined as they emerged from the abstracted pot. Tremé/Seventh Ward “is a gumbo, not a melting pot, because you can taste all the flavors” averred Margery Shroyer, the project coordinator. She repeated similar lines used by other groups, like the planners of the Piazza d'Italia, to explain the reasoning behind their compulsion to *build* something during this era of ethnic revival. Due to available space, funding, and social circumstances, Tremé/Seventh Ward residents constructed an intangible product, but one intended to be a “living monument” just like the Piazza d'Italia.

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### **Conclusion: New Orleans Gumbo: A Metaphor for Some But Not All**

Longtime and newly arrived New Orleanians established the Piazza d'Italia, Versailles weekend market, and St. Mark's ethnic heritage curriculum as contemporaneous ethnic spaces in postmodern New Orleans. Materials surrounding the construction of the Piazza d'Italia claimed that Italian Americans built the space in order to honor the city's multiethnic diversity, but its

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<sup>130</sup> Although the St. Mark's researchers hoped that their curriculum would be adopted in schools throughout New Orleans and beyond, it did not seem to travel far. When the project was complete, St. Mark's issued press releases indicating that they were prepared to share the original materials with area schools for duplication. It is unclear if any schools adopted the program. The single, original version of the video documentary, *Tremé/7th Ward Griots: A Video Documentary*, resides at Xavier University. The bound volume of recorded oral histories, *Quartee Red Beans, Quartee Rice: Stories of the Tremé/Seventh Ward*, also its only copy, is held at Tulane University's Amistad Research Center.

exclusive focus on Italian and Italian-American cultures showed such aspirations to be essentially privileged and superficial. The arrival of Vietnamese refugees coincided largely by chance with a new awareness among the broader public regarding the meanings of ethnicity and race and the workings of assimilation. Non-Vietnamese visitors to grocery stores and the Saturday market, which the community had built out of necessity, put these spaces to work for their own interests by using them to claim that the city continued its heritage as a multiethnic gumbo. Yet reporters neglected to tell the history of evicted Versailles residents as part of the same story. In contrast, when St. Mark's researchers sought to teach students a more inclusive, equitable version of New Orleans history that served many groups, they proved that they understood best the notion of celebrating the city as a multiethnic construction. Though not immediate neighbors, the three projects coexisted, exemplifying differing iterations of a new era of self-consciousness related to race and ethnicity in America.

In 1979, UNO historian Joseph Logsdon, a longtime scholar of race and assimilation in New Orleans, wrote a reflective essay on the nature of ethnicity in the city.<sup>131</sup> "The disappointments of the American melting pot have, I guess, made me become a New Orleanian," he wrote. Logsdon, a Chicago native, concluded that New Orleans's history was exceptional. "Here the process of assimilation created something of inestimable value – a new public culture related to place and tradition. Nowhere else in America has a new culture of this sort developed." Logsdon perceived the creolizing process as a loosening of the bonds of history, which, perhaps unexpectedly for a historian, he declared to be liberating. He explained, "In New Orleans, we have developed a new ethnicity.... We have no need to regret the loss of our ancestors' habits and

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<sup>131</sup> Logsdon co-edited the first scholarly edition of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, eds. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968).

customs....We can reflect upon our own past and its joys, decide upon our needs, and determine our own wants. Most Americans do not have that choice.”<sup>132</sup>

Though deeply sensitive to New Orleans’s complicated history, Logsdon’s emphasis on the pleasurable *choice* to submit to the creolizing process and become New Orleanian underscored a privileged perspective.<sup>133</sup> “We Can All Become New Orleanians,” Logsdon subtitled his essay. Yet as the St. Mark’s ethnic heritage curriculum taught its students, many New Orleanians of color had long claimed to be Creole and were violently spurned. New immigrants most fully accessed social, economic, and cultural security only after being absorbed into the ranks of white New Orleanians. When the descendants of Sicilians identified as Italian in the late twentieth century, their choice provided a simplified geographic referent that tied them to other Italian communities throughout America. At the same time, though, it served to whiten a group that had originally suffered discrimination for their so-called “swarthy” skin.<sup>134</sup> Vietnamese refugees benefitted, too, from the admiring gaze of those intrigued by a perceived blend of Asian exoticism and proximity to French culture. As the histories of these groups demonstrated, the value that city residents attached to celebrated ethnic identifiers like “Creole” was no less crucial, or disputed, in the late twentieth century than it had been one hundred years earlier. Such battles stood in for much larger, nebulous struggles for full political, social, economic, and cultural inclusion, which New Orleanians of color had had to wage since the city’s founding. Even America’s ethnic revival and the sensory pleasures of an Italian muffuletta

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<sup>132</sup> Joseph Logsdon, “The Surprise of the Melting Pot: We Can All Become New Orleanians,” in *Perspectives on Ethnicity*, ed. Cooke, 7-8.

<sup>133</sup> Logsdon’s article supported the findings of sociologist Richard D. Alba who concluded, “[F]or Americans of European background in general, ethnic identity is a choice.... [W]hites are largely free to identify themselves as they will and to make these identities as important as they like.” Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, 294-5.

<sup>134</sup> In 1890, a writer dismissed the French Market’s Sicilian vendors, “with their swarthy skins, unstudied attitude, and careless raiment.” Herbert W. Burdett, “Historic America: VI. New Orleans,” *The Illustrated American*, April 5, 1890, 153.

or Vietnamese *bánh mì* could not correct the prejudice inherent in New Orleans's lengthy, conflicted history as a city that originated in slavery and segregation but simultaneously proclaimed itself to be exceptionally multiethnic and racially progressive.

In the same year that Logsdon wrote his essay, the St. Mark's project published an oral history conducted with Hazel Bean, a resident of Tremé/Seventh Ward and community advocate. Rather than a gumbo pot, she suggested a different culinary metaphor to explain her experience as a lifelong New Orleanian:

I was feeding the baby the other day and.... a fly flew in and it fell right in the child's bowl of milk with the cornflakes. And I sat there and I watched that fly. It was black. That fly was black. And he's in that bowl of white milk and cornflakes, and he's just swimming round and round and round and I took a straw out the broom and I pushed him down.... When I pushed him down, he jumped back up and when he jumped back up, something snapped in my mind, and said, That's you. You see, everywhere he tried to get up, he was surrounded in that white milk and sooner or later it drowned him. And that's just the way...these white people got set up for us...just swimming and swimming and swimming and looking for, you know, me to give up! But I'm going to still strive, strive – struggle to stay here and going to try to out-beat him and outwit him or something, try to do something to him, but he just ain't gon' kill me off.<sup>135</sup>

Joseph Logsdon and Hazel Bean offered vastly different perspectives on their lives as New Orleanians. To those without the privileges of choice, space, and a widely respected cultural history, creole New Orleans could be suffocating, not liberating. As the twenty-first century approached, the postmodern Crescent City was still a gumbo pot, many claimed. Yet this utopian metaphor – especially in an age of inequitable and superficial ethnic revival – left a bitter taste on many New Orleanians' tongues.

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<sup>135</sup> “Just Ain’ Gon’ Kill Me Off!” oral history with Hazel Bean, interviewed by Donna Davis, in *Quartee Red Beans*, ed. Davis.

## Conclusion: Making Sense of the Past

In January 1981, a *Times-Picayune* journalist published an article celebrating the importance of New Orleans's cuisine to the city's contemporary economy. Inadvertently, she defined much of the Crescent City's present appeal in the terms of the past. "When tourists were asked in a survey what they liked best about New Orleans, food was the leading answer," she wrote.<sup>1</sup> The reporter noted Creole, French, and Cajun cuisines as the predominant culinary strains, but also tagged a variety of other ethnic options – Chinese, German, Japanese, Mexican, Filipino, Spanish, and Vietnamese – that helped make New Orleans an "international city." Locals as well as tourists enjoyed the more than 1,000 restaurants that could be found there. "Visitors, especially those from colder climates, are charmed by patios and courtyards and love to visit restaurants in such settings," she observed. Furthermore, the city benefitted from two other attributes that helped draw the almost 800,000 convention delegates counted in 1980. "New Orleans now capitalizes on the river's attractions," the journalist disclosed. At restaurants on the top floors of skyscraper hotels, travelers could enjoy "dining with a view of the 'lazy Mississippi' and its traffic of steamers, tugs, ferries, barges and paddlewheel sightseeing boats." New Orleans enjoyed the "natural advantage" of its location, too, which the writer claimed could be equally convenient to tourists arriving from either coast.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the journalist drew on characteristics of the city that had been cited by a broad range of writers, politicians, and local historians over the past century and a half. New Orleans's position near the mouth of the Mississippi; the visual appeal of its "lazy" river and the people

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<sup>1</sup> Next most appealing, in decreasing order, were "the French Quarter and Jackson Square, the hospitable people, atmosphere charm [*sic*], sightseeing, history, jazz/music, architecture, variety of activities, scenery/beauty, Bourbon Street, night life entertainment, riverboats, plantations and general shopping." Rachel Daniel, "Food is Top Tourist Attraction in N.O.," *Times-Picayune*, January 25, 1981, section 10, page 21."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



and vessels who worked there; the delightful feeling of sensory displacement experienced by northern travelers on a tropical restaurant patio; the tourists and locals who all eagerly devoured the cuisine of this cosmopolitan city; and, last but not least, the food itself: all described New Orleans's singular appeal. In 1885 William H. Coleman had sung the praises of "the great dish of New Orleans....There is no dish which at the same time so tickles the palate, satisfies the appetite...and costs so little as a Creole gombo."<sup>3</sup> Almost a century later, gumbo and the other dishes that filled New Orleans's culinary pantheon – including recent additions, such as bánh mì – still made the Crescent City distinctive in the eyes of locals and visitors. Food drew the hungry admiration and dollars of literally millions of consumers.

At the time of this article's writing, the journalist noted that tourism generated the second largest portion of New Orleans's annual revenue; the port continued to reign supreme.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the coming years that dynamic would change. The Crescent City's oil industry drained slowly but steadily to Houston, Texas; white flight out of the city center continued; and poverty and crime among New Orleans's increasingly isolated African-American communities skyrocketed. Such profound changes to the city's urban fabric jolted New Orleans's food industry. Even as new Cajun restaurants arrived in the French Quarter during the 1990s and 2000s, other mainstays that had fed diners for over a century, the so-called *grandes dames* of Creole cuisine, moved to the suburbs or closed their doors completely. New Orleans shoppers "made groceries," as they called it, at national chain supermarkets rather than locally owned establishments.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William H. Coleman, *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs, with Map. Illustrated with many original engravings; and containing exhaustive accounts of the traditions, historical legends, and remarkable localities of the Creole city* (New York: William H. Coleman, 1885), 91.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel, "Food is Top," *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008), 54-64.

Yet a new level of devastation would soon reach the New Orleans food world. In late August and early September 2005, the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina and the extreme heat and mildew that followed obliterated families' homes, as well as humble and fine restaurants alike. Though a largely symbolic loss, the entire contents of the wine cellars of Antoine's and Brennan's, legendary French Quarter restaurants, perished.<sup>6</sup> Block-by-block destruction of the city's kitchens could be counted in the refrigerators dragged out to curbs, wrapped tightly by residents to guard against the maggots and stench of rotted food inside. New Orleanians quantified their material losses not just by counting the photo albums, clothing, and furniture gone, but also the pounds of shrimp, oysters, and roux that putrefied in their refrigerators.<sup>7</sup> In these ways, the city's annihilation, like its success in other eras, could be specified in terms of food. Such deficits were surely far less horrific than the thousands of human lives lost, which still have not been counted accurately.<sup>8</sup> Yet they represented the tangible components of Crescent City culture; they were the stuff of private and public memories and histories. Rotted shrimp and waterlogged recipes ensured that a seafood gumbo would not be made again with those specific ingredients, in those terms, in that kitchen.

Still, far from all was lost in the storm. Katrina inspired new enthusiasm – not all of it uncontroversial – for the value of New Orleans cuisine and the preservation of its history.

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<sup>6</sup> Antoine's lost 16,000 bottles worth almost one million dollars. Thirty thousand bottles of wine were destroyed at Brennan's restaurant, where a walk-in refrigerator also exploded, causing severe structural damage. Brenda Maitland, "Heat Exhaustion: Wine Cellars Suffer Their Own Losses from Katrina," *Gambit*, May 23, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Of these hundreds of thousands of "Katrina Refrigerators," anthropologist David Berris wrote, "The mostly white exteriors proved to be an irresistible canvas for commentary about everything from FEMA and President Bush, to Saints owner Tom Benson (who had threatened to take the team from the city permanently), the mayor, and, of course, the general funkiness (not the good kind) of the fridges themselves." Berris, "Katrina Fridges, 10 Years After," *Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition*, August 28, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Most estimates revolve around 1,800. See Carl Bialik, "We Still Don't Know How Many People Died Because of Katrina," *FiveThirtyEight*, August 26, 2015, [http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/we-still-dont-know-how-many-people-died-because-of-katrina/?ex\\_cid=538twitter](http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/we-still-dont-know-how-many-people-died-because-of-katrina/?ex_cid=538twitter), accessed March 22, 2016.

Famously, New Orleans chefs cooked on generators to sustain rescue workers laboring in the deluged city. Local food writers and celebrity chefs published a new wave of cookbooks that proclaimed New Orleans's resilience with more than a faint flavor of nostalgia.<sup>9</sup> The Southern Food and Beverage Museum, dedicated to the preservation and celebration of southern foodways, opened on the Mississippi riverfront in 2008. And in 2010, the HBO series *Treme* premiered, bringing New Orleans's people, food, and music to a national viewership. All of this activity helped spur renewed tourist interest in the city and even new residents, whose numbers helped stem the losses, at least on paper, of the 400,000 New Orleanians initially displaced by the storm.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau announced that 9.28 million visitors had spent nearly 6.5 billion dollars in the city during the previous year, making 2013 the most profitable year ever for the tourism industry. Much of this money went to food.<sup>11</sup> In 2015, some counts numbered New Orleans's restaurants above 1,400, or 600 *more* than the

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<sup>9</sup> While heavily damaged, neighborhoods like Tremé and the Lower Ninth Ward drew more public attention than other sectors of the city that were equally, if not more, wrecked, such as Mid-City and Broadmoor. Lolis Eric Elie, *Tremé: Stories and Recipes from the Heart of New Orleans* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2013); John Besh, *Cooking from the Heart: My Favorite Lessons Learned Along the Way* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2013); Todd-Michael St. Pierre, *Taste of Tremé: Creole, Cajun, and Soul Food from New Orleans's Famous Neighborhood of Jazz* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2012); John Besh, *My Family Table: A Passionate Plea for Home Cooking* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2011); John Besh, *My New Orleans: The Cookbook* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2009); and Marcelle Bienvenu and Judy Walker, *Cooking up a Storm: Recipes Lost and Found from the Times-Picayune of New Orleans* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Forty percent of all adults who remained displaced one year after the storm lived in Texas, especially Houston and Dallas. Narayan Sastry and Jesse Gregory, "The Location of Displaced New Orleans Residents in the Year After Hurricane Katrina," *Demography* 51, no. 3 (June 2014): 753-775; Lynn Weber and Lori Peek, eds., *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Michelle Krupa, "Baton Rouge, Texas Trade Transplants with New Orleans Region, Census Data Show," *Times-Picayune*, April 12, 2012; and Elizabeth Fussell, Narayan Sastry, and Mark VanLandingham, "Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Return Migration to New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina," *Population and Environment* 31, no. 1 (2010): 20-42.

<sup>11</sup> "New Orleans Achieves 9.28 Million Visitors in 2013," press release, New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau, April 22, 2014, <http://www.nola.gov/mayor/press-releases/2014/20140422-tourism-numbers/>, accessed March 22, 2016.

total prior to the hurricane.<sup>12</sup> And also in 2015, an ambitious renovation of the St. Roch Market, formerly a public market in a neighborhood off the typical tourist track, offered a newly diverse array of culinary experiences to New Orleanians. In a bright white space that would have pleased early twentieth-century Progressives, diners could enjoy raw oysters or a plate of fish, rice, and beans made by a Nigerian chef: offerings that recalled New Orleans's early history, in different ways. Alternatively, consumers could find raw kale salad and "Koreole fried chicken," which conceivably made that particular corner of New Orleans taste more like Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup>

As may be expected by the content of even this short list of dishes, food came to stand at the epicenter of early twenty-first-century debates about rapid gentrification in New Orleans. Soon after the St. Roch Market opened, vandals smashed windows, threw paint, and painted "Fuck yuppies" on the market's walls.<sup>14</sup> Longtime and even newly arrived New Orleanians voiced concerns over the continuing cultural authenticity of the city, as many new (mostly white) faces bought houses and opened restaurants and boutiques, remaking old neighborhoods into something new.<sup>15</sup> Some coverage of the ten-year anniversary of the hurricane in 2015 focused on the very unequal levels of returning white and black residents dispersed by the storm: the contemporary city counted almost 100,000 fewer African Americans than in 2005. Among those

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<sup>12</sup> Such estimates were provided by Katrina 10, a public-private partnership initiated on the tenth anniversary of the storm to track and celebrate New Orleans's recovery. See "Culture & Tourism," *Katrina 10*, <http://katrina10.org/recovery-data/culture-tourism/>, accessed March 22, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> The website of St. Roch Market claims, "Est. 1875," yet the structure's history was far more discontinuous than such a brief statement suggests. The market's website offers details about market vendors, special events, and renting the space, but it offers no discussion of the public market's history, rendering it invisible to unfamiliar visitors. See <http://www.strochmarket.com/>, accessed March 22, 2016; Brett Anderson, "8 Great Dishes to Try at the St. Roch Market," *Times-Picayune*, July 7, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Bullington, "Vandals Hit St. Roch Market," *NOLA.com/Times-Picayune*, May 1, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> On contemporary debates about gentrification in New Orleans, see Rob Walker, "Airbnb Pits Neighbor Against Neighbor in Tourist-Friendly New Orleans," *New York Times*, March 5, 2016; Todd A. Price, "St. Roch Market Operators Answer Critics, Share Their Vision," *Times-Picayune*, July 7, 2015; Richard Campanella, "Gentrification and its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans," *NewGeography*, March 1, 2013.

who were able to return, black and white populations exhibited divergent degrees and experiences of recovery, with sluggish insurance payouts and inadequately mitigated reconstruction prevalent in poor areas.<sup>16</sup> Observers widely agreed that severely incompetent preparation of and response to impoverished, African-American neighborhoods damned their residents to much higher mortality rates and far slower and incomplete rehabilitation.<sup>17</sup> Sadly, such outcomes were unsurprising, as they stemmed from structural prejudices whose roots were buried deeply in the city's past and pervasive even in New Orleans's celebrated food industry.

In the New Orleans food world, laborers of color had suffered one of the world's most elaborate systems of enslavement and, even after emancipation, struggled under oppressive Jim Crow segregation and *de facto* racism.<sup>18</sup> Yet white consumers reveled in the tastes, spaces, and workers associated with the city's culinary culture as thoroughly gratifying and available for

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<sup>16</sup> Writer Gary Rivlin commented of Katrina and its aftermath, "[I]t was not an equal opportunity storm....And it has not been an equal opportunity recovery." As cited in "An Unequal Recovery in New Orleans: Racial Disparities Grow in City 10 Years After Katrina," transcript, *Democracy Now*, August 28, 2015, [http://www.democracynow.org/2015/8/28/an\\_unequal\\_recovery\\_in\\_new\\_orleans](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/8/28/an_unequal_recovery_in_new_orleans), accessed March 22, 2016. Also see Sarah M. Broom, "The Yellow House," *The New Yorker*, August 24, 2015; Gary Rivlin, *Katrina: After the Flood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Wendell Pierce, *The Wind in the Reeds: A Storm, a Play, and the City that Would not be Broken* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015); and Tom Fitzmorris, *Tom Fitzmorris's Hungry Town: A Culinary History of New Orleans, the City Where Food is Almost Everything* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2010). Studies of some of the mental and physical health effects of the hurricane found no significant difference between white and black survivors. See Alexis A. Merdjanoff, "There's No Place Like Home: Examining the Emotional Consequences of Hurricane Katrina on the Displaced Residents of New Orleans," *Social Science Research* 42, no. 5 (September 2013): 1222; and Jiao Zhen, et al., "Effect of Hurricane Katrina on Incidence of Acute Myocardial Infarction in New Orleans Three Years After the Storm," *American Journal of Cardiology* 109, no. 4 (February 15, 2012): 502-505.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright, eds., *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009); Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006); and Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Edward E. Baptist argues against a reflexive inclination to offer histories of the resistance of enslaved people without giving due weight to the overwhelmingly violent, oppressive power of slavery. To call slavery and related oppression anything other than inescapable in many cases is to ignore the full histories of those who endured them. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). See also Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *Southern History Across the Color Line*, Painter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15-39.

purchase. It is crucial to explicitly point out such histories as they occurred, specifically because New Orleanians and tourists celebrated and enjoyed them as uniquely pleasurable.<sup>19</sup> Woven between such stories, however, were other kinds of histories. New Orleanians of color resisted tirelessly the oppressive structures and personal relationships that constrained them. They derived great joy and pride from the foods they created, especially when they were able to claim authority over their cooking as chefs, cookbook authors, and proprietors of their own businesses. They were also consumers, who delighted in the city's cuisine and dining experiences in ways that had primarily been reserved for whites. Like all American cities, New Orleans has experienced complex histories of race and ethnicity. Certainly many relationships of friendship, collaboration, and love flourished in the diverse blocks of the Irish Channel, Ninth Ward, and Mid-City neighborhoods, among others. Yet claims that New Orleans is and always has been exceptional – exceptionally tolerant of interracial relations, exceptionally liberal in its preference to eat, drink, and relax rather than segregate and discriminate – are inaccurate. This study insists that New Orleans relied on a harsh dividing line between black and white that carved out histories of disparity in many American places. This line cut through the New Orleans voting booth, the tourist sector, residential neighborhoods, and even the many restaurants that refused to serve customers of color. It left a uniquely ugly scar in the Crescent City because its politicians, restaurant proprietors, souvenir shop owners, guidebook authors, historians, and ordinary residents ignored it or even celebrated it, driving it deeper into the lived experiences of New Orleanians of color.

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<sup>19</sup> In his study of the visual culture of Atlantic slavery and emancipation, Marcus Wood writes, “I had no idea of the ingenuity, and frequently the poisonous beauty, with which the memory of slavery was lovingly repainted by the dominant cultures of the slave diaspora. In the natural world venomous things frequently advertise their nature with a flamboyant beauty, and then nonvenomous things copy them.” Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

In 1984, Charles Moore, the architect of the whimsical fountain at the Piazza d'Italia, reflected on the fate of his design, which he called "in a fully Latin state of disrepair," and the nature of newer projects in the city.<sup>20</sup> Organizers of the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans had commissioned Moore to create the Wonderwall, a construction described by the *New York Times* as a "three-story-high meandering collection of urns, towers, columns, domes, chimneys, gazebos, pediments, busts, cupids and animal sculptures" that was almost a half-mile long.<sup>21</sup> Though seemingly impossible, the Wonderwall counted as an even more absurdly fantastical daydream than the Piazza's fountain. Yet Moore also found wonder in other corners of the World's Fair. He wrote:

One of my favorite pieces of the 1984 World's Fair is a set of seven Centennial Pavilions, gazebos of varying sizes apparently randomly disposed in and around a lagoon – that, from just one spot, snap into place to resemble (with considerable abstraction) the great main pavilion of the 1884 World's Fair in New Orleans. It seems an appropriate comment on history to say that you have to choose your point of view very carefully to make any sense of the past.<sup>22</sup>

Moore's perspective allowed him a glimpse of a vanished New Orleans. A carefully chosen vantage point marks the approach of this project, too. In antebellum coffee houses and hotels, on postbellum levees, and in the twentieth century's markets, restaurants, souvenir shops, and public

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<sup>20</sup> Moore met with collaborators at the Piazza d'Italia to celebrate the completion of a poster for the 1984 World's Fair. He recalled, "It was very hot and threatened to rain, most of the neon was broken, and most of the jets did not work, and the mayor did not show up, but there were tables set up with linen...and a 400-pound cake, and it seemed a fine party." A friend had described the current state of the Piazza to Moore. He wrote, "It seems that the benches, as usual at [seven o'clock in the morning], were covered with the sleeping figures of the vagrants who constitute the place's only regular inhabitants. Then one of the sleepers awoke and rang a little bell. Everyone got up, picked up all the trash, and went back to hanging around. This is, I choose to think, welcome confirmation that this public space is not just flexible but special, and able (I think) to support the particular needs of groups with very different needs." Charles Moore, "Ten Years Later," *Places* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1984), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Goldberger, "There's Fun in the Fair's Architecture, but Not Quite Enough," *New York Times*, May 13, 1984. Also see Charles Moore, "The Wonderwall," *Architectural Design* 54, no. 3 (January 1, 1984): 60; and Ethel Sara Goodstein, "The Image of a Southern City: Architecture, Culture, and Sense of Place in New Orleans, 1884-1984" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Moore, "Ten Years Later," 30.

spaces, food opens the door to histories of people and place in a New Orleans of the past that delineates the shapes of the present.



## Appendix A: Mary Longfellow Greenleaf Diary, 1852

### October

- 19: market 60. Tub 40. Apron 60.
- 20: market 85....horseshoeing 200. Camphor 10...
- 21: market 1.10... bucket 30 duster 40 cakes 1.25 soap 70 gridiron 75 bread ticket 50. Harriett 1.25....
- 22: market 65. Apples 15.
- 23: market 1.55. ice tickets 50.
- 25: market 60. Soap 10. B. tickets 50.
- 26: market 65. Whip 1.25. lit 50
- 27: market 95. Gloves 50... linen 100.... Fruit 3
- 28: market 50...
- 29: market 85. Chimney sweep 2.10.
- 30: market 1.35... butter 1.45... apples 10.

### November

- 1: market 1.10. soap 5 indigo 5 bread 5 linen 1.0... drayage from ship 1.25
- 2: market 1.25 butter 25. Hops 20. Charity 1.00. lit 50
- 3: market 80. bread ticket 50...
- 4: market 2.35. fruit 20. Butter 25. Cake 30. Coffee 40.
- 5: market 75. Ice tickets 50. Charity 50. Yeast 5.
- 6: market 1.50. K. butter 25. Paid Sarah 18.50. apples 10. Drayage 1.50...seamstress 75
- 8: market 1.55. apples 10... saw 25
- 9: market: 90. T. butter 1.75. bread tickets 50.
- 10: market 45. Bookcase – 29.00
- 11: market: 50. Key 25. Apples 10...
- 12: market: 1.00... car ticket 4.00
- 13: market 1.95. ducks 60. Lavender 40. Drugs 30.
- 15: market 1.45. ice ticket 25. Rice 10. Charity 1.25
- 16: market 75. Coal – 7.50. feed bill 6.60
- 17: market 40. K. butter 40. T. butter 1.75. Soap 5.
- 18: market 85. Broom 15. Charcoal 40 ice 10
- 19: market 2.65. oysters 10...
- 20: market 1.60. apples 10. Bread tickets 50... paid John 11.50. book 25. Turkey 100.
- 22: market 1.30. repairing coach -- \$2.50.
- 23: market 80...
- 24: market 2.00...
- 25: market 2.40 oysters 5...
- 27: market 1.85. bread tickets 50
- 29: market 1.00 ice tickets 50
- 30: market 80. Molasses 15...Fruit 30.

### December

- 1: market 1.90. shoes 25. B. tickets 50. Broom 75
- 2: market .55. soap 5...cookbook 75. Paid Mary 12.00

4: market 1.55... feed bill 7.30.... buckets bill 38.65. car tickets 4.00  
 6: market 45. Contribution 50. B. tickets 50  
 7: market 1.35. apples 10. Charcoal 40. Milk 75  
 8: market 55...lit 50. Cravat 2.25. lacing 35... fruit 20...  
 9: market 95. B. tickets 50... charcoal 40.  
 10: market 1.20. labor \_\_s 1.00. milk bill 6.50.  
 11: market 1.60...charity 1.00. suspenders 50...  
 13: market 1.10. \_\_ apples 2.40  
 14: market 1.10... velvet...trimming...lining...wadding...gloves 75 collar 2.00 parasol 2.50..  
     ribbon 40... oats and corn... chicken 45. Dray 100  
 15: market 55. Oysters 10. S. school 200 silk 10  
 16: market 45. Charity 1.00. Picayune 6 mos. 6.00  
 18: market 1.65. butter 25. Horseshoes 100...  
 20: market 50. Shoes 25... basket 40.  
 21: market 1.00  
 22: market 90... fruit 95. Cake 30.  
 23: market 95. Ribbon 20. Toothbrush 25...  
 24: market 2.90...  
 25: market 2.95 ice 15...book 6.00 cravat 75 servants dresses 4.65...book 25. Cap 50. Pies 10...  
 27: market 40. Cake 1.50  
 28: market 1.20...  
 29: market 80.... Liniment 30.  
 30. market 50.b. tickets 50 orange flower 40  
 31: market 30. Vases 6.50. boots 4.00. paper, up to Dec. 31, 5.70<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Illegible words are noted by an ellipsis. October's expenses began on the 19th because that is when Greenleaf and her husband returned from their summer trip to New England. MSS 363, Greenleaf Diary, HNOC.

Appendix B: Wilson S. Howell Photographs, March 13, 1890



Figure B.1: Wilson S. Howell was an amateur photographer who traveled the country to inspect electrical generating stations. His photographs of the New Orleans levee provided an interesting contrast to stereographs and postcards of similar scenes in that they were private works, not for sale. Among other photographs Howell took on the New Orleans levee, at least one depicted African-American workers pushing carts of cotton bales. Most, however, were individual portraits of black men and women at rest. While it is impossible to know for sure, it is conceivable that other visual sources, like stereographs and postcards, prompted Howell's style and subject matter, transforming him from a consumer to a producer of such imagery. Wilson S. Howell, "On the Levee, March 13, 1890, at 10:00 a.m.," Wilson S. Howell Photograph Collection, City Archives/Louisiana Division (hereafter cited as CA/LD), New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La. (hereafter cited as NOPL).



Figure B.2: Wilson S. Howell, "On the Levee, March 13, 1890, at 2:00 p.m.," Howell Photograph Collection, CA/LD, NOPL.

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*New Orleans Tribune*  
*New York Herald Tribune*  
*New York Times*  
*Newcomb Arcade*  
*North & South*  
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